

AN OPINION

NATIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION'S EDUCATION PLAN IS WELCOMED BUT IS AMBITIOUS AND NEEDS SUPPORT FROM ALL SOUTH AFRICANS AND BUSINESS SCHOOLS

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This opinion paper assumes significance in the context of the National Planning Commission's release and publication of the National Development Plan for South Africa, in August, 2012, which incorporates the envisaged transformation of education by 2030. The plan will have far reaching effects for both basic education and higher education in South Africa, given the morass, decay and collapse of basic education and the problems being experienced in the higher education system of the Republic. This opinion bears relevance on the basis that democracy in South Africa has been ushered in almost two decades ago and not much has been achieved in respect of the quality of education. The opinion elaborates in summary, the main issues raised by the Planning Commission and projects upon these envisaged changes. The writer's opinion is that Business Schools have an important part to play in the realization of the National Planning Commission's education plan for South Africa.

Business Schools must nuance some of the issues raised in this opinion, within the ambit of their MBA programmes and general management discourse, with the aim of new ideas into their curriculums, vision, ethos and delivery of MBA programmes, as a part of the higher education system. On the other hand a number of distance Business Schools have also introduced undergraduate degree and diploma programmes by means of contact and distance modes of delivery. Thus the character, ethos and vision of Business Schools must cater for the new imperatives that are being developed and devised for the reconstruction and delivery of education in South Africa.

The planning Commission's plan assumes relevance on the basis that the issues raised as intervention strategies for basic education by 2030, will directly impact upon the higher education system in the long term. To this end, it is imperative and cardinal therefore that the higher education system both traditional and distance learning take cognizance of the plan and stimulate intellectual and practical steps to assist the plan to come to fruition. Higher education has a major role to play in this regard. The plan of necessity is ambitious and the time frame seems too distant, given the morass and decay of education in South Africa currently. Perhaps the time frame for implementation needs to be brought

drastically forward, because the South African system needs urgent remedial action, on the basis that South Africans should have access to education and training of the highest quality. This is required now not any later and the time frame needs revision downwards to a five or eight year time span. If this is not done, South Africa courts the reality of further distressing the education system with the real ramification of ushering in complete destruction of the education systems to a point of no return. The reality of the situation is that South Africa since 1994 on average has ploughed nearly 18 percent of its GDP into education, with no tangible returns. Very few countries in both the developing and developed world have ploughed such large monetary amounts into education in respect to reconstruction of their education systems. The all embracing reality is that South Africa is nearly 20 years into democracy and reconstruction and, therefore 18 years is too long a period to implement the Commission's Education Plan, because this will translate into nearly 40 years since the emancipation of South Africa to reconstruct and intervene meaningfully, given the current economic crisis, the lack of school and higher education infrastructure, low quality teachers, the shortage of teachers, poor management, poor curriculum initiatives over time and a paucity of a number of other education variables that will require a major overhaul, in the shortest period of time. The Commission's plan is silent about the role of educator unions and as to how they will be dealt with, because the educator unions in the main have been a great impediment to the delivery of education in South Africa and have stymied the emergence of quality education. This issue has to be dealt with decisively by government or risk the failure of the envisaged plan and thus fail the schooling system and the South African child's education advancement and success.

By the same token the issue of building national capabilities requires quality early childhood development, basic education and higher education which has been lacking and found wanting in the democratic order, no fee schools must be given greater support, in order to reap the benefits after 12 years of schooling and language policy must assure together with sound nutrition policies that currently fail children within the education system, the assurance of proper and sound cognitive development. These aspects are not meaningfully raised in the Planning Commission's Plan for education

The commission proposes that focus areas for the next 18 years must include the following:

- Improving literacy, numeracy and mathematics and science results. This is a noble goal and desired outcome. However, literacy programmes have failed over nearly 20 years under the democratic government and there does not seem to be a tangible plan to address this vexing issue. In reality for adults there should be a separate government department dealing with this important and vexing issue. South African children have consistently underperformed on the world stage in respect to numeracy, literacy and mathematics and the plan would have to raise these issues more seriously and in a cogent manner, if success is to be achieved.

