

Public and private Further Education and Training in South Africa: a comparative analysis of the quantitative evidence

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Public and private provision of vocational education and training (or Further Education and Training in the South African usage) exist in a relationship with each other but are rarely considered together. An analysis is provided of recent quantitative evidence on both sectors in South Africa in order to advance the case for further policy and research work on the inter-connectivities of the two sectors. This particularly emphasises the need for better conceptions of quality and a more serious focus on equity in both sectors.

Introduction

Public and private provision of vocational education and training (or Further Education and Training (FET) in the South African usage) take place alongside each other internationally. However, debates about each sub-system largely take place with the other either absent or presented in an idealised form. Thus, much of the debate about public provision effectively ignores the existence of private provision, or presents it as an idealised model against which public providers cannot possibly compete. Unfortunately, debates about public and private vocational provision, especially in the African context, have been largely about the defence of ideological positions, even where they claim to draw off empirical data.

In the sub-Saharan African context there has been a growth of two literatures on public and private provision in the past decade. In the public sphere there have been comparative studies of a range of countries (e.g. Bennell *et al.*, 1999; King & McGrath, 2002; Johanson & Adams, 2004; Akoojee, Gewer & McGrath, 2005), as well as a number of single country studies, most notably on South Africa (e.g., Kraak & Hall, 1999; Powell & Hall, 2000; 2002; 2004; Cosser *et al.*, 2003; McGrath, 2004). This literature makes clear that public provision is in a stage of transition, driven both by external intellectual and aid influences, largely emanating from development co-operation agencies (see McGrath, 2002 for more details) and by the real or imagined impacts and implications of globalisation (King & McGrath, 2002). This has resulted in public providers becoming more focused on responsiveness to the needs of industry and on promoting employability rather than employment of graduates. This has been linked to a range of changes in management and governance at the institutional and national levels, which have made public institutions take on many of the characteristics of private enterprises (King & McGrath, 2002; Akoojee *et al.*, 2004; Johanson & Adams, 2004).

In the case of private provision there has been comparative work done by Atchoarena and Esquieu (2002), as well as a small number of single country studies (e.g. Mudariki *et al.*, 1997: Botswana; Bennell, 2000: Zimbabwe;

Akoojee, 2003; 2005: South Africa). These studies have shown the heterogeneity of private provision, with its mix of not-for-profit and for-profit modes and rationales. It has also illustrated that private provision tends to operate in a fairly narrow range of niches in terms of location (typically urban) and programmes (typically business or computing). Responsiveness of such providers is assumed by those working in the sector, but some of these studies have pointed to the need to test this more rigorously at the empirical level.

In this article we seek to promote a new approach by providing a South African country-level discussion of the combined state of public and private provision. The complexity of debates about the relationship between public and private Vocational Education and Training (VET), referred to as post-school Further Education and Training (FET), cannot easily be condensed into one journal article. However, part of our intention in writing this article was to make a start in debating the two sectors together. We have a three-part focus in the rest of the article. First, we briefly lay out the key elements of recent South African policy for the two segments of provision. Second, we shift in the longest section of the article to an exploration of some comparisons that can be made from the available quantitative data. Third, we then raise a series of research and policy issues that flow from the quantitative data.

Noting limitations

Before turning to the real storyline, we need to make two clarificatory points. First, we need to make clear what both public and private FET do and don't mean in South Africa. Second, we need to highlight some health warnings about the data we intend to use.

Currently, the official definition of FET is shaped by the tri-band structure of the National Qualifications Framework. Hence, FET is all provision within levels 2–4. However, these levels are served by a wide range of providers. In the Further Education and Training Act of 1998 (RSA, 1998a), the new institutional model of the public FET college was introduced (see McGrath, 2004 for further discussion). These institutions are expected to deliver vocationally oriented programmes in levels 2–4, although they do also have significant portions of general education delivery and programmes within NQF level 5 (post-school, pre-degree).

The Department of Education also differentiates between private providers of academic programmes within the FET band and providers of vocational programmes. Therefore, for our purposes, private FET means those private non-school vocational education and training providers who, in terms of current legislation, need to register with the national Department of Education as private FET institutions. As with public providers, such institutions may not exclusively provide vocational programmes at the FET level, offering programmes across general, further, and higher bands.

It is important to be clear about the nature of the data we are using, both in terms of their reliability and in terms of the uses they can be put to. In terms of their quality, certain health warnings need to be acknowledged about

both sets of data. The public colleges' data (Powell & Hall, 2004) has gaps as the result of non-responses from colleges, and these are particularly serious in terms of measures of equity and access. There are also clear errors in the final report in terms of the codification of data, whether this stems from poor returns or poor recording by the research team is not clear.

The private college data (Akoojee, 2005) may also have problems, based as they are on self-reporting by institutions in response to survey questionnaires. However, there may be greater reasons for concern about the generalisability of the data as we have no reliable information on how many private providers there actually are, due to the nature of the datasets upon which we drew. The evidence we present for private provision was from two sources: first, from a government instrument used as part of a pre-registration process; second, from an independent follow-up survey of those who pre-registered. What proportion of all private providers were in the first, and hence the second, data sets was unknown; as were questions about whether the sample had any systematic biases.

Both sets of data provided snapshots of the state of the respective sectors (although the public data were the third in a series of biennial surveys). They report on a situation that may have already changed, for both public and private provision is currently dynamic and fluid. Moreover, that fluidity included the potential shifting of boundaries as the public providers were enjoined to be more marketised and responsive, potentially moving them into what were formerly private provision niches.

It also needs to be made clear that the public and private data were not collected to be comparable with each other. Moreover, both were collected for specific reasons that were only of partial relevance to what we wanted to do in this study. Crucially, neither set of data could answer certain crucial questions about the nature of vocational education and training in South Africa. Nonetheless, after a close analysis of both sets of data we were of the opinion that something useful could come out of examining them comparatively. In so doing, it is apparent that we can make no grand claims for the scientific proof of what we are saying but that our analysis was intended to be a starting point for further debate.

The South African policy context

The development of South African FET college policy (at least with a focus on public providers) has been outlined elsewhere (McGrath, 2000; 2004). Only a brief summary will be given here.

The key legislative statement regarding FET in South Africa is the Further Education and Training Act of 1998 (RSA, 1998a). This is backed up by the greater detail of the FET White Paper (RSA, 1998b). In the case of the public colleges, the subsequent merger process was detailed in the New Institutional Landscape document of 2001 (DoE, 2001a); whilst private provision was subject to a pre-registration exercise in the same year (DoE, 2001b) and is currently awaiting guidelines on full registration procedures.

For public colleges, the regulations and policy statements brought about the transformation of the previous state and state-aided technical colleges into large, multi-site and partially autonomous institutions. These institutions are expected to be run on more business-like lines and to be more responsive to the needs of the business community. The May 2004 and 2005 State of the Nation Address (Mbeki, 2004; 2005) committed government to further progress on curricular change and on institutional funding. Considerable progress has also recently been made in the delivery of learnerships by public colleges.

Private providers were addressed under Chapter Five of the FET Act. This provided for a Registrar (a Department official) to oversee a process of registration of private providers. Such registration was made compulsory for all those wishing to offer provision. At the heart of the requirements for registration were evidence of financial sustainability; quality assurance — under the NQF processes; and non-discriminatory enrolment practices. Whilst a pre-registration process took place in 2001, a full registration exercise has not yet taken place. Thus, there has yet been no real requirement for providers to meet the conditions of the Act.

The empirical evidence

Enrolments in public and private further education and training

In 2002 there were 406,144 students enrolled in the 50 public FET colleges. This represented a growth of more than one-third since 1998 (Powell & Hall, 2004:34). This total enrolment equated to 143,913 full-time equivalents (FTEs) in 2002, a 17% increase since 1998 (Powell & Hall, 2004:35-37).

Total enrolments for private FET in 2001 were estimated at 706,884. These were spread over 864 providers and over 4 000 sites, showing the huge spread of this little-understood sector (DoE, 2001b).

It is not possible to compare numbers of providers or enrolments confidently with previous years. However, it is likely that there has also been a rapid increase in private provision given that we do know that 70% of the providers surveyed by the HSRC in 2002 had been established in the past decade (Akoojee, 2003; 2005). The private college sector does not operate in the context of FTEs. However, it can be deduced that its FTE numbers would be lower than the public sector given that course durations are typically short, as indicated in Figure 1.

It is usually argued that both public and private provision tend to have particular patterns in terms of their range of programme offerings and the distribution of enrolments across these. Public providers tend towards a focus on long-established trades, often associated with apprenticeships, and are seen as being relatively slow to respond to new occupational niches, whilst private providers are perceived to focus largely on areas where profits are greatest. This leads them to concentrate on areas where set-up costs are low and learner volumes are high, most notably in commercial and information technology subjects (Mudariki *et al.*, 1997; Bennell, 2000; Atchoarena & Esquieu, 2002; Johanson & Adams, 2004).

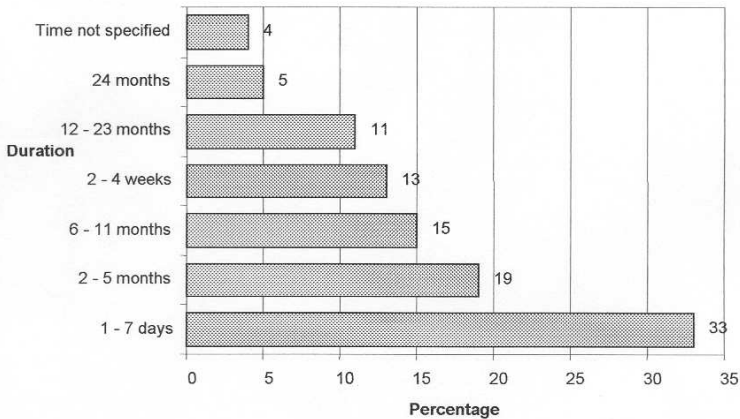


Figure 1 Programmes offered at private FET institutions by duration, 2002 (Source: Akoojee, 2003:411)

South African provision shows a more complex picture. Public provision remains largely in traditional programmes, with 45% of students in engineering studies and another 45% in business studies in 2002, although with considerable provincial variations (Powell & Hall, 2004:42). Seven percent were enrolled in utility studies, largely in tourism and hospitality, and clothing and textiles (Powell & Hall, 2004:43-45).

Private provision in South Africa is very diverse. The DoE database has 864 providers on it, which can be placed into three broad categories (following Atchoarena & Esquieu, 2002): not-for-profit, for-profit, and in-house. In-house providers tend to be located within large firms and are focused at their internal training needs. Not-for-profit providers are by no means homogenous, including religious and secular NGOs focusing on basic skills for the poor, but also more conventional educational providers who have chosen to take charitable status. For-profits do most closely match the conventional picture, but even here the reality is more complex.

Across the whole of private provision, enrolments showed considerable complexity, as shown in Table 1.

The pattern here was somewhat surprising. Although commerce (under field 3) accounted for 14% of the total, this was relatively low. Moreover, only 5% at most fell under ICT (as part of field 10). Instead, there was a strong diversification of delivery. Education amounted to 37% of delivery, possibly because some respondents confused the issue with the sector in which they themselves were engaged. Agriculture amounted for 12% of provision, whilst health and services amounted to 8% each.

Table 1 Number of learners by SAQA Field¹ (Source: Akoojee, 2005)

SAQA field of study		National (%)
SAQA 1	Agriculture and Nature Conservation	12
SAQA 2	Culture and Arts	0
SAQA 3	Business, Commerce and Management Studies	14
SAQA 4	Communication Studies and Language	2
SAQA 5	Education, Training and Development	37
SAQA 6	Manufacturing, Engineering and Technology	10
SAQA 7	Human and Social Studies	1
SAQA 8	Law, Military Science and Security	0
SAQA 9	Health Sciences and Social Services (including basic medical programmes, Social Work)	8
SAQA 10	Physical, Mathematical, Computer and Life Sciences	5
SAQA 11	Services (including Hospitality, Tourism, Consumer Services, Transport, Retail and Wholesale, and Personal Care)	8
SAQA 12	Physical Planning and Construction (including Architecture, Town and Regional Planning, and Building Construction)	4
Total		100

Access to further education and training

It was not possible to use quantitative data to answer many of the most important questions about access. In particular, it was impossible with the data at hand to explore whether institutions, their staff and their programmes were epistemologically accessible (Morrow, 1993) to learners from diverse backgrounds. Nonetheless, we could begin to explore issues of access and equity through some of the main quantitative indicators: race, gender, age, and employment status of the learner. We could also make some inferences from the geographical distribution of providers.

The racial profile of learners

Public FET colleges evolved under colonialism and *apartheid* and reflected the racialised politics of access of both eras. It was not until the Manpower Training Act of 1981 (RSA, 1981) that Africans were able to become apprentices and, hence, to access the principal programmes of the then technical college sector. However, the public college sector has seen a radical transformation of its racial composition of students since the early 1990s. By 2002, 73% of learners were African; 17% white; 8% coloured; and 2% Indian (Powell & Hall, 2004:77) (see Figure 2).

Private provision had a very different evolutionary path (see also Kruss, 2005) but also has a clear preponderance of African learners, also 73% of the total in 2002. However, the racial mix of the other three population groups

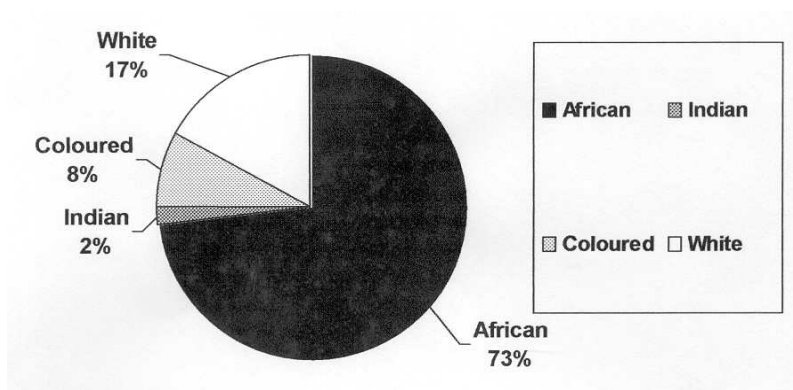


Figure 2 Public FET enrolments by population group, 2002
(Source: Powell & Hall, 2004:77)

was different from that of public providers: only 10% were white; 11% coloured and 6% Indian (Akoojee, 2003:405) (Figure 3).

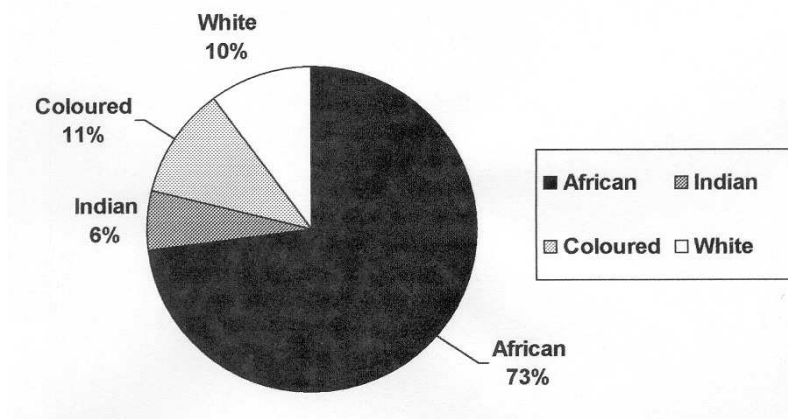


Figure 3 Private FET enrolments by population group, 2002
(Source: Akoojee, 2003:405)

Gender and enrolments

Sixty percent of learners in the public colleges in 2002 were male. This marked a worsening of the gender distribution from 1998 when there were only 56% male students. Unsurprisingly, there were widespread variations in gender mix across the various vocational areas. Only in engineering did males predominate, but in that case by 81% to 19%. Two-thirds of business stu-

dents were female and three-quarters of those in utility studies (Powell & Hall, 2004:78).

The private data did not disaggregate by subject area in the same way. The aggregate gender mix in private providers was within the same range as the publics, there being 57% male enrolments in 2002 (Akoojee, 2003:404). What was striking, however, was the regional variations that lay beneath this aggregate (Figure 4).

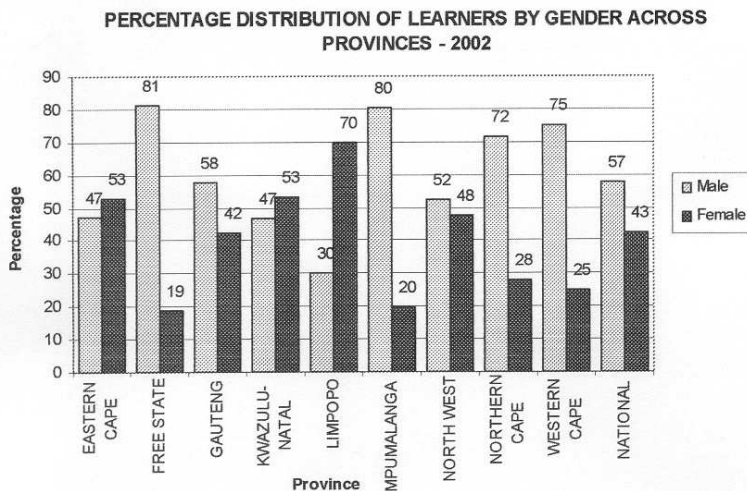


Figure 4 Gender mix of learners in private FET by province
(Source: Akoojee, 2005)

This pattern is not easy to explain. It appeared that those provinces with the highest female participation were those in which there was the strongest presence of rural, not-for-profit provision. Whilst it may be surmised that such provision is often particularly targeting women, it was less apparent why a radically different pattern of female participation should hold for the Eastern Cape and Limpopo, on the one hand, and the Free State and Mpumalanga on the other.

Age and enrolments

There has been official encouragement (DoE, 2001a; DoE & DoL, 2001) for public colleges to make a relative shift away from their traditional focus on provision for school leavers. Nonetheless, in 2002, 65% of students were aged 15–24, and only 9% were aged 35 or over. Indeed, the data suggested that whilst there had been an emergence of older learners since 1998 (defined as over 40 years old); there had been a relative shift in enrolments away from

25–40 year olds and towards 15–24 year olds (Powell & Hall, 2004:40).

The private FET data used different age cohorts but it was still evident that there was a different age distribution of learners. Only 25% of learners in private FET were aged 22 or younger in 2002. In contrast to the public picture, 52% of learners were in the age cohort 23–35 and 23% were over 35 years of age (Akoojee, 2003:406).

These age data confirmed the widespread international view that public providers tend towards a younger clientele than privates. It is also widely assumed that public providers are catering to pre-employed learners, whilst private providers are far more likely to offer programmes and delivery modes that appeal to those already in work.

Employment status of learners

The quantitative public college data did not shed any greater light on employment status of students. However, from our engagement with the sector and from the evidence of the tracer study of past students conducted by Cosser (2003), we could be confident that few public college students were already employed, although the drive towards greater partnerships with industry may well have gone some way to altering this in the medium term.

The private provider survey explicitly explored this issue of employment status. It showed that 58% of learners were reported to be employed in 2002 (Akoojee, 2003:406). Therefore, it appeared that public providers had a young, pre-employed cohort, whilst private providers were characterised by an older, already employed student component, although with considerable variations. However, it is particularly important to note in this regard that there were a considerable number of private providers who were expressly catering for the young unemployed, either as a profitable niche market (where these young people came from wealthier families — a trend also found by Bennell [2000] in Zimbabwe) or as a specific target group for an NGO intervention.

Measures of quality

It was very difficult to measure quality comparatively across public and private FET providers in South Africa. Whereas public provision remained largely organised around nationally administered examinations and certificated qualifications, private provision was far more diverse in terms of assessment, moderation and certification.

Private providers tended to argue that their provision was driven by a greater concern for quality as compared to the public provider. However, they seemed to be operating with a materially different conception of quality as compared to that of the public provider. Private providers largely based their conception of quality on individual learner support and the relevance of programmes based on labour market responsiveness, rather than internal (or for that matter external) moderation procedures. Indeed, only 38% of providers surveyed in 2002 reported that they had 'external moderation' mechanisms in place.

In public colleges, quality was largely seen in terms of what proportion of

those sitting national examinations passed them (pass rates) and what proportion of those originally enrolling passed (throughput rates).

The overall national pass rate in 2002 was 57%. Beneath this figure lay pass rates at the individual colleges that ranged from 39% to 84%, with seven out of 50 colleges having less than a 50% pass rate. There was also a large variation in pass rates across subject areas, with business studies recording a 64% pass rate as opposed to only 52% in engineering (Powell & Hall, 2004: 83).

Throughput rates, naturally, were lower. Only 51% of those who initially enrolled successfully completed their studies in 2002. Whilst the best throughput rate of a college was 74%, the worst was only 32% (Powell & Hall, 2004:85).

One very crude measure of quality of provision that did allow comparison was to assume that staff qualifications were in some way related to quality of provision. In 2002, 46% of staff in public colleges had a degree or higher qualification, as opposed to 36% in private institutions (Powell & Hall, 2004:75; Akoojee, 2003:407).

Discussion

Implications of the comparison of the quantitative data on public and private FET provision

This exploratory study of quantitative data on public and private provision of Further Education and Training in South Africa suggested a series of further questions and additional knowledge needs for both research and policy.

The study stressed the importance for both research and policy of seeing both segments in relationship to each other. There was a clear need to understand the complexity of both. Given that we know more about the public component, this is particularly a plea about better understanding of the private element. Crucially, we need to have a better sense of the heterogeneity of the private FET sector, whether in South Africa or in other countries. We need to understand some of the decisions about offering provision and in locating an institution as for-profit or not-for-profit, given that this is far from self-evident in a number of key cases. Additionally, it may be worth exploring why certain firms choose to have in-house provision.

It is important to remember, however, that the relationship between the two segments is dynamic and shaped strongly by both the market and the state. Whilst proponents of the private segment emphasise the way in which it has grown in response to market forces, the reality is clearly more complex. To a large extent, it can be argued that the private segment in South Africa has grown as a result of a range of policy decisions by the state and as a result of the slow expansion of the public FET college sector. It seems likely that at least some of the growth in private provision is as a result of excess demand that public providers have not been able to meet (as Kruss [2002] has argued for the higher education sector). Moreover, it is possible that some of the demand for private provision relates to the slowness of curriculum and programme change in public providers in the first democratic decade. Such

factors in the expansion of private provision raise the possibility that public providers could reclaim some ground from the private segment if policies and practices were changed. Furthermore, there is also the possibility that other changes in policy for public providers could have negative implications for private provision. For instance, the stress on increasing the number of older learners in public provision (DoE & DoL, 2001; DoE, 2001a), if pursued with more vigour, could potentially shift learners away from private providers. Equally, better responsiveness of public providers to the needs of industry, could undermine demand from employers for the services of private providers. In this light, the dramatic growth of delivery of learnership provision in public FET colleges in 2004 may be significant.

From a research point of view, there is a need for the deliberate combining of qualitative and quantitative data on both segments. Indeed, there may be a case for a comparative study with agreed methodology across qualitative and quantitative, public and private, which deliberately seeks to avoid the privileging of one segment over the other through the choice of questions covered. There is a need to develop more methodological sophistication in addressing both segments in South Africa. There are serious methodological problems in existing surveys of both segments. Real attention is needed to getting data that have more coverage and more accuracy.

On the policy level, a similar need for a synoptic view of the two segments also holds. The 1998 FET Act looked at both segments but there has since been little attempt to have a coherent policy view.

Attention needs to be paid by both research and policy actors to the unsatisfactory nature of conceptions and measures of quality in regard to both segments. The evidence we have presented here implies that it is far from clear how the state should intervene in terms of quality. What is clear is that output or input measures, on their own, do not provide an adequate measure of educational quality. Perhaps some rigorous, nationally agreed upon, mechanism needs now to be developed.

The quantitative data also leave unanswered questions of curricular relevance. In reality, both segments appear to show a relatively broad range of curricular options. However, it remains unclear as to what demand each is really reflecting. In-house providers may be the least problematic here, as their delivery is likely to be closely aligned to the strategies of their parent enterprises. There is also a case for thinking that the adult employed have a good idea of why they are studying, whether this is at private or public institutions. However, this may be less the case for those who are seeking to re-train to get out of their current job. For the pre- and un-employed, there is a great danger in assuming that there is demand that is related to real labour market conditions, again regardless of whether the provision is public or private. For either type of provider, responsiveness to learner demand is not necessarily an indicator of labour market positioning.

Conclusion

This study pointed to a range of unresolved issues about demographics, ac-

cess and equity. There have been major changes in student demographics in both the public and private sectors. However, not enough is known about how the process of demographics plays out in either segment and what its implications are for learning and teaching. Whilst the overall shift towards black and away from white learners is apparent in the public segment, this appears to be reinforced in the private segment.

We need to understand more about gendered access to provision by province. The data presented above suggested that female access was greatest in rural areas in the private segment, but we are as yet unclear about what this amounts to in terms of programmes of study and labour market outcomes? Given existing data about the gendered labour market for public college graduates (Cosser, 2003), there is a need to also look more carefully at how girls and women can be encouraged into non-traditional areas and what needs to be done in the labour market to support this.

In the light of the differentiation of enrolments according to age between the two segments, should public colleges be encouraged to move to lifelong learning? Is there really a useful market for them here and, if so, what is the nature of this market? In particular, what can public providers offer to the classic private student — who is older and employed?

Finally, this study was done at a time when the Department of Education had signalled that it was about to take action in line with its duties from the FET Act as regards the registration and regulation of private providers. This discussion suggests that there is much for the Department to consider as it begins to develop strategy in this area. It needs to come up with a clear position on its views of the relationship between the public and private segments of FET provision. It must be transparent in what it can and should expect from private providers. It must also be prepared to respond to the calls from some private providers for financial assistance, whether positively or negatively. In answering all these questions, there is a pressing case for building on the modest contribution of this article by developing a more coherent policy research agenda on the public-private mix in FET.

Note

1. The data presented in this table excluded two providers, St. John's Ambulance and the National Occupational Safety Organisation, as their data seriously skewed the overall picture. Between them these organisations, which are major providers of short courses in first aid, account for 90% of delivery under SAQA field 9. With them included, this field accounted for 45% of all provision; with them excluded, this figure fell to 8%.

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