



NEW POST-SCHOOL STUDIES NEEDED? The writer argues that “we need to revisit the true meaning of the word ‘vocation’ and this needs to permeate our Technical and Vocational Education and Training Colleges”.

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A HANDFUL of people (1%) live in a kind of “Elysium” — the luxurious space habitat depicted in the 2013 film of the same name, suspended in the air far away from the ravaged Earth on which the majority of people live — poor and desperate.

We have these same “Elysium” dwellers in gated communities living in splendid isolation behind their high walls, with boomed-off streets, security guards and cameras where they live, eat, shop and work — they never really have to leave.

At the same time, the majority of people live in poverty — workers increasingly have no jobs and ecosystems are being destroyed in the name of “development” — state-of-the-art office building after office building is erected in Sandton, Johannesburg — many of which stand empty, while millions live in shacks or on the streets.

This is a stark symbol of the crisis — a colossal gulf dividing the haves from the have nots. The youth — born into this crisis — now bear the brunt of it, mostly when it comes to being unable to find employment or to create their own jobs. Globally the formal economy’s ability to absorb labour is fast slipping away while students are still being prepared to enter into the labour market.

The youth are told they are lazy, uneducated, under-educated, inexperienced, disinterested, incompetent and so on.

They are told that the reason for their unemployment is a result of their own deficiencies and inadequacies.

If they can’t get a job, they need to acquire more education or ignite their entrepreneurial spirits and start their own businesses. — as if it were as easy as that, as easy as the technical steps of putting a business plan together.

Adapt and die: Alternative views on skills and development

Alas, doing that is not a technical exercise, and keeping on doing “business-as-usual” will not get us anywhere, except maybe enrich a few consultants and authors of “how to” books. There’s even an application that was launched on Youth Day “to develop youth entrepreneurship” — yet another so-called “solution” to yet another so-called “challenge”!

Pointing the finger of blame has become an art form in the last couple of decades.

This blame game extends beyond blaming people (particularly poor, working class without jobs) to the educational institutions that prepare them for citizenship.

In South Africa, our Technical Vocational and Education and Training (TVET) colleges are targeted and championed as the places where all will be fixed. It’s simple — pour money into them and do some “fit for purpose” training and all will be resolved.

A lot of fiddling and tinkering has already been done and has got us nowhere. Remember outcomes-based education, which was meant “to level the playing fields”?

We have more hills and valleys in our schools now than ever before.

We hear daily the mantras of “upskill”, “reskill”, “retrain”, “refocus”.

Most of us, like the good compliant robots we have become, get ourselves up-skilled, reskilled, retrained and, indeed, refocused — a la get a qualification in one thing and because there are no jobs in that area, do something else (and remember it’s your fault for choosing the “wrong” field of study).

Does all this “uping” and “reing” really help the people it is meant to? Ask the millions who have been retrenched the world over. Ask the increasing number of unemployed graduates who sit with certificates and not much else.

The other mantra — the “shortage of skills/mismatched skills/scarce and critical skills” mantra — is now bankrupt and boring. The people who sit on the sides of the streets with paint brushes and spirit levels in hand have skills, as do millions of others the world over, such as the farmers forced off their land in India.

These are examples of skilled people with no jobs. So, wherein lies the problem?

No, not in the people themselves nor in the choice of study options, and not because the youth are disinterested and “untrainable”.

The problem lies in the crisis of global corporate capitalism and its formal labour markets that cannot absorb

the workers.

Surely, a narrow, technicist focus on education and skills for business and industry only is past its sellbydate?

“Doing work” as useful to oneself, one’s community and society in general should be part of one’s life — and life is about so much more than simply being a cog in business and industry’s wheel.

We need to revisit the true meaning of the word “vocation” and this needs to permeate our Vocational Education colleges.

“Vocation” means a calling — one’s life’s work and purpose.

It refers to the many meaningful and productive activities that human beings carry out with a great sense of dedication and commitment.

The idea of vocation is also found in religion and is central to the belief that God created each person with gifts and talents oriented toward specific purposes and ways of life.

Even though one could argue that UNESCO’s definition of TVET is broad(er) in that it includes “employment, decent work and lifelong learning”, the White Paper for Post-school Education and Training defines the main purpose of TVET colleges as sites for providing youth with the skills, knowledge and attitudes ne-

cessary for employment in the labour market.

This narrow definition, repeatedly and routinely used in South Africa, is about preparing students to become workers for business and industry (compliant and adaptable) and if that fails then to be “employable” or get a “job opportunity” (what is that?) or miraculously become an entrepreneur (never mind the realities of banks not providing finance and all the other hardships and barriers that budding entrepreneurs face, including a dwindling customer base as more and more people have less and less disposable income and simply cease to be customers).

The global economic system continues to exclude and marginalise millions of people.

However, the world over, numerous movements, spaces, groupings, organisations, ideas, learnings, activities and ways of doing things differently are emerging — against the dominant, oppressive system of global corporate capitalism.

These examples are meaningful and valuable demonstrations of hope and possibility outside of formal spaces.

These spaces or “cracks”, have been created by ordinary people who show resilience and agency and refuse to give up despite hardship and struggle.

These examples may be invisible to many but they exist.

For instance, amid the shacks of Khayelitsha, Nyanga and the surrounding areas of the Cape Flats one finds the “Abalimi Bezekhaya farmers’ (that is, “the planters”/Farmers of Home) and many gardens filled with a variety of ecologically grown vegetables. Abalimi Bezekhaya was started in 1982 and today the Abalimi movement consists of over 5 500 registered microfarmers (led by women who hail from the Eastern Cape, many who left their homes in search of work).

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