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## 2<sup>ND</sup> ANNUAL WORKSHOP OF THE EDUCATION POLICY CONSORTIUM

### **“Building our Emerging Critique, alternative landscapes”**

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### **MINISTER'S SPEECH**

#### **WELCOME**

Chairperson, Directors' of the EPC Forum, officials from government departments, researchers and representatives from universities and research institutions, ladies and gentlemen, it gives me great pleasure to be here with you today - to provide the opening address at the second annual workshop of researchers involved in the Education Policy Consortium (EPC) on **Building our Emerging Critique, alternative landscapes**.

#### **HISTORY OF THE EPC**

The EPC has a long and proud history. In 1993, the Education Policy Units located at the then University of Natal, Wits University, UWC, UDW and Fort Hare as well as the CEPD established the Directors Forum to better coordinate the efforts of the units. This was later restructured as the EPC, although the Director's Forum remains its main coordinating body.) I was Director of EPU Natal when the Directors' Forum was established and was thus one of its founding members; others included Harold Wolpe, Linda Chisholm, Enver Motala and Trevor Coombe (then at CEPD). This was before the first democratic election when the outlines of a democratic education policy were being developed. Not only the founding directors, but also

many of the researchers and policy analysts in the EPC units went on to play an important role in SA education. Many continue to do so, while some like Enver Motala and Salim Vally, can still be found in the EPC. So, not only did the EPC units play a central role to creating the outlines of democratic SA's education and training policies (with all their strengths and weaknesses); they were also important training grounds for education policy specialists. This rich history cannot be allowed to be forgotten; it must live on in ongoing, relevant and high quality research and policy analysis.

### **EVOLUTION OF EPC-GOVERNMENT RELATIONSHIP AFTER 1994**

Before the 1994 election, the expectation of the EPC units was that the new government would take over or at least share the burden of funding their work and that they would in turn continue to assist the government in developing, monitoring and evaluating transformative policies – both through critique and through dialogue.

Things unfortunately did not turn out this way. The post-1994 legal and political dispensation did not provide governmental instruments for providing sustainable funding to non-governmental progressive research units – or indeed a way of distinguishing a progressive unit from a reactionary one. Nor does it have a sustainable way of funding policy analysis of the kind that the EPC is best capable of providing. Right-wing and liberal think-tanks, meanwhile, are well funded by the private sector and foreign foundations.

One of the issues that needs attention is that of sustainable funding for the EPC and its units. What is the future of the EPC and how can it be funded in a more sustainable way? This matter requires sustained engagement and creative solutions. We can't allow the EPC units to just become consultancies, not able to do progressive policy analysis and research – a fate that has threatened them many times over the last 20 years. While doing some consultancy work is not altogether bad as it puts one in touch with real problems being experienced by others in the

education system, it should never be the main work of units set up to provide *intellectual* support to the project of creating a non-racial, non-sexist, fair, democratic, equitable society that has the ability to provide a decent standard of living to all its people.

## **THE WORK OF THE EPC**

The EPC research programme is a vital component of research on post-school education and training. I trust that it will inform, as well as challenge our thinking about the post-school education and training (PSET) system and provide an alternative discourse on post-school education and training.

Over the last few years, the EPC has begun working more intensively on TVET colleges and Community Colleges and community education more generally. We want to encourage this. The community colleges in particular will require a lot of work. They are new institutions and we have few institutional traditions to build on in this respect. We want community colleges to be responsive to community needs but also accountable to the public institutions of the democratic state – i.e. to the Minister, the Department and, through them, to parliament. This is not an easy thing to do and we must work hard to develop a model that functions accountably, efficiently and effectively. Researchers in universities and progressive organisations should assist us to monitor progress, to point out weaknesses and to make suggestions for policy and action, that leads to equity, access, quality – and, more generally, national development.

The EPC research programme is being undertaken in the context of unprecedented high levels of unemployment in the country, particularly among youth. The problem of the NEETs (persons who are not in employment, education or training) is well known. South Africa has one of the highest rates of young people who are NEET, in the world. It has reached crisis proportions and is a major threat to social stability in the country.