- Increasing the number of pupils eligible to study mathematics and science – based degrees. This must be the normal trajectory in the broader scheme of education reconstruction, but increasing numbers does not automatically translate into quality. The intervention strategy has to be carefully planned, assuring success and not placing students into these programmes for the sake of increasing numbers with no tangible benefit to the country. Not all students want to pursue mathematics and science based degrees and cognizance of this must be taken into consideration. There is a real shortage of mathematics and science teachers which must be addressed with great urgency and rectified by government in the shortest period of time. Numbers are not important, but a flair and desire to pursue mathematics and science is the issue, coupled with high quality teachers and students. The plan remains bland in terms of outlining a real, acceptable and cogent intervention strategy in this regard.
- Improving performances in international comparative studies. Not much emphasis must be paid to this aspect at basic education level but its importance is not clearly outlined in the commission’s plan in relationship to higher education. Parameters need to be set and clearly outlined in this regard together with the necessary outcomes and areas of engagement.
- Retaining more pupils. This is a plausible outcome but how it will be achieved given the high student drop out rates, the reality of poverty, single parent families, poor quality education within both the basic and higher education systems that the country is confronted with, very high unemployment figures in South Africa and other issues, indicate that this might be a pipe dream and the plan does not elaborate upon retention strategies to achieve this objective.

On the other hand the commission’s plan cited the following contributing factors in respect to the above:

- Human capacity weaknesses in teaching management and school support at district offices. This is a reality and much attention must be paid to the selection of staff at districts, which have been found wanting. It is obvious therefore that distance MBA business schools and their undergraduate and short courses could be of great help to resolve these issues. Government needs to cooperate with these institutions in developing a cogent management plan for districts. These institutions could be of immeasurable use to education and their modalities of teaching could save much time and not interfere with daily management and district routines.

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- They could tailor short action driven courses in respect of management techniques that are sorely lacking at district level and offer school support

programmes. This must be pursued by government relentlessly with distance education Business Schools.

- Pupil's language skills is a vexing issue and as long as language skills are not comprehensively pursued in the lower levels of basic education in respect of indigenous languages, not much will be achieved. This must be clearly enunciated by the commission and become a broader policy issue if success is to be achieved in this direction. The desire of African parents wanting their children to learn in the English language from grade zero upwards must be addressed and the importance of home language instruction must be emphasized. By the same token, teachers must not teach in indigenous languages when after the required number of years of African languages have been taught and teach accordingly in the English language.
- The lack of cooperation between key stakeholders, particularly unions and government. It is vital to intervene accordingly and has been a major stumbling block in respect of education. Education has often been turned into contested political terrain to its detriment and to negative realization of educational objectives. The government must intervene far less than it does at the moment but it must intervene and home in on unions that often become a negative force to orderly education reconstruction and sound delivery.

The plan groups the areas into four broad categories. These are the role of teachers, principals, other stakeholders, parents and districts (retaining teachers and attraction of new teachers). This can only be a success if the correct teaching environment is created, reducing the influence of the unions and affording market related salaries based on performance. Government has failed the South African student because of its haphazard introduction of the use of information technology in schools. This issue has to be very seriously looked at and schools must be provided with information technology laboratories, trained information technology teachers, equipment in the form of computers, libraries, internet services, and the use of ipads, other technologies and so on. It is imperative that sports, arts and culture be promoted. Curriculum must not be changed too frequently, thus allowing teachers to develop core skills and competence to deliver the curriculum. Annual assessments for improvement must be provided with appropriate incentives and so on.

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The plan is to be welcomed and is a move in the right direction. However, it must not be paid lip service and be actioned in the shortest period of time, with the necessary commitment by government, its education departments, unions and all civil society role – players, teachers, parents and students alike. Throwing money to the problems of education without the

requisite accountability and necessary responsibilities will render the plan a futile exercise. The implementation of such an ambitious plan will require substantial amounts of money to implement and to this end both government and the South African private sector are called upon to provide the necessary leadership. There can be no half – measures. Commitment and discipline together with the requisite action will place education reconstruction in South Africa in the path of a correct trajectory and will provide us with the opportunities to become a winning nation. The time has arrived to intervene decisively or fail the nation and the continent.

To this end Business Schools both traditional universities, distance education providers and schools themselves can make a great difference in supporting the Plan outlined by the National Planning Commission. However, the education plan has to be further strengthened and refined, in order to become realizable and, a blueprint to South Africa's education and general development, and to secure its economic development, for purposes of peace, and has to be sustainable over time, or for ever be left behind, and thus exacerbate the situation for greater turmoil to persist within the country. This would be a recipe for disaster. .