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The RURAL EDUCATION ACCESS PROGRAMME

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Submission to the Portfolio Committee on Labour (National Assembly)

on

YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT

May 2006



RURAL EDUCATION ACCESS PROGRAMME

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Submission to Parliament on YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT

Some facts:

- South Africa has a critical shortage of skills¹
- The highest rate of unemployment is amongst the South Africa youth, African, rural and female in particular²
- Tertiary education is a major factor in increasing employability and providing critically needed skills for Asigisa³
- Universities are producing fewer graduates than they should⁴
- There is an "access gap" for rural youth to enter higher education institutions – rural youth do not easily access Higher Education
- There is a high level of student drop outs

The question:

- How can we enable many more young people, especially the vulnerable groups in terms of unemployment, access and gain a tertiary education that will equip them for self development and making a contribution to the development of their country?

1. Introduction

The dawn of the new democratic South Africa in 1994 brought joy and hope to many citizens. Youth were particularly encouraged by the new dispensation given their invaluable contribution to the struggle. Today there are many unanswered questions with regard to young people's feelings about our new democracy, especially in relation to unemployment.

The unemployment statistics in our country are shocking. Haroon Bhorat of the Development Policy Research Unit at the University of Cape Town tells us in *Youth Unemployment in post-Apartheid South Africa*⁵ that African youth in rural areas, in particular young females, are most affected by unemployment. He reports that:

- 78% of Africans in the 15-24 age groups are unemployed (female 84%, male 72%).
- 84% of African females in the 15-24 age group living in rural areas are unemployed.

The Rural Education Access Programme (REAP) team has a deep understanding that our work is a calling to contribute to the eradication of poverty through education. The programme empowers youth from previously disadvantaged communities. These youth would not have the opportunity to pursue tertiary studies if it was not for the support of REAP. We believe the lack of education will in turn perpetuate the cycle of poverty in which they are living. Generally REAP applicants are from stressed and impoverished households dependant on government grants. Having achieved their senior certificate with university exemption in difficult circumstances they are highly motivated to achieve their dreams – to continue their education, acquire necessary skills and get a job. Women have a special place in our programme, because for too long they have been economically marginalized. REAP allocates at least 50% or more of spaces on the Programme to female applicants.

¹ Deputy President Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Business Report, 10 May 2006

² Haroon Bhorat, Development Policy Research Unit, UCT, www.commerce.uct.za/drpru/

³ Accelerated and shared growth initiative for SA

⁴ Minister of Education's 2005 budget vote speech

⁵ Haroon Bhorat, Development Policy Research Unit, UCT, www.commerce.uct.za/drpru/

equipping themselves academically in order to escape unemployment they are not always able to secure places to undertake the required in-service training or to gain the necessary experience post graduation. One wonders how this situation affects the morale of young people, who are essential to the economic growth of the nation. Employers seeking previous experience before appointing new recruits complicate the issue of unemployment. Students sometimes have to pay to undertake in-service training. REAP understands that Seta⁶ programmes are supposed to be addressing some of these challenges. While a few Seta programmes may be effective there have been negative reports that some Seta programmes are non-functional. Is the skills development programme of government accessible, user friendly, relevant and sufficiently networked with providers and clients alike?

REAP only supports students for undergraduate study. With the growing number of our students graduating we have several requests for postgraduate support. Some of the youth indicate that they opted for postgraduate studies, as they couldn't secure employment after their first qualification. They would prefer to stay in the city furthering their studies than to go back to the villages, where there are limited resources. In the city they enjoy the benefit of facilities and better opportunities of networking e.g. internet. Facilitated opportunities are needed for these educated young people to access the job market and gain the required experience.

5. Conclusion

Youth unemployment is a threat to the stability of the country. Lack of opportunity or support may drive young people to criminal activities. While there are no easy answers to the youth unemployment problem we appreciate Parliament's initiative to seek stakeholder input. Government needs to proactively involve stakeholders in searching for, and implementing solutions. A multi-sectoral approach is needed to deal with the challenge of youth unemployment, underpinned by drive and passion. We believe partnerships with non-government organisations and business are vital and in our domain we have much evidence to demonstrate the importance of tertiary education and the support of disadvantaged youth with education. Our partnership with NSFAS is a fruitful one bringing benefit to some 400 youth (female & male) from rural areas. This initiative needs to be sustained so young people can receive just the right support required, and grow so many more disadvantaged young South Africans can benefit. Such a programme might be of relevance to the Further Education and Training sector currently receiving attention. REAP has a range of corporate sponsors which provide very valuable support. Partnerships with South African development agencies such as the Umsobomvu Youth Fund and/or the National Development Agency, or similar, and the National Lotteries Distribution Trust Fund could greatly enhance the scope and ability of REAP to contribute to the reduction of youth unemployment in South Africa.

Submission prepared by Eugene Machimana & Glenda Glover of REAP

⁶ Sector Education and Training Authorities

2. The Rural Education Access Programme

The Rural Education Access Programme (REAP) is a unique nationwide NGO that supports poor students from rural areas. REAP facilitates access to higher education for academically able matriculants where information, resources and support are absent. It bridges the "access gap" for rural learners who might otherwise remain trapped in the cycle of rural unemployment and poverty. The programme is unique in the sense that it provides holistic support to the beneficiaries. Students are provided with financial aid, through our partnership with the government's National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). This is supplemented with a small grant to cover the cost of books and subsistence for students whose families do not have the resources to assist them. A programme of individual, academic and social support is provided during the years of undergraduate study. This life skills programme is aimed at giving the students a competitive advantage in the market place. Currently (2006) we are supporting 386 students studying in most of the state's Higher Education institutions across the country. At least 50% of the students on the Programme are female. The partnership between NSFAS and REAP is vital aspect and cost effective way of enabling academically able rural youth access and succeed at Higher Education. NSFAS has the resources, infrastructure and systems. REAP has the outreach to rural youth and ability to provide the individually tailored support for student success. A recent study of students who started on the Programme in 2002 recorded an expected 66% graduation rate, significantly better than the national average and impressive given the environment from which students are drawn.

3. Tertiary education reduces unemployment

Bhorat records an unemployment rate of 14% for those with a tertiary degree in 25-34 age group. While this may be higher than desired it is a massive improvement on his figure of 43% unemployed in the same age group with Matric/Senior Certificate only. REAP applicants, having achieved their senior certificate with university exemption in difficult circumstances, are highly motivated to achieve their dreams – to continue their education, acquire necessary skills and get a rewarding job. This is an important moment for intervention. We hear stories of high school learners becoming de-motivated because of the lack of opportunity and unemployment they witness around them.

The experience of post matrics illustrates the lack of opportunities for young people with matric in rural areas. In 2006 39% of applicants interviewed for REAP places were post matrics. They did not have the resources to register for further study, although keen to do so, and had not found employment. Many of them related how they did volunteer work at schools, with youth groups, and at HIV & AIDS clinic to keep themselves motivated and active.

To facilitate further education for academically able youth is key, not only in developing much needed skills and knowledge but, to providing the hope and supporting the momentum of a young South African's development into a valuable citizen able to make a contribution to her or his community and country. From their second year of study REAP begins to prepare the students for the world of work. Although the Programme is only 5 years old many students have graduated, usually the first members of their family to do so. They are already working as a physiotherapist, educator, radiographer, articled legal and financial clerks, engineers, administrators, internal auditors, biomedical technologist and I T personnel amongst others professional activities.

4. Providing opportunities for students & graduates to gain experience

Bhorat notes a 12.4% unemployment rate for African graduates in 2003. Does lack of experiential training contribute to this figure? Our experience shows that while students are