We face a contradiction, though. The national youth unemployment crisis occurs simultaneously with the problem of skills shortages in the country. We need to understand better why we are not able to respond more effectively to the issue of skills shortages, and to understand better the

nature of the skills crisis. I do not, by the way, argue that education and skills in themselves can create jobs as some have accused me of. However, without the necessary skills, our economy cannot develop its full potential and provide a better life for all our people. We must also start to understand the types of skills that are needed by people in the informal sector and determine the role of the formal education and training system (especially the TVET and community colleges) in developing those skills.

We need to continuously assess how appropriate the institutional landscape for PSET is – whether it can respond appropriately to the crisis of NEETs in the country or whether we need to search alternative institutional forms as well as alternative forms of learning.

The achievements of the EPC's work on this programme are noteworthy. I am particularly happy that the Centre for Integrated Post-School Education and Training (CIPSET) at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) is now a fully established unit and that this project has contributed towards its establishment. I am also pleased to note that the EPC project will be laying the basis for an academic journal, and that you have been successful in producing two education policy reviews. Engaging and influencing thought in the academic world is a very important way of influencing society – especially in the medium to long term.

I have been looking at some of the EPCs recent work of the relationship between education and training and the economy – especially the labour market. Much of it offers a trenchant critique of the dominant, largely uncontested assumptions in much mainstream economic and educational thinking today and is a valuable contribution to our understanding.

The dominant, largely neo-liberal, view with which I am confronted every day is (stated baldly) that our weak and irrelevant post school education is the cause of high youth unemployment. There is a mismatch, it is said, between skills and the needs of industry and employers can't find the skilled people that they need. If only we fixed up the education system (at both school and post-school level), then the problem of unemployment could be drastically reduced. This view looks almost exclusively at the formal economy and its main concern is a narrow focus on the needs of employers. The fact that millions live outside the formal economy and have no prospect of getting a formal job anytime soon is totally ignored.

One manifestation of this type of thinking is the appearance of the widespread use of the concept of ‘unemployability’ in the public discourse in many western countries and in organisations such as the OECD and UNESCO. Young people are now often described as unemployable rather than just unemployed – i.e. the victim is blamed rather than the socio-economic system that generates unemployment.

Much of the EPC work reacts to these views and provides an insightful critique. It points to the fact that the education system does not address the challenges facing people in the informal economy, that education does not, in itself, create jobs; that qualifications do not necessarily lead to jobs; that the purpose of education should not only be to provide skills for the economy or even to allow the individual to make a living; that education has wider social, cultural, political and ethical purposes.

There is a danger, though, that the reaction to prevailing neo-liberal views, can lead to another extreme – the idea that there is no significant relationship between the education and training system on the one hand and the economy on the other. We even hear the view that developing skills is meant only to meet the need of private business so that it can increase its profits.

Although proponents of these views may deny that they argue against skills development in the formal economy, the implication of their arguments is that government should not in any way prioritise the development of skills for the formal economy.

In government we are faced with a situation where all the evils of poverty, unemployment, and inequality not only exist but are very acute. But it’s not enough to simply point this out and critique it. We must do something about it, including developing policies and strategies to address the challenges. And we must do something about it in particular circumstances: the uneasy political and legal compromises negotiated at CODESA and that attempted both to avoid civil war by guaranteeing white (economic) privileges and at the same time overcoming inequality; the real and ongoing legacies of apartheid – both material and ideological; a population that until fairly recently was denied educational opportunities (until the 1980s blacks could not even become artisans in SA, and opportunities were still severely limited after that); a public service that still requires substantial capacity-building; a world still dominated by imperialist countries and their institutions; and so on.

In tackling all these challenges in our specific conditions, I think we need to be able to rely on the support and assistance of progressive policy researchers with whom we should be in

continuing dialogue. Critique may be enough for many academics; but policy researchers must engage in addition with the development, implementation, monitoring and assessment of policy in a less-than-ideal world.

As government, we must ensure that we grow our economy and create jobs, build our education and health systems; develop and strengthen our infrastructure; strengthen our state machinery; provide grants to the poor, the sick, the young and the aged. We must not only strength our industries; but we must be in a position to create new ones in, for example, the green economy or the maritime economy. The state must be able to build its financial reserves so that it is not totally dependent on private and foreign capital for investment in our economy as many African countries have become. We must improve our research in the natural, medical and social sciences so that we are part of the world science systems and just dependents on them. And we must take difficult decisions where we must weigh the benefits of certain courses of action against disadvantages.

