

ABET: WHOSE BUSINESS IS IT? A BUSINESS PERSPECTIVE

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1. POINT OF DEPARTURE

- ABET is critical basic education required for further development.
- Basic education is a fundamental right of all citizens in South Africa.
- It is the responsibility of Government to provide basic education to all its citizens.
- Basic education can only be provided if there is enough funding from the fiscus to ensure that all citizens are provided the opportunity to acquire basic education.
- Education institutions have the capability and the capacity to provide basic education. Therefore education institutions have the competencies to run basic education programmes.
- It is the function of business to provide necessary skills to its employees in order to survive and be sustainable in the long term.
- Skills can easily be provided and acquired by those employees who have the requisite basic education.
- ABET can be implemented successfully where all concerned participate fully and voluntarily.

2. ABET CONTEXT

KEY CHALLENGE: The design and structure of Adult Basic Education and Training have hallmarks that clearly make it the sole business of government with its education institutions.

- ABET is highly scholastically oriented and structured according to school requirements. ABET levels are articulated in terms of school grades. Adults who have very little or no basic education at all are expected to acquire a Grade 9 or NQF 1 qualification in almost half the time it takes a full time learner to acquire the same qualification. It takes nine years for a full time learner to acquire this qualification being assisted by fully qualified educators.
- ABET learners are subjected to writing exams to prove their competence.
- The basic principles of adult learning are really superficially applied in ABET

In this context ABET clearly becomes the business of government with its education institutions, and therefore has to be funded by the government. Business whose real concern is to run successful business operations and whose core competencies is not to provide basic education

to its employees who need such basic education cannot be charged with the responsibility of providing basic education.

Some of the key adult learning principles are:

- An adult learner must want to learn.
- An adult learner must see the reason why he/she has to learn.
- An adult learner must contribute to his/her own learning.

These adult learning principles clearly indicate that the responsibility for implementing and funding ABET cannot lie with one party only. All those involved in ABET must make it their business.

If one assess the extent to which these principles are applied in our ABET programmes at both the private sector and government funded adult centres, one could conclude that:

- They are not applied properly
- There is no difference between school education and adult centres, therefore ABET should be the domain of government and should take charge in all respects.

If an adult does not want to learn it is going to be difficult for the best teacher/educator/facilitator to successfully teach that adult learner. Clearly ABET is as much the business of the adult learner as it is that of government.

THE BUSINESS PERSPECTIVE

Business is currently struggling to associate with the current design and structure of ABET, hence the difficulty we experience getting support for funding, allocation of resources and allowing time for people to go for classes. Perhaps Business' understanding of ABET and what it should achieve is really not in agreement with that of government and its educational institutions, hence the attitude that it is not the business of Business to be involved in funding and implementing ABET. Business feels clearly that it is getting involved in funding and participating in activities that should clearly be the responsibility of government. Some of the things that are clear indicators in the private sector that show that ABET is really the business of government are:

- High drop out rates
- Poor results and completion rates
- Poor financial support
- Lack of interest by the very adults who are supposed to go to ABET classes.

A general observation of the practice is that at most of the private sector delivery centres, the ABET facilitators are not necessarily fully qualified practitioners. They are drawn from the ranks of labour or administrative staff and they struggle with applying proper methodology and adult

learning principles. This situation very often contributes poor success rates. There are very few good stories we can tell about ABET success in the private sector because we are not using the right personnel to drive ABET implement. ABET implementation needs a qualified practitioner who understands educational methodology with a specific specialization in adult learning. It is prudent to mention that although we cannot be proud about the success rates in ABET in the private sector, the efforts of the private sector are reaching between five to ten percent (5% to 10%) of the target population when compared to the national figures who are reaching around 0.1% of the targeted population that requires ABET. Whilst Business argues that ABET is not within its domain, it is proving to be more successful than what should really be done by government and its educational institutions.

Perhaps another big indicator that ABET is not the business of Business is the ABET indicator on the National Skills Development Strategy. We have a target of educating 700 000 employed people up ABET level 4 in the period 2005 to 2010. To date we have achieved less than 17% of this target and we have less than two years to achieve this target. Not everyone in this 17% has really achieved ABET 4. We will be looking for reasons for this dismal failure yet we will be denying the fact that we placed the responsibility to provide basic education on the private sector knowing fully well that:

- It does not have the competence to provide basic education;
- It has other priorities that are more important than the provision of basic education;
- The learner does not have keen interest in sitting through long drawn out programmes with no immediate returns.

These conditions then really beg the question: Whose business is it?

My arguments should never be interpreted as those of an arrogant business representative who has no interest in the basic education of its nation, especially those who were deliberately denied basic education in the past. There are many good and successful stories we can tell about ABET in the private sector. This is rather a plea for being realistic about best way in which we can deal with the massive challenge of the lack of or even poor basic education that our people are facing. It is a plea to all of us to really place the responsibility where it belongs and to ensure that we do not perpetuate the problem to the detriment of our economy. Business realizes that there will always be a shortage of resources and funds to fulfill the objective of having an adult population that has the necessary basic education, given the history of our country. For this reason Business is always willing to support adult basic education in various forms, namely funding, scholarships and other related resources, as long this question is honestly and realistically addressed: **Whose business is it?**