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We need to produce the skills required by the economy

IN ORDER to thrive, an economy requires a diverse range of skills, from high level, conceptual to practical get-your-hands-dirty-type skills.

To meet these demands, the post-school education and training system provides universities and two types of colleges – technical vocational education and training (TVET) colleges and community colleges.

Since 2013, much focus has been directed at universities and the #FeesMustFall campaign. The government has come to the party in terms of no fee increases during 2016 and 2017.

With all eyes on the drama surrounding universities and #FeesMustFall, TVET colleges have become the proverbial boiling frog on the stove.

We should keep in mind that the majority of school leavers don't make it to university and while enrollment at TVET colleges has been increasing (almost doubled from 358 393 in 2010 to 702 383 in 2014), in comparison to universities, the post-secondary college sector remains small.

In most other countries, school leavers generally attend colleges, with relatively few going on to attain university education – here the trend is almost the opposite. Unfortunately, much of the desire for a university education is rooted in the relatively negative stigma attached to college education.

Be that as it may, colleges may be the next to explode. If the Department of Higher Education and Training, the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) and college management don't do something soon.

TVET colleges were previously the responsibility of the nine provincial education departments. Given that the funding of these colleges was at the discretion of these education departments, the result was an unevenly developed college system, with TVET colleges in some provinces severely underfunded.

Given the centrality of the skills developed by TVET colleges, and in order to bring about a measure of uniformity in the funding and management of these institutions, the function was shifted to the national sphere in 2012.

Unfortunately, an assessment of the funding allocated in respect of TVETs over the medium term suggests that even

COMMENT

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with this migration of the function to the centre, the general deprivatisation of these colleges will continue. When the minister of finance tables the 2017 Budget in February, it will in all likelihood entail increases in subsidies to TVETs and higher transfers to NSFAS.

The question is not whether we will see any increases in respect of TVETs, but rather the quantum of those increases, especially if one considers that in real terms, subsidies to these types of colleges have been on the decline since 2013/14, growing below the rate of inflation.

Of concern in the current fees crisis is the blanket approach being applied to both universities and TVET colleges, which may well serve to compound the financial challenges faced by colleges, because it assumes that the nature of the financial challenges faced by these two very different institutions are similar. For example, TVET college fees are less expensive than university fees. One would also expect that the household incomes of TVET students are generally different to those of university students.

So, while the provision of a no-fee increase for students from households

with an income up to R600 000 a year might make sense for university students, the cut-off of R600 000 might be too high in the case of a typical TVET student and could possibly mean that the majority of TVET students actually qualify for this no-fee increase, including those students who can and have been paying their tuition fees.

The TVET sector has the potential to create the skills our economy so sorely needs to spur on economic growth. But for that potential to be realised, and indeed for colleges to be a real and feasible alternative to university education, we need an overhaul of the sector such that quality is improved.

Furthermore, for TVETs to effectively produce the skills required by the economy, we need to ensure that TVET curricula and training are responsive to the needs of industry.

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