

Preparing new principals in South Africa: the ACE: School Leadership Programme¹

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There is increasing recognition that effective leadership and management are vital if schools are to be successful in providing good learning opportunities for students, and emerging evidence that high quality leadership makes a significant difference to school improvement and learning outcomes. However, in many countries, including South Africa, a teaching qualification and teaching experience are the only requirements for school principals. In the 21st century, there is a growing realisation that headship is a specialist occupation that requires specific preparation. In 2007, the former South African Department of Education introduced a new threshold qualification for aspiring school principals as part of its wider strategy to improve educational standards. The course, badged as an Advanced Certificate in Education: School Leadership (ACE), was piloted in six provinces from 2007–2009. This paper reports the main findings from the evaluation of the pilot ACE programme and links them to the South African and international literature on leadership development.

Introduction

There is increasing recognition that effective leadership and management are vital if schools are to be successful in providing good learning opportunities for students. There is also emerging evidence that high quality leadership makes a significant difference to school improvement and learning outcomes. Huber (2004:1-2) claims that 'schools classified as successful possess a competent and sound school leadership' and adds that 'failure often correlates with inadequate school leadership'. Leithwood *et al.* (2006:4) show that 'school leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning'. They conclude that 'there is not a single documented case of a school successfully turning around its pupil achievement trajectory in the absence of talented leadership' (Leithwood *et al.*, 2006:5). There is also a significant body of South African literature supporting the view that effective leadership and management are essential to develop good schools (Bush *et al.*, 2010, Christie, 2001; 2010, Department of Education, 1996, Roberts & Roach, 2006).

While there is an increasing body of evidence that leadership makes a significant difference, there is less agreement about what preparation is required to develop appropriate leadership behaviours. In many countries, including South Africa, school leaders begin their professional careers as teachers and progress to headship via a range of leadership tasks and roles, often described as 'middle management'. This leads to a widespread view that teaching is their main activity and that a teaching qualification and teaching experience are the only requirements for school leadership (Mestry & Singh, 2007).

Bush and Oduro (2006:362) note that 'throughout Africa, there is no formal requirement for principals to be trained as school managers. They are often appointed on the basis of a successful record as teachers with the implicit assumption that this provides a sufficient starting point for school leadership'. However, as Kitavi and Van der Westhuizen (1997:252) note in respect of Kenya, 'good teaching abilities are not necessarily an indication that the person

appointed will be a capable educational manager'. Van der Westhuizen *et al.* (2004) reach a similar conclusion following their research in the Mpumalanga province. 'Wide-ranging changes in the education system have rendered many serving school principals ineffective in the management of their schools. Many of these serving principals lack basic management training prior to and after their entry into headship' (p.1).

In the 21st century, there is a growing realisation that headship is a specialist occupation that requires specific preparation. Bush (2008; 2010) notes the following reasons for this paradigm shift:

- The expansion of the role of school principal; in decentralised systems, the scope of leadership has increased.
- The increasing complexity of school contexts; principals have to engage with their communities to lead and manage effectively.
- Recognition that preparation is a moral obligation; it is unfair to appoint new principals without effective induction.
- Recognition that effective preparation and development make a difference; principals are better leaders following specific training.

Mathibe (2007:523) says that South African principals 'are not appropriately skilled and trained for school management and leadership. Daresh and Male's (2000) comparative study of English and US principals demonstrates that heads experience a 'culture shock' as they cross the threshold from teaching into principalship. Effective preparation is one way of reducing the 'shock' and helping leaders to cope.

There are two main options available for the preparation of school principals. These are to identify and prepare *potential* principals before they are appointed, or to provide development for *practising* principals after their appointment. This distinction is important for South Africa because the pilot study, reported below, recruited mainly current principals with the intention to focus on aspiring principals from 2009.

The former South African Department of Education³ introduced a new threshold qualification for aspiring school principals as part of its wider strategy to improve educational standards. The course, initially badged as an Advanced Certificate in Education: School Leadership (ACE), was piloted in six provinces from 2007–2009. The pilot was open to serving principals as well as to deputy principals and school management team members aspiring to become principals. Participants were nominated by the provincial departments of education.

The ACE is being delivered by universities, through a common framework agreed with the national Department of Education and the National Management and Leadership Committee (NMLC). The first pilot cohort involved only five universities, and the Matthew Goniwe School of Leadership and Governance. The intention of the course is that it should be different from typical university programmes in being practice-based:

Its primary purpose is to ascertain how much of the course learning has been internalised, made meaning of and applied in practice in the school.

This emphasis on practice resulted from the evidence (e.g. Department of Education, 1996) that, although many school leaders hold university qualifications in management, their collective impact on school outcomes had been minimal. Their focus appeared to have been on achieving accreditation rather than improving their schools. The Government's Task Team on Education Management (Department of Education, 1996), described as 'not only a turning point, but also a starting point, for the training and development of education leaders in South

Africa' (Van der Westhuizen and Van Vuuren, 2007:436), was critical of much university provision. "Management development practices ... have tended to focus on the collection of qualifications and certificates with little attention being paid to actual ability to transfer this newly acquired knowledge to the institutions in which managers work" (*Ibid*:24). Van der Westhuizen *et al.* (2004) make a similar point in concluding their evaluation of management training in the Mpumalanga province:

The design and content of training programmes should be geared towards developing requisite skills and knowledge to enable trainees to transfer their skills and knowledge ... to the school situation (p. 717).

