

## ***New Futures: A youth employability programme currently being piloted by SchoolNet SA – Maryla Bailobrzaska reports***

In recent years the issue of youth employability has emerged as one of the most critical challenges facing most nations. Changes in the demographic profile of many countries are intensifying this problem as young people become a larger percentage of the total populations. At the same time, a rapidly changing global economy and shift toward knowledge-based jobs is making it increasingly difficult for youth, especially disadvantaged young people, to compete successfully for available jobs. Unfortunately many education systems are not keeping pace with the changing world of work and as a result, more and more young people enter the labour market without the skills needed to find decent work or continue their education.

In South Africa this problem has reached extremely worrying proportions. There were 2.8 million young people not in employment, education or training in South Africa in 2007 - two in five 18 to 24-year-olds - and the number could have soared to 3.2 million now. These are the findings of a study of post-school youth, '*South Africa: Scoping the need for post-school education*' undertaken by Charles Sheppard and Nico Cloete.<sup>1</sup> In the researcher's words, this "is not only an educational problem but constitutes a social and economic disaster".

There are no easy answers to this vicious cycle of poverty, unemployment, frustration and vulnerability. There are however some options for mitigating this trend and *New Futures* is one such option. This pilot project demonstrates that under the right conditions, it is possible for disadvantaged youth to break the grip of poverty and to transition successfully into the world of work.

The *New Futures* youth employability programme is currently being piloted in Johannesburg and SAIDE has been asked to evaluate it. For further information about the programme and some initial results, read more...

### **Introduction**

The New Futures Programme (NFP) was born out of a partnership between Microsoft US, the Academy for Education Development (AED) an American NGO and SchoolNet (South Africa). Microsoft donated funding to AED to implement a youth employability programme with the aim of providing IT technical support to the NGO industry in South Africa. AED, having run a youth employability programme in Brazil with school leavers in 2003/4 had successfully developed a hands on project-based approach to student learning. They were well positioned to provide initial support and guidance to the SchoolNet team to implement the NFP. In their search for an implementing partner in South Africa, AED made contact with the Department of Extended Public Works who expressed interest in the programme. With a view to replicating the programme in South Africa, 14 members of the department visited Brazil in order to understand how the programme was

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<sup>1</sup> University World News (20 December 2009 Issue: 106 accessed [www.universityworldnews.com](http://www.universityworldnews.com)).

implemented. Unfortunately, however, various delays with the implementation of the programme in South Africa resulted when most members of this delegation were shifted to different positions within the department after the April 2009 elections in South Africa. Through Microsoft SA, AED, was then put in touch with SchoolNet who, realizing the important need for such programmes for youth in South Africa, was ready and available to take on the role of implementing partner. The project-based approach to this programme is in line with SchoolNet's approach to learning as well so it was a good fit for SchoolNet.

A programme that prepares young men and women for the realities of the working world meets a significant need in South Africa. Far too often, young people have a theory-based qualification from a college or a university of technology with – in this case Information and Communication Technology (ICT) – but who, in reality are unable to solve real life problems and have little or no practical, work-based experience. They are expected to be able to navigate successfully through the world of work, but without the right skills and support networks, many are not able to secure employment to support themselves or to contribute to the development of their communities. Interventions such as the NFP need to be implemented to ensure this cycle is broken.

Universities and technical universities have come under a lot of criticism for not equipping graduates with relevant employability skills that will assist them in securing employment. It has become all too clear that it is not enough just to have technical knowledge; skills such as effective communication, planning, time management and problem solving are absolutely vital if one is to survive, and thrive, in the workplace. Addressing the Parliamentary portfolio committee on education in March this year, Higher Education Minister, Blade Nzimande stated that “universities were not producing the right kinds of graduates that the country needs to fight poverty and unemployment” (The Citizen, 26 March 2010). He continued by saying that universities should focus on developing a sense of patriotic responsibility in the education sector. “How do we educate to ensure people plough back?” he asks. The New Futures Programme aims to address exactly these issues. The programme seeks to develop, not only young people that are employable because they have a good mix of hard and soft skills, but young people that are also responsible, contributing members of society.

## **The New Futures Programme**

### **Aims and objectives**

The programme's primary aim is to address the fact that youth unemployment is at an unacceptably high level, and that young men and women are not adequately prepared for entering and succeeding in the workplace. The programme aims to do this by equipping the participants with the relevant information and communications technology (ICT) and employability skills that they need for securing work. Through an integrated mix of life skills, work place readiness, entrepreneurship and hands on experience and mentoring, the project seeks to

provide young people with the skills needed to secure decent employment and/or self-employment in entry-level ICT technical support positions.

### **Programme structure**

The pilot programme has run from October 2009 to June 2010. The first group of participants (NFP 1) – a group of 21 – attended the programme from October to the end of March, with the second group (NFP 2) – a group of 20 – participating from mid-March to the end of June 2010. The participants were required to attend sessions for about six hours daily for the duration of the programme.

The programme is structured in three phases. First, the transition from student to member of the NFP, second, the development of applied technical and professional soft skills and third, the transition from the NFP to the world of work.

1. The focus for the *first month* of the programme is around orientating the participants to the way the New Futures Programme operate. The participants are introduced to the idea that they are now being required to take responsibility for their own learning. They will be treated as young professionals and they will not be spoon fed information such as may have been the case at school or college. Activities to assist with this transition include a discussion on the participants' expectations of the programme and instilling important values and behaviours such as respect for the group and time keeping.
2. The *second and middle phase* of the programme focuses on developing the core activities of the programme, the ICT technical skills and employability skills. This is an intense period of equipping the participants with both 'hard' and 'soft' skills in an integrated way.
3. The *final phase* prepares and supports the participants to make the transition from the programme to the world of work. Activities such as effective CV writing, interviewing skills, and starting your own business are addressed. Participants are also given an increasing amount of time to search for and apply for jobs, with the assistance and guidance of the programme facilitators.

While this phased approach serves to frame the programme delivery, it is not implemented rigidly. Rather this is done in a flexible and responsive manner. For example, if opportunities around specific preparation for the workplace arise before the 'official' final phase of the programme, such opportunities *are* maximized. During every session, regardless of the topic focus, the facilitators reflected with the participants on the relevance of the specific topic to their preparation for employment.

This flexible yet strategic approach allows the team to integrate the participants' specific needs, interests and desires into the overall structure of the programme.

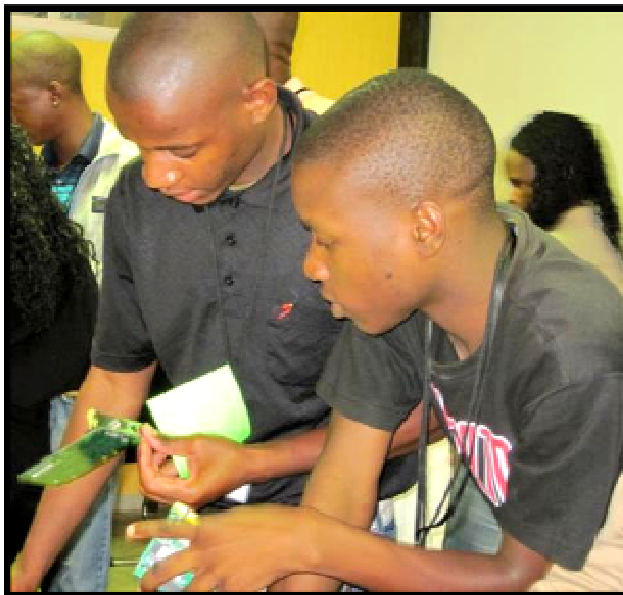
### **Themes covered**

Each week of the course is dedicated to a particular theme. All activities for the week are aimed at enhancing the participants' knowledge, skills and attitudes surrounding that theme. The themes or key focus areas selected are derived from extensive research. The NFP team has consulted a range of recruitment agents and ICT companies to find out from them what skills and attitudes potential employees needed to be successful. In this way the programme interventions were matched with authentic marketplace demands.

The curriculum for the New Futures Programme is broadly broken into two areas, namely ICT technical support skills and employability or the so called 'soft skills'.

### ***ICT Technical Support Skills***

- Understanding hardware
- Understanding and installing Operating System software
- Introduction to and practicing troubleshooting
- Supporting hardware (e.g. hard drives, USB ports, RAM)
- Supporting networked computers
- Accessing and using the Internet
- Supporting security needs
- Performing routine maintenance



*NFP 1 participants dismantling and reassembling desktops.*

### ***Employability Skills***

- Navigating the world of work
- Effective communication
- Business presentation skills
- Exploring entrepreneurship and starting a business
- Personal financial literacy
- Understanding NGOs and their ICT support and planning needs
- Business writing skills
- Team work
- Effective planning
- Critical thinking and problem solving
- Citizenship and personal responsibility

### **Project-based approach to learning**

The New Futures programme is based on project based learning (PBL) principles. PBL is defined by the Buck Institute of Education (2003) as *'a systematic teaching method that engages students in learning knowledge and skills through an extended inquiry process structured around complex, authentic questions and carefully designed products and tasks.'* Students are pulled through the curriculum by a driving or primary question or authentic problem that creates a need to know the material. Two key attributes of projects designed on PBL principles are the following:

1. Projects recognise learners' inherent drive to learn and their need to be taken seriously by putting them at the centre of the learning process;
2. Projects highlight challenging issues or questions that lead learners to in-depth exploration of authentic and important topics.

The programme's learning facilitators assists learners, working in teams, to gain necessary skills through relevant learning projects using authentic scenarios. Each learning project aims to integrate some, if not all, the curriculum areas mentioned above. The development of learning projects is an ongoing process, designed to integrate learners' abilities, needs and interests. As far as is possible and realistic, the programme seeks to simulate the world of work and results in learners developing products that demonstrated mastery of skills and abilities.

### **Programme delivery**

Facilitators aim to provide an environment where learners can take responsibility for their own learning. Learners are given a primary question which is derived from the overall expected outcome of the session. The participants then came up with secondary questions which help them to answer the primary question. Various experiential learning activities are designed and then used to answer these questions. Some of these activities include research leading to presentations, role plays, interviews, written reports, debates and brainstorming sessions. The incorporation of an activity-based approach means that important knowledge and skills are learnt by *doing*.



*NFP 1 participants hard at work on a group work project in their first week*

### **Guest Speakers and Facilitators**

Over and above the regular learning projects designed by the NFP team, the programme delivery was enriched by the participation of a number of guest speakers. Guest speakers told their stories of how they have navigated the world of work and spoke about the skills and attitudes they believe are successful in the marketplace. Some specific guest speaker and topics covered include:

- Leo Pineda and Scott Mills from AED visited the NFP 1 participants during their first week on the programme and spoke about the importance of effective communication skills in the workplace, and showed off some new technologies being developed in the United States.
- Annette Kinneer, author of 'Your Career, Your Life' spoke about the importance of setting goals, persevering and believing in yourself. Annette founded IRIE Inspiration in 2009 spurred by the Jamaican philosophy that one person can make a difference. The company's three divisions include Career Design, Corporate Inspiration and Cross Cultural Inspiration.
- Angel Jones, Creative Director of Morrisjones&Co advertising agency and founder of the Homecoming Revolution spoke about the importance of follow one's dreams and gave some practical tips and advice on starting one's own company.
- Omashani Naidoo from SchoolNet SA presented a session on financial management. The participants had the opportunity to practice drawing up their own personal budget and learnt the importance of managing one's finances effectively.
- Staff members from Dependable Strengths ran a 3 day workshop to assist NFP participants in identifying and articulating their strengths. The final outcome was a strengths report which participants presented to members of their community with the aim of being remembered and possibly referred for potential employment.
- Phelelia Sekele from the Sci-Bono Career Centre facilitated a practical workshop on effective CV and cover letter writing for both groups. This was followed by a

series of ‘mock interviews’ where participants were interviewed by a panel of Sci-Bono staff members and feedback was given to them to help them improve their interviewing skills.

### **Job shadowing**

Job shadowing at various Johannesburg-based companies is another important component of the programme. Participants spent one week at an IT company or in an IT department within a company. They then returned to the formal programme for a period of two weeks, before returning for another week of job shadowing. The two main objectives of the job shadowing are:

- to provide the participants with an opportunity to familiarise themselves with the industry and to be exposed to organisational culture and structure; and
- to assist the participants in obtaining career exposure so that the participant can make a more informed decision regarding the direction in the ICT sector that they wanted to pursue.

After the first week of job shadowing, the facilitators discussed the feedback received from host companies on the participant’s skills or attitudes that still needed improving.

### **eMentoring programme**

Every participant on the New Futures Programme was assigned an eMentor, a working professional who acted as the participant’s guide, advisor and supporter along their journey. The mentoring relationship provided an opportunity for more experienced people in a variety of industries and professions to provide support and guidance to the participants through modelling positive attitudes and behaviour such as integrity, commitment, professionalism and perseverance. It was referred to as eMentoring because the majority of the interaction was online i.e. through email and instant messaging (IM). Where IM was problematic, the telephone was used.

The goal of eMentoring was similar to face- to- face mentoring, which is to establish a relationship of trust, respect and responsibility between someone experienced and someone less experienced and younger. Part of the aim of online eMentoring on the NFP is to assist the participants (mentees) in improving their reading and writing skills through IM chats and email correspondence. It gives the participants an opportunity to understand the potential benefits of using Internet communication tools. The eMentors supported their mentees by sharing their stories of how they successfully navigated the world of work. Discussing employment opportunities, giving general advice and guidance and helping the mentee to develop a positive attitude to taking responsibility, are all areas that the mentor is likely to engage. Another important aim of this relationship is to assist the mentees in developing professional networks that they otherwise would not have had access to.

## **Initial programme pilot results**

As the New Futures Programme 2 is still in progress, results reflected here pertain to the New Futures Programme 1. It is however important to note, that the findings of NFP 1 have already been fed into NFP 2 in April 2010, thus significantly strengthening the second programme delivery. The final results the pilot are still pending the conclusion of the programme at the end of June.

### **The importance of programme attendance**

Overall, there appears to be a correlation between participant attendance and the level of transformation reported by the project team. Those whose attendance was 70% or lower did not exhibit significant changes in behaviour or attitudes and were not identified by the project team as those who would be most likely be successful on completion of the programme. Those whose attendance was above 70% showed great improvement in their skills and ability to communicate effectively and in their attitude towards their peers and facilitators.

### **Shift in participant perceptions**

In a baseline survey undertaken by all participants at the commencement of NFP 1, 85% of the participants cited 'lack of experience' as the main *cause of unemployment*, with 63% stating 'lack of skills' as another significant cause. When these perceptions were further unpacked during the 'Pathways to Employability' learning project, the majority of participants seemed to feel that the main reasons they were unemployed had to do with external factors, such as employees not giving graduates enough opportunities or the government not assisting enough in terms of job creation. They also believed that universities or colleges do not adequately prepare young people for the realities of the working world. By the end of the programme most participants appreciated that they could not only blame external factors for their unemployment. They realized it was important that they acknowledged their own role in the situation and that they take responsibility for what happened to them instead of believing it was all out of their control and up to someone else to simply provide a job for them.

### **Overall changes in attitudes, behaviours and skill level**

Changes in attitudes, behaviours and skill level were demonstrated both in terms of technical skills and soft such skills as confidence, presentation skills and effective communication. Those who attended regularly, participated actively in group activities and discussions and made use of the opportunities provided, grew the most in terms of their skills and confidence levels. Not surprisingly, they are largely the ones who secured employment soon after the programme ended. The areas in which the programme appears to have had the most impact include:

- Improved ICT skills particularly with regards to understanding hardware, software installation, troubleshooting, setting up and maintaining networks and understanding and maintenance of servers.
- Improved presentation skills including voice projection and modulation, breathing and relaxation techniques, Powerpoint and Prezi skills, gathering and



summarising information and planning and presenting an informative, engaging presentation.

- Increased self-confidence and belief in one's abilities and innate talents.
- A more positive attitude to life and a greater sense of one's own responsibility for one's future.
- Greater awareness of and access to the resources available for searching for job opportunities, such as websites and personal and professional networks.

### **Participant's perception of their employability**

When asked to explain in the programme end evaluation questionnaire whether the programme participants felt that they were more employable after having completed the NFP 1, all the participants responded positively. Key reasons provided included the fact that they felt that they could 'sell' themselves better; communicate better; and that overall they had more confidence. Some participants mentioned CV writing and interview skills. They also reflected on technical/hard skills acquired. Sixteen (84%) of the respondents said that they would recommend the New Futures Programme.

### **Programme completion rate**

At the start of the programme there were 21 participants, five more participants joined the programme during the first couple of weeks after its commencement, making the total 26. During the course of the programme, five dropped out, two because they had found employment, two, because they could not financially afford to continue and one – no reason given. Twenty-one participants or 81% of the total number enrolled, completed the pilot programme.

### **Employment, internships and learnerships**

- Six of the participants have secured employment.
- Three have secured internships and
- Two have secured learnerships at the Department of Social Development as IT technicians.
- At the time of this article being published, it appeared that ten participants were still seeking employment (although this could not be verified).

Below are testimonials from two of the NFP 1 participants that illustrate the participants' satisfaction with this programme. When *Mamsy* started the programme, she was too shy to introduce herself to the group, and would in fact leave the classroom if asked to give feedback to the group as a whole or to present anything. She was soft spoken and not able to communicate effectively with her colleagues or facilitators. However, by the end of the programme she had grown so much in confidence that she would even volunteer to be the group spokesperson and was able to make herself heard during presentations – she spoke with ease and confidence.

*Khomotso was an active member of the group throughout but also lacked confidence initially and was very soft spoken. Throughout the programme, however, he grew in confidence, began volunteering for tasks such as being the chairperson of the weekly meetings and was well liked by all his peers. When he started his internship, he told his facilitators that the soft skills he had learnt on the NFP had equipped him so well and he felt he had mastered all the skills they were referring to already. He felt that NFP had changed his life and given him hope.*



*'It was an honour to be part of NFP. Learning someone's culture and behaviour was difficult for me, but NFP taught me patience, respect and adaptability. I benefited so much from my colleagues and facilitators in terms of specific skills and life in general. At first I was discouraged, and thought I would not meet my expectations. But in the end my expectations were more than met! I am still practicing and using the soft skills I learnt where I am working now. I am even able to stand in front of people and give presentations, and this is because of NFP. I love the feeling and it feels so good. Thank you!' Mamsy.*

*'NFP benefited me a lot in terms of my soft skills and technical skills. On the soft skills side, I remember when I arrived at the programme I lacked confidence and self-belief even though I*



*knew what I was capable of. But with the help of the facilitators it was easy for me to adapt and regain my self-confidence. The presentation skills that we learned there really benefitted me a lot because now I know what to do and what not to do when presenting. I remember the feedback session we used to have after every presentation and that played a major role in my life and I would also like to thank my former colleagues for that.*

*On the technical side of skills I also benefitted even though all my expectations were not met, but I can't regret the opportunities I received whilst on the programme, and the facilitation style was excellent. I also enjoyed the opportunity our ICT facilitator gave us to facilitate now and then because that also uplifted our morale and confidence.*

*How can I forget the opportunity I was given to chair our weekly meeting of which I think I did a fair job on that one, and that really prepared me for the future as it was like a trial for me.' Khomotso.*

## **Conclusion**

Participants interviewed all endorsed the programme's relevance and spoke enthusiastically about its value.

More than half of the pilot programme participants - 52% of those that have completed the programme have managed to secure employment and/or a

combination of employment with further skilling opportunities as in the case of the two learnerships and three internships (work-based learning positions). In all instances some income is being generated, thus successfully achieving one of the key objectives of the NFP.

As seen at the beginning of this article, the challenges of youth unemployment are vast and require a coordinated effort to ensure that more and more young people are able to access opportunities. South Africa's general rate of unemployment is 26%, a round number of about six million. Amongst the youth, that rate is double. The major concerns related to youth unemployment are that it could lead to increased social instability, and that jobless youth tend to stay unemployed into later adulthood and are in danger of becoming a generation of long-term unemployed.

There is general consensus that having completed Matric (Grade12) and / or a tertiary qualification is not necessarily enough for securing employment; many young men and women in South Africa lack basic work readiness capabilities 'such as communication, reading comprehension, interviewing, personal presentation and general work behaviour' (Carol Paton Financial Mail, March 2010).

The New Futures Programme is a relevant intervention that seeks to address this gap in skills. With the programme's focus on learning in an authentic context, and preparing youth for the workplace through practical and relevant learning projects, the project is specifically designed to prepare South African youth for the realities of the workplace, thereby making them more employable and increasing the likelihood of them being able to secure employment and contribute to the improvement of our society.

### **The next phase of NFP**

As the Microsoft (US) funded pilot draws to a close at the end of June 2010, the programme's future hinges on further funding being secured. There is no doubt that this pilot programme has been a success – lives have been transformed and the young people involved were afforded opportunities – and given hope – that they otherwise would not have had. Through the work of this programme, a small yet significant difference in the rate of youth unemployment in South Africa has been made.

For further information about this programme or to offer support to enable its continuance, please contact the Director, SchoolNet SA, Janet Thomson, email: [janet@schoolnet.org.za](mailto:janet@schoolnet.org.za)