

EQUALISING PROFESSIONAL AND ACADEMIC QUALIFICATIONS

Issued by Perfect Word Consulting (Pty) Ltd

The view of many parents today is that their children will be assured a healthy career and the opportunity to build personal wealth if they get a university degree. However, where does this leave those that do not have access to a tertiary education? What about the many who have dreams of entering careers that do not require a degree, or who do not want a degree? How then do we explain the number of unemployed graduates, which simply increases with every graduating class?

At the recent African EduWeek conference, Gizelle McIntyre, director of The Institute of People Development (IPD), confirmed that the myth that having a qualification will ensure a good job must be debunked. "There is a great reputational difference between professional and academic qualifications and this is due to the misconceived belief that the best way to prepare our children for employment is through a degree, or academic qualification." In her presentation, McIntyre stated that the Organising Framework for Occupations codes indicate that a staggering 70% of all high and low level work lies in the realm *before* degrees.

In a world that has been conditioned to a certain level of academic snobbism with regards to the types of qualifications available, how can the mind-set of the general population be changed? "The only way to address this misconception is to redefine thought patterns in this regard. The very existence of many bridging programmes indicates the need for professional qualifications. In a recent talk Dr Frans Cronje, CEO: SAIRR, emphasised the need for us not to focus on how many matriculants we exit from education, but how many of them have over 50% for maths, this being industry's main indicator of a student who will be worthy of recruiting."

Academic qualifications equip candidates with knowledge about the subject, but practical skills are rarely taught as part of that qualification. "If managers were given autonomy over the recruitment process, most of them would more than likely select candidates that have occupational qualifications and/or experience in the field, based on their experiential skills, rather than an academic qualification (unless the position is strictly strategic)," says McIntyre.

It is important to note that this is not a call for people to disregard the importance of academic qualifications. Academic qualifications add immeasurable value in terms of teaching graduates how to think deeper, question more, research effectively and solve problems in a structured manner. Where a position requires these skills, an academic qualification would certainly add more value than a professional one. However, McIntyre believes that there are certain steps that should be followed before starting an academic qualification; after all, how many graduates are actually working in their field of study?

One of the most common strategies currently being utilised, especially by big companies, is to place graduates in internship programmes – to ensure that they are work-fit, not just study-fit. Surely this should be raising red flags to those who believe the simple obtainment of a degree will automatically lead to employment?

The first step would be to equip people with occupational qualifications, evaluate their progress and identify the cream of the crop from an educational and occupational standpoint. From this there are two skills development paths to choose from; those with management or strategic potential and the correct fit in the company could now begin an academic qualification, while others may be better suited to a professional qualification giving them occupational expertise, speciality direction and real-world skills.

“For this to become a reality, however, companies will need to change their recruitment processes, hiring based on skill and core competencies, not purely based on qualifications.” Essentially, skills development is about return on investment and building powerful companies; there are very few ‘hippies’ in skills development; it is all about the bottom-line in the long run. “Here’s the fact – once hired, companies cannot simply fire employees; so when hiring, doesn’t it make more sense to base the decision on proven skill and competence, rather than just a piece of paper?”

The Quality Council for Trades and Occupations is heavily advocating articulation and it is hoped that these two types of qualifications will soon be regarded as equal, enabling them to work together; but there is a long road ahead. When this pinnacle is reached, Africa will finally be at a point where skills development is truly best practice. McIntyre concludes that; “There are millions of unemployed youth that need to be employable; more than can afford to get degrees. Professional qualifications are more affordable, offer greater levels of flexibility, can be completed piecemeal to build up to a full qualification and, although they require practical application and are therefore not easier than academic qualifications, they take less time to complete.”

Before forcing school leavers into a tertiary education which doesn’t truly guarantee that the world will become their oyster, parents should consider the unemployment statistics carefully. Why are there so many unemployed, highly qualified people? Success is a ladder that must be climbed from the bottom rung to be sustainable. With a focus on skills first, employees can build themselves up to a point where they can achieve those academic qualifications (and their companies would probably pay for it too.)

- ENDS -