To do these things we need more and better skills. Although we have large unemployment, there is no doubt that the lack of appropriate skills is holding us back. Although labour markets are not very efficient and we do find unemployment graduates, virtually all employers, whether in the state, the state owned enterprises, the private sector, or indeed in the NGO sector, report great difficulty filling posts with appropriately qualified enterprises. As a state we have no choice but to tackle this challenge.

This doesn't mean that we believe that skills will create jobs – just that many jobs in the formal sector will not be created without the existence of the necessary skills. The creation of jobs is not something that will be done predominantly by the education and training system. It will be done in the economic sphere, but the education and training system must play its part and provide skilled workers while also fulfilling all its other social functions – deep literacy, critical thinking, cultural and scientific knowledge, life skills of many kinds, and so on.

I urge you, as part of your stakeholder engagements, to organize national and, if possible, international debates around these and other issue, engaging a range of stakeholders. I support the EPC's role in spreading its influence into the academic world both intellectually and in terms of developing a larger of contacts and collaborations. It's good, for example, that the EPC is gradually increasing the participation of other institutions in its work. I have noted that academics at Tshwane University of Technology, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, Vaal

University of Technology, Durban University of Technology , Universities of Cape Town and KwaZulu-Natal and Rhodes University are involved in EPC research projects. It is also important that ongoing development of internal capacity (staff, interns and Masters and Doctoral fellows) is taking place through research project activities, participation in seminars and workshops.

I have seen some of the interim publications from the Emerging Voices 2 project and the exciting research that it reveals. I really look forward to the book that finally emerges from this process and trust that it will be as good as the first Emerging Voices book that dealt with basic education.

I would like to thank the CEPD for taking on the new project on capacity development and support for student leadership and organisations in the post school sector. But I do want to urge you to treat this matter as urgent. We can't afford to wait another year until this is up and running; I sincerely hope that you can get started early in 2015. If you have any problems that delay you, don't hesitate to ask for help from the Department or from my special advisor with whom you have good relations.

In addition to supporting the EPC, the DHET has undertaken several initiatives to promote and encourage research. The Labour Market Intelligence Project is another major research project supported by the DHET. It focuses on helping us with the establishment of “a credible, institutional skills planning mechanism” – one of the key sub-outcomes of the Medium Term Strategic Framework, This project is being undertaken by a consortium made up of the HSRC, the REAL Centre and a range of other institutions.

Other research initiatives include the publication of the DHET's first **Research Agenda** on the Department's website, and the other is the annual research colloquium on PSET.

The Research Agenda informs stakeholders of the department's research priorities; it signals to funders and development partners what research areas require investment; and assists the department to guide its own resource allocation for research.

## **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE EPC AND THE DEPARTMENT**

I welcome the critical approach adopted by the EPC programme. However, I do hope that the EPC will adopt the relationship of being a critical friend to the DHET as well to me as Minister. It is important for the DHET to deliberate on its policies and programmes and be exposed to critical voices in order to strengthen its work.

Meanwhile though, it's good to see the current relationship between the EPC and the Department of Higher Education and Training starting to bear some fruit. For example, it's good to see EPC work being presented at DHET seminars of late (this should continue). Some of the ideas coming out of these seminars and the written work of the EPC have started to make an impact on internal discussions – both formal and informal. Let's try to intensify this. Let's also try to promote constructive debates between the EPC and other researchers, especially those who are doing work for the DHET (e.g. LMIP) who hold more conventional views.

It is important to strengthen this relationship even further and that we have an opportunity like this at least once a year to discuss your work and ours. We must also continue to have more frequent dialogue around particular programmes or policies – not only bilateral discussions but also multilateral ones. We must create an atmosphere that allows space for vigorous but constructive debate while not becoming inherently conflictual. Our relationship should be mutually supportive while allowing room for the critical interrogation of policies, ideas and practices on both sides. South Africa's tradition of critical policy research is an excellent foundation for current and future relationships between the education departments and the research community. The department therefore expects researchers to engage robustly with departmental policies and programmes both as participants, as well as critics.

I would like to ask that the EPC to engage more vigorously in dialogue and debates in the public media. We don't mind if our policies are subject to critical examination, but when our

progressive policies are scurrilously attacked by conservative and reactionary forces, it would be good if we were not alone in defending our progressive path.

I am sorry that I can't spend any more time with you now, but we do now have some time for discussion – and John spend some time with you on Thursday.

I wish you a fruitful and productive conference.