

**Workforce Development:
Broadening Roles for National Training Agencies in
Small Island States**
By: George W. Gamerdinger

Nations moving from good to great require not only a healthy environment for employment but also a skilled workforce. The mix is delicate. Making the process work can promote a growing economy. Getting it wrong can result in not only a lack of employment opportunities but a probable national exodus of its talented workforce.

Small-island states (SIS) investing in workforce learning now have a range of SISs to draw good workforce reform experiences from. However, the action may necessitate looking at workforce models both regionally and inter-regionally, a process enhanced by having a national apex agency to facilitate the search¹.

Among Caribbean countries, good practice models are best represented by Barbados, Dominican Republic, Jamaica, and Trinidad & Tobago, while in other regions successful workforce models are found in Singapore, Papua New Guinea and Mauritius. The regions where these countries are located offer many quality experiences for adaptation beyond those just mentioned and served as a resource for much of this article. What is common among the countries with the most successful workforce-learning initiatives is legislative support, strong private sector involvement and citizens that demand relevance from their education systems. Therefore, it is perplexing that more SIS have not drawn on each other's creative innovations to link workforce development with national economic development, especially since most workforce models are available just for the asking or at minimal cost.

Reasons often given by national decision makers for their country's passivity regarding workforce preparedness range from the lack of financial resources to limited private sector employment opportunities. The article also suggests that entrenched "negative

¹ The Caribbean Association of National Training Agencies (CANTA) is a suggested model to consider when forming a regional association of national training agencies.

perceptions” about workforce learning are a contributing force to why occupational skills and careers are not receiving the national attention they deserve. Thoughts on why such entrenched views continue to influence careers and why it is important that they be corrected are explored.

Broadening Workforce Development - The Challenge

Two statements worth reminding workforce development decision-makers is that (1) skilled learning and performance in itself, no matter how excellent, does not create jobs, and (2) no national apex agency responsible for workforce learning can be credible if not linked to civil society, in particular the private sector. These somewhat obvious observations are worth remembering in narrowing the gap between rhetoric and reality on workforce preparedness. Another equally important observation is that there are a number of practical models that can be borrowed from small-island states that do indeed move the process of skills development along. To aid in this development process five planning options have been identified for consideration when enhancing human performance through national workforce development.

- Establishing a **national apex agency** to facilitate and monitor occupational programmes at the private as well as public sector level;
- Customizing internationally recognized **workforce standards** to create national vocational qualifications and occupational standards of competence;
- Making **education systems** more relevant to all citizens;
- Promoting **societal valuing of workforce learning and performance**;
- Implementing continual **recommendations for** broadening workforce development by **NTAs**.

National Apex Agency

Global good practices have shown that a country can enhance its workforce development efforts by designating a single agency to coordinate its workforce learning and performance options. Such an apex body is referred to in this article as a national training agency (NTA)².

² Countries often name their national apex agency responsible for workforce development differently.

Operating at the national level, NTAs work closely with the private sector to validate international skill competencies, while monitoring quality performance and learning at the institutional and workplace level. Expanding this organizational approach from the national to the regional level, through establishing a regional NTA is an idea worth exploring, especially where national private sector alliances are limited. Often a NTA is located within the ministry of labour or ministry of education. A major element in how well an NTA can function in this facilitation role can be linked to the policy-driven legislative authority they are granted, the private sector support they receive, and the quality of the public education system. In limited cases some NTAs take on the role of providing occupational training. However, most often training delivery is left to specialized training providers that in turn are monitored by an NTA. The separation of training and monitoring offers a checks-and-balanced system, which leads to greater accountability on the part of all involved parties.

Workforce standards: National Vocational Qualifications and National Occupational Standards of Competence

There are many reasons why a nation should incorporate the use of globally- recognized occupational standards of skill competence. Acceptance of internationally validated workplace learning standards gives a nation's learning systems international credibility. It is also cost effective as the transferred competencies have already been identified and field-tested. In addition, the use of internationally recognized standards validates for citizens the quality of content within their learning delivery system. However, it is when global standards and skill competencies move to the national level and are adapted and adopted by the private sector that they become infused with national credibility. The process of customization is delicate. Accepted standards need to retain international validity, yet have national credibility among local employers. It is in this facilitative role that NTAs can provide an invaluable benefit.

Common titles include: vocational training agency, technical and vocational education and training council, technical and vocational training board or national training agency. In this article, the generic title of

While applying international standards and skill competencies is critical in a nation's workforce development, the capacity of learners to fully access the learning process is often determined by the quality of a nation's primary and secondary education system.

Relevant education: Investing in human development

To the delegates of the 2005 Youth Visioning for Island Living Conference, employment and education were critical issues of concern³. The following highlighted country commitments by conference delegates reflect the need for countries to develop multi-dimensional education systems that equally promote learning and performance.

- Cape Verde Islands: Generating employment opportunities for secondary school leavers
- Mauritius: Helping to create more youth employment
- Seychelles: Helping to create more youth employment through local investments
- Sao Tome and Principe: Improving the education system
- St. Kitts and Nevis: A mandatory internship programme to promote youth employment prospects
- Tokelau: Establishing learning centres, targeting youth not in scholarship programmes for vocational training including information technology.
- Zanzibar: Improving the education system

Addressing the concerns voiced above means for many nations not only revising current educational practices but also revisiting the elitist view that everyone must go to college to be viewed as successful in society.

Countries re-energizing their national education system may be confronting remnants of colonial history that institutionalized a passive education and career guidance approach. Too often ignored, such education systems promote almost exclusively subject content geared toward a student's access to the university as the socially accepted career path. In establishing such a system, other forms of learning and performance delivery were either

national training agency (NTA) is used to represent this grouping.

³ Resolutions from the Youth Visioning for Island Living Conference held in Pointe aux Sables, Mauritius, 7-12 January 2005. <www.unesco.org/csi/smis/siv/yv/Youthdecl-commit.htm>

ignored or tainted as being of a lesser social worth. While the graduates from such systems have skills, they are too often unprepared in how to adapt such skills outside academia.

The Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), representing small island states and a population of just about 600,000, provides an example of what awaits students that mainly see higher education as a their sole career path. The results of a study first done in 1992 and followed-up again in 2002 indicated that only approximately 20% of students met the standard for entry to the university, leaving 80% of the students, who also hoped for the same career path, now on a path that they cannot travel⁴. While the system is changing, career preparation concerns continue to be an issue for learners and their families. Adjusting a single path education system to one that recognizes multiply entry-exit points into the labour force as well as higher education is critical for learners and essential for a nation's economic and social development.

Regardless of a country's economic status, key elements in all education systems promote learning skills associated with problem solving and the command of reading, writing and mathematics⁵. Skill sets, when combined with the ability to be a self-directed learner, have become the new core competencies of the university as well as the workplace.

Mastering the academic and social skills necessary to promote societal interaction is what a quality education system prepares people for. The greater the quality of those skills, the greater is the potential of the learner in today's marketplace. Yet, equally as important as these skills are, knowledge about careers is essential for enriching skill development. Career education and guidance services help learners by forming the connection between abstract subject matter and a lifetime of self-fulfilling employment. The path to employment, whether by way of the university or direct entry into the workplace,

⁴ Payne. Paul. *Developing a 21st Century Quality Work Force for the OECS*. pages 11-16. Caribbean Journal of Technical and Vocational Education and Training for Workforce Development. Vol.1. April 2005.

⁵ UNESCO. Education For All Global Monitoring Report –2005.

requires the application of the same skills. Somehow, in many countries the career path at the secondary school level has become a one-direction super highway, emphasizing higher education while diminishing other educational choices. Examining some of the following common global concerns encapsulates why national learning systems need to innovate more effectively.

Challenges

- half the world's unemployed are youths between 15-24 years of age.
- In the past decade official unemployment globally has grown by 25%.
- People who are unable to find local work are migrating looking for jobs, which is creating national and regional tensions.
- Technical and vocational education systems that prepare a nation's workforce are still viewed by many youth and their parents as second-class employment.
- Employers are finding their aging workforce harder to replace and a limited pool of qualified workers to draw from.

Increasing patterns of global trade and finance are critical for any country's economic sustainability. For small-island states with limited employment opportunities, any disruption of employment such as the closure of a business, or the failure to attract new industry, can contribute very quickly to wrenching changes in people's livelihood and the nation's economy. For a NTA responsible for workforce preparation, such actions go beyond just scenarios to avoid. In short, the work of a NTA must include not only strengthening the employment environment but also addressing potential labour and skills gaps. One way to address this goal is by focusing attention on improving a nation's perception of skills development and occupational careers.

Societal valuing of workforce learning and performance

Reasons given by public sector decision makers for limiting investment in national workforce development programmes are generally linked to funding constraints. Another

theme is the private sector's disappointment in the lack of quality skills training institutions. While both reasons may be valid to a degree, the question lingers as to why civil society remains passive and accepts such pronouncements as a *fait accompli* rather than a challenge to be corrected. For many workforce related issues the gaps between rhetoric and reality may be influenced more by perceptions than reality.

For many nations, the origin of such views has historical linkage to colonization, or long-term issues associated with low wage rates, gender stereotyping, and/or possibly the negative depiction of the country's vocational and technical career preparation systems. It can only be hoped that many such negative perceptions no longer reflect workplace realities. Yet, such assumptions cannot be left unexplored. If unchallenged, the negative influence from such views may continue to drive the career decision-making process of youth, their parents, the general public, and policy decision making on workforce investments.

Skeptics might argue that negative values attached to the concept of skilled occupations and workforce preparation no longer exist. Yet, the arguments are easy to spot in conversations about career choice, during debates on educational funding or in articles highlighting general business news. Typical types of such statements include:

- *Of course skilled workers are the backbone of our economy and are critical for society's development and they get paid well...I am all for technical and vocational education as a career choice for other people's children ...just not mine.*
- *Workforce education lacks the rigor of general education. People in workforce learning are not as smart as those in academic education. The two systems are "miles" apart.*
- *NTAs are an expense not needed in a country that does not have a large workforce or limited private sector.*

Often the sort of statements mentioned above are so ingrained within a culture that they remain unchallenged and so reinforced. Developing a skilled workforce takes not only

years but requires serious inputs from the private sector, NGOs, and trade unions among others to ensure that the learning and performance instruction provided has the credibility to meet national needs. The other side of the skills development equation is that trade unions, occupational training providers, and employers need to ensure that they are not missing opportunities to market the positive value of having a skilled workforce. The adage that educators are experts at marketing everything except their own success stories is probably correct.

Recommendations for broadening Workforce Development by NTAs

Recognizing that perceptions about occupational skills and careers play a pivotal role in national decision-making requires that they be a crosscutting component in the ways NTAs promote workforce preparation. Four recommendations for implementing the views outlined in this article for national training agency consideration include:

- Assessing national views on work and skills by information gathering through focus groups, review of national publications, local media and participation in national meetings. Gathered information will serve as the platform for a national action campaign to reposition the positive valuing of occupational skills and careers.
- Correcting negative and outdated perceptions about skilled vocations by updating career information materials, media presentations and community dialog by NTA officials and advocates from the private sector. Special target groups should include political leaders, educational professionals, community decision-makers, youth and previously uninvolved public interest groups.
- Establishing a consortium among regional and inter-regional NTAs, formalizing strategies for the sharing of career information, skill competencies, occupational standards, learning and performance materials, apprenticeship work sites and possibly staff exchanges. Follow-up actions include lobbying international development agencies to support the consortium's formation, especially inter-regional collaboration.
- Encouraging citizens to take responsibility for education programmes by demanding relevant courses of study from their national learning systems.

The recommendations mentioned in this article require seeking collective intelligence as well as using internationally benchmarked good practices. However the process also requires national political will and joint commitment by the public and private sector.

It is not surprising that environments in which workforce practices tend to thrive do so where agencies and organizations function in a state of cooperation. In such an environment, organizational demarcations like private sector, public sector, and non-governmental organizations are titles for identification rather than functional barriers - a national environment where the term collaboration is not viewed passively, but promoted vigorously through social dialogue and implementation.

With the impact of globalization, the issues faced by countries in developing a national workforce are not unique. What is unique is how each country chooses to address the issues in ways that best maximize its talents. In this regard a NTA can make a major contribution by turning global good practices into customized national solutions to workforce learning and performance challenges.

GWG –December 2006