The very different, and ambitious, aim of the ACE programme was to make an appreciable difference in participants' management practice, leading to school improvement. The ACE was also intended to ensure that candidates were able to engage with leadership and management issues in a sustained way. This reflects implicit acceptance of the limitations of the 'workshop' model of development. McLennan's (2000) assessment of training in the Gauteng province was that such workshops are "often poorly organised and irrelevant" (p. 305).

In this paper we report the main findings from the evaluation of the pilot ACE programme and link them to the South African and international literature on leadership development.

Methodology

The research was intended to provide a comprehensive evaluation of the first pilot cohort, which comprised 430 participants. Its broad purpose was to inform the development of the course and to provide advice to the Minister of Basic Education about the suitability and sustainability of the qualification for its intended purpose, *to improve school leadership and management*.

The evaluation was planned alongside the design and development of the course and was a longitudinal study, involving four phases (preliminary, baseline, mid-term, and impact), funded by the Zenex Foundation and the Department of Education. The research was extensive and comprehensive, including the following specific dimensions:

- Desk research of international and South African leadership development practice (preliminary phase).
- Documentary analysis of the initial field test materials (preliminary phase).
- Observation of the orientation sessions for candidates (baseline).
- Repeat interviews with key HEI staff (baseline, mid-term and impact).
- Two surveys (baseline and impact) with all candidates in the first field test cohort.
- Longitudinal case studies with 27 candidates and their schools (including repeat interviews, shadowing and analysis of school and course documents) (baseline, mid-term and impact).
- Observation of contact sessions (mid-term).
- Observation of mentoring practice (mid-term).
- Interviews with mentors (mid-term).
- Observation of networks (mid-term).

A full report was submitted to the Department of Education and the Zenex Foundation Board (Bush *et al.*, 2009). The next part of the paper presents evidence about the various components of the ACE programme.

The ACE Programme

The ACE programme was designed by the National Department of Education in consultation with the National Management and Leadership Committee (NMLC), which includes representatives of the universities involved in delivering the programme. This national model involved the following elements:

- Specially prepared *teaching materials*, designed and developed under the auspices of the NMLC.
- Formal *contact sessions* arranged at university campuses or at other locations.
- *Mentoring* support provided by, or through, the universities.
- *Networks* of candidates, fostered by universities and/or provincial departments of education.
- *Site-based assessment*, linked to leadership and management practice.

The research team examined each of these dimensions of the programme.

Teaching materials

Teaching materials may be regarded as the ‘content’ of the course, representing the authorised curriculum. The ACE course was modular, comprising ‘core’, ‘optional’ and ‘foundation’ modules. Core modules were intended to be taken by all candidates in every province. Optional modules were offered at the discretion of the provider and, in practice, most universities did not provide any of them. Foundation modules were intended to help candidates with limited English language or ICT capability to improve these skills as a ‘foundation’ for their leadership learning. The five core modules were:

- Module One: Understanding school leadership and management in the South African context.
- Module Two: Managing teaching and learning.
- Module Three: Lead and manage people.
- Module Four: Manage organizational systems, physical and financial resources.
- Module Five: Manage policy, planning, school development and governance.

As noted above, the national teaching materials were prepared under the auspices of the National Management and Leadership Committee (NMLC) and were intended to be used by all providers, except in Gauteng, in order to denote a common curriculum. The Gauteng group used MGSLG’s modules, which were prepared before the national materials. The research team offered a critique of the national materials based on documentary analysis (Bush *et al.*, 2007a). Their main findings were that the materials were too detailed, over-theoretical, and inadequately connected to the realities of the many disadvantaged schools in South Africa. They were particularly critical of module two, which did not appear to address the management of teaching and learning. Their recommendations were considered by the NMLC’s Review Group, which produced revised materials in November 2008. The evidence below relates mostly to the unrevised modules.

The impact survey shows very positive findings with 80% saying that the materials are ‘of great help’ and only 2% responding that they are ‘of limited help’. In many cases, this was candidates’ first engagement with leadership and management ideas, so they could not adopt a comparative perspective. The case study candidates offered diverse views on the materials. Some were positive, saying that they are ‘fantastic’, while other candidates offered a range of criticisms. The most common view was that the materials were too long or too ‘bulky’.

Most lecturers were content with the modules, saying that they are valuable because they

are practice-based, and KZN staff, in particular, praised the materials. However, the HEIs have chosen to use them in different ways. Some supplement these modules with their own resources and others make only limited use of the national programme, preferring to use it for reference, while leading with their own materials. The varied use of the materials raises questions about the extent to which the ACE can be regarded as a genuinely national programme. This is a substantial weakness as a measure of standardisation is essential if the course is to become an entry-level requirement for new principals.

Contact sessions

Five universities were responsible for delivