

Enhancing the employability of youth through a work-based values approach

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1. Introduction

This paper gives an account of a pilot project that was conceived to explore the opportunities and options for introducing a *work-based values curriculum component¹ linked to a WBE/WIL programme that* would enhance the benefits of the work-based learning experience for TVET students, thereby preparing them more effectively for the workplace and, thereafter, for successfully obtaining and retaining employment.

The project was conceived in the context of high levels of youth unemployment in South Africa where numbers of TVET college graduates are rising and the absorptive capacity of the labour market is limited.

Values daily inform behaviour and attitudes in the workplace. If students are afforded the opportunity to debate and formulate their own work-based values while at college, when they are employed they will be better equipped to achieve their potential by learning from, working with and relating on a personal level to other people at work. Accordingly, students need to become conscious of the workplace as a context where, in addition to the requisite knowledge, skills and competencies, expression of particular work values is appreciated, not only by employers, but by co-workers and supervisors.

This paper is intended to share work towards a current pilot project in which students engage in a work-based values process which is coordinated with and intended to facilitate student exposure to a workplace environment. The paper draws on a recently published literature review that was undertaken to inform the project (Paterson, Keevy, Boka, 2017).

2. Unemployment affecting TVET graduates

South Africa is a society in the process of deepening post-apartheid democracy and combating historically high levels of unemployment, with the ambition of achieving shared economic growth. In this democratic era, despite many hurdles, there are young Black South Africans who have taken advantage of the available education and work opportunities. But, while access to post-secondary education has expanded at unprecedented levels, access of the country's youth to decent work and livelihoods has remained a national concern - even more so with South Africa's slow economic recovery after the great recession of 2009.

South Africa's Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges are predominantly attended by marginalised Black African youth, many of whom may have left school early, do not qualify to enter higher education, have limited financial resources for continuing to study and are at

¹ 'Component' implies the design of a curriculum element of which the duration, activities and weight dimensions will need to be established through piloting.

high risk of unemployment. Importantly, the challenge in South Africa is greater than in many other emerging economies, with over three million young South Africans disengaged from education and work (Field, Musset & Álvarez, 2014). Failure to integrate this population into the labour market poses a significant threat to social cohesion in the country.

The interaction between unemployment and poverty among young people who have not completed their studies and are under pressure to find work is of great concern. Although gross employment in South Africa has increased since 1994, the pace has not been fast enough to absorb all new entrants into the labour market. Already high unemployment levels that were a legacy of apartheid policy have increased. For example, after the global recession, South African employment rose from 14,2 to 15,7 million between 2009 and 2015. But the 2015 national labour absorption rate of 43,7% was 2,2% below the 2008 pre-recessionary high (Statistics South Africa, 2016, p. 36). Furthermore, gross domestic product (GDP) forecasts for economic growth of between 2% to 3% over the medium term are much lower than the threshold levels above which economic growth may become positively labour absorbing. Formulating and implementing an economic growth path to support and maintain economic and employment growth will take time. The situation that most people entering the labour market must confront is the high risk of unemployment that contributes to poverty, inequality and dependence on social safety nets. Meanwhile, as much as possible must be done in the colleges to improve TVET graduates' chances of finding employment. In this environment, the value of WBE/WIL and placement that is built into

TVET qualifications is crucial.

The South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) has highlighted the strategic importance of exposure to work-based education /work-integrated learning (WBE/WIL) in the transition of young graduates between college and the labour market. The cardinal principle of including compulsory work experience in the annual programme of activities of all technical and vocational courses on offer in TVET colleges is taking hold in South Africa. The learning opportunities inherent in this activity are taken as a necessity: that students must be required to apply what they have learned from college-based theory and practical activities in a real working environment in order to significantly enhance their vocational and occupational capabilities.

A great deal is learned through participating in the world of work. But students do not necessarily realise the full value of experience in a real working environment on site. The South African DHET argues that the main purpose of the TVET colleges is 'to train young school leavers, providing them with the skills, *knowledge and attitudes* necessary for employment in the labour market' (emphasis added) (DHET, 2013, p. 11). Clearly, the DHET recognises that attitudes – which stem from underlying values – are a crucial dimension of employability. Institutions of learning in South Africa such as the TVET colleges need to take up the challenge of informing and enabling young people to become familiar with their own values in relation to the work values that are associated with enhanced employability.

The TVET college programme already has some curriculum components that deal with values; these are akin to 'Life Skills' programmes offered in the junior and senior secondary phases of South African high schools, but they are limited in scope and depth. Values-based curriculum elements are not formally infused or integrated into other curriculum elements in the TVET colleges. This leaves open an opportunity to contribute to student's individual development and employability through

developing a work-based values component that is linked to the student's WBL/WIL exposure. By introducing students to work-based values as preparation for their WBL/WIL in the workplace they are able to gain an understanding of their own work-based values and of the values that are expected and appreciated by employers.

3. Contribution of values

Values matter because they inform motivations and intentions; hence they shape human action in almost any behavioural setting. Barring the contribution of technology, worker behaviour is ultimately the most important input into workplace efficiency, enterprise productivity, competitiveness and innovation. Values are an important predictor of human behaviour. Employers therefore pay close attention to the workplace values that prospective and current employees express.

As relatively durable social and psychological constructs, values reflect what individuals and human groups hold to be important, that inform how they live and work and that define for them what is good or bad, desirable or undesirable. The approach to this project on work-related values acknowledges that values acquisition is part of the process of individual identity formation (Lloyd, Roodt & Odendaal, 2011). The project therefore seeks to make a contribution by creating a process within which students may improve self-awareness of their own work-related values and take the opportunity to clarify these.

The approach of this project further acknowledges that values are acquired directly or indirectly from many sources and via many different types of interaction (Furnham, 1987). A young person studying in a vocational college or other educational institution will be exposed to whatever values are expressed in that institution, whether formally or informally. Simultaneously, the student will be exposed to other sources of values in the everyday, out-of-school environment. But very little empirical information or analysis specifically about 'youth' or 'young adult' values (or more precisely, youth work values) and change in those values is available for South Africa.

Furthermore, values occur in different dimensions. Some have broad application, while others are more specific in focus. We may ask: How are broader general values like 'peace' related to context-specific values such as those in the workplace? Some may seek to distinguish between shared or common values such as 'honesty' and 'accountability', which seem to be particularly highly prized by employers. Are these values separable? This gives rise to two possible scenarios: (a) that work-based values and general values are distinct groups of constructs; or (b) that work-place values are a subgroup of general values (See: Roe & Ester, 1999; Ros, Schwartz & Surkiss, 1999). Findings from an empirical study that set out to explore the relationship between 'general' and 'work' values among Hong Kong Chinese university students suggest that this relationship is best understood as a combination of (a) and (b) 'with work values being both a distinct construct to some extent but closely integrated with general values (Wong, 2013, p. iv)'.

The proposed approach is concerned with work-based values that are foregrounded when employers select workers with values that fit the jobs that need to be done in their establishments. In this project 'Work-based values' refer to what employers are looking for in work seekers. The employers want to select individuals who bring certain behavioural and attitudinal values to their daily work. These values may include (Loretto, 2015):

- work ethic;
- dependability and responsibility;
- positive attitude;
- adaptability;
- honesty and Integrity;
- self – motivated;
- desire to learn;
- self – confidence;
- professionalism;
- loyalty;
- diligence;
- perseverance;
- (self) discipline;
- (customer) service orientation;
- respect;
- dedication; and
- ability to collaborate.

Personal work-based values centre on a framework according to which individuals conduct themselves and manage their relationships in the workplace. The work-based values of the employer therefore need to be juxtaposed with the job-seeker's or employee's work-based values.

All other things being equal, the congruence between values expressed by a work seeker and the firm are an important factor affecting an employer's judgement/assessment as to the employability of a work seeker. Judge and Bretz (1992, p. 261) observe that 'Organizational work values significantly affected job choice decisions for both parties. Individuals were more likely to choose jobs whose value content was similar to their own value orientation'. Nevertheless, perceived complementarity between the values of the new appointee and the new employer before actual engagement can be different to the actual experience of employment between the employer and employee.

Where differences between employer and employee surface about what behaviour is appropriate, the scenario needs to be analysed for the underlying values that inform the respective values of the protagonists. Where differences in values are identified, the capacity and willingness of either or both employer and employee to accede to or negotiate their 'work-based' values must be explored. For young entrants to the labour market, the risk of misunderstanding between employers and workers regarding the rules of engagement is relatively high. This last point is important because it draws attention to age-related differences in work values among the workforce. Differences in work-based values are not limited to the employer-employee divide. Age, gender, status and other characteristics are also associated with differences between workers in the work-based values that they uphold. As noted, new entrants to the labour market in particular may need time in employment to clarify their personal work-based values that they formed within the confines of their TVET college experiences as students.

Both work seeker and employer may well be obliged to compromise on their expectations. For instance, in a period of economic decline and poor job chances, 'changes in economic growth and

labour market conditions may lead to changes in work values among people who are actively participating in the labour market (Watson, 2003, p. 177-178). (See also: Jin & Rounds, 2012; Johnson & Monserud, 2012; Kalleberg & Marsden, 2013).

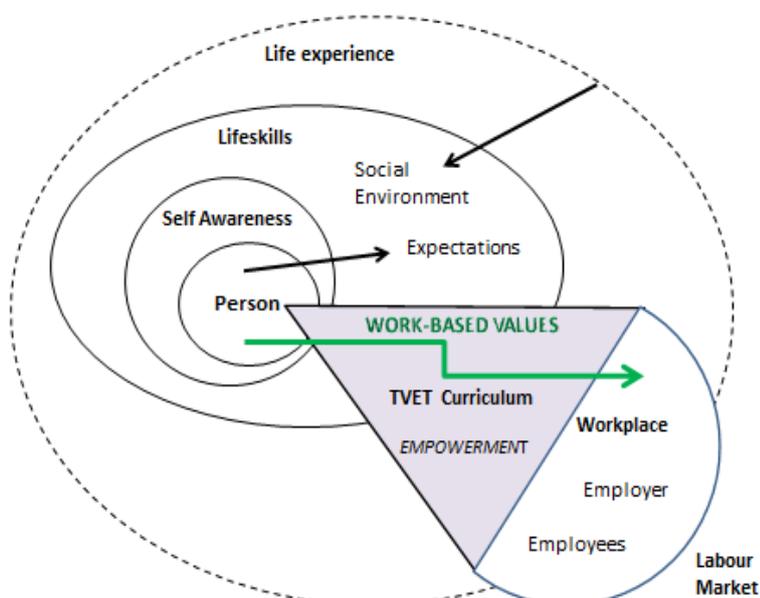
A work-based values program would involve providing young people with the opportunity to digest the issues, understand values they do not necessarily subscribe to and, upon reasonable reflection, internalise values that will guide their choices and behaviour as individuals and as work-seekers.

4. Conceptual model of a work-based values intervention

How a work-based values intervention may impact positively on a student’s transition to the workplace is suggested in Figure 1 below. The figure, illustrates conceptually how a values-based curriculum component may be integrated with work-based experience as part of a WBE/WIL programme in a TVET college.

The model is built with reference to an individual located in a social environment. That individual has personal life and career expectations (expressed through personal values) and will be exposed to other expectations in the social and working environment (including other’s values). Working life experiences are accumulated and mediated through the individual’s capacity for self-awareness as she/he develops her/his own work values framework. The envisaged programme will be structured to support the emergence of participants’ own work-based values frameworks that will empower them to work and engage optimally in the workplace – and also to navigate the labour market.

Figure 1: Illustration of how work-based values intervention may impact within the institutional and social environment of a TVET student



5. The work-based values project intervention

This section provides an overview of the key features of the project intervention which was designed on a small scale.

- **Negotiation with partner colleges**

First, it was important to engage in discussion with the participating colleges through presenting the groundwork of the literature review and through forging a partnership between the project team members including the college personnel involved in the relevant divisions and functions such as: lecturers, career development officers, placement officers, and industry liaison officers and campus managers. This required a multifunction team that could address the variety of elements that needed to be taken into account. This included negotiating time scheduling to suit the students and employers within the scope of the annual college year-plan.

Two colleges agreed to participate. One is based in a small town and the latter is part of the broader Johannesburg metropolitan area. The Colleges are about 160km apart.

- **Selection of the work-based values**

Second, the selection of which values would be explored in the workshop sessions had to be given careful consideration. Factors to be taken into account included the necessity to take an interactive approach to the workshops with the students which was deemed appropriate owing to the importance of sharing and discussion within the group. Further, due recognition was given to the levels of complexity involved and time needed in clarifying values. A set of five values was selected as follows: accountability, perseverance, respect, reliability and self-development. The process of selecting the values included: an internet search of the literature for sources of values and work-based values; creation of a set of twenty frequently referenced values; followed by blind panel based selection with input from a facilitation perspective.

- **Timetable for the program**

Third, the first pilot of the program was completed according to the following parameters which had to fit into the college timetable as well as the annual business schedule of the employer. The work-based values pilot program was structured according to three phases as shown in Table 1. The phases were conceived as complementary activities that help to frame the workplace experience and guide students towards acquiring greater insight into their identity and role as occupational practitioners. Standard complementary activities to work exposure would likely entail:

- Phase 1 beforehand, sensitising students about what to expect and look out for as part of preparation
- Phase 2 during work exposure requiring students to reflect on their experience as it unfolded. A logbook and exercises included to encourage reflection.
- Phase 3 afterward, encouraging students to extract useful learnings in retrospect that can be practically applied going forward.

Period	Phase	Activities	Duration
One week	Phase 1 Introduction to work-based values on college campus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Interactive workshop process, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 4 workshops x two hours
Two weeks	Phase 2 WBE phase at the premises of participating employers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Activities as guided per employer, & ● Individual student tasks to be completed as part of WBV program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 10 days of work exposure
One week	Phase 3 Consolidation phase on college campus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Two workshops to be held with student participants and facilitator to share experience and to integrate with values. ● A joint stakeholder workshop to evaluate the process with students, employers who hosted the students, college lecturers and facilitators. ● Pilot closure and award of certificates of completion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 2 workshops x two hours ● stakeholder workshop x3hrs ● Closure and awards 1.5hr

The aim was to expose TVET students to a structured programme with an embedded process based on work-based values that takes place in conjunction with the schedule of WBE/WIL work placements of students in active businesses. The intention was to achieve a conceptual synergy between the activities of the complementary programme and the actual work-based experience.

- **Teaching and learning approach**

Values education is understood as a process that entails respectful sharing and free exchange of opinions about value positions and the implications of taking such positions. In this sense, it is preferred to refer to 'values acquisition', where a student selects values akin to his identity, rather than values being imposed. This approach subscribes to the argument put forward by Silcock and Duncan (2001, p. 242) that students should be accorded the right and encouraged to voluntarily take a position on their values choice and that, as a result of the process, students might shift their positions, rather than simply accept or retain received sets of values.

The 'capabilities approach' also offers a useful conceptual framework that accords with the process envisaged for tackling values as a means of increasing young people's personal resources to successfully achieve their goals, develop their own occupational skills and identity and secure the skills to successfully maximise their employment time over their careers. In support of this personal

trajectory ‘...a form of education is proposed that would enable students to become aware of the values they hold, and develop them further through fostering critical thinking, practical reason, and access to knowledge, rather than directly imparting values to students’ (Peppin-Vaughan & Walker, 2012, p. 495).

The desired outcome would be TVET students graduating with a maturing understanding of their own values as drivers of their own behaviour and an open and receptive approach to understanding the behaviour and underlying values of various participants in the workspace, from workers, to supervisors, to managers, to owners and shareholders.

Student group

The aim was if possible to secure a group of at most twenty students. They were from the N5 and N6 on the NATED program. In the South African TVET system the NATED program has the largest registered student group. Thirteen students completed all facets of the program, of whom 75% were female.

6. Conclusion

The experience of this project so far suggests that a values-based approach has the potential to equip young people with the personal capability to negotiate relationships in the workplace with managers, supervisors and colleagues with confidence. Young people may indeed benefit more from a systemic programme that addresses values in the TVET context in South Africa, using a pedagogical approach that encourages them to engage in their work environment with ‘informed respect, creativity, and responsiveness’ (Bagnall, 2010; 878).

With ongoing low growth and high youth unemployment in South Africa, many government, non-profit and corporate programmes target youth unemployment. Some are not explicitly designed to develop participants’ employability ‘skills’, while others are deliberately structured to raise the potential of young people to find employment through exposing them to such ‘skills’. Employability focused intervention models vary considerably in their philosophical approach, focus, duration and intensity (e.g. Harambee, International Youth Foundation). It is important therefore to consider the relative impacts of different approaches. Accordingly, this project has involved developing a theory of change, has made provision for monitoring and evaluation activities, and further, the team is engaged in developing a measure of change in workbased values with the view to exploring impact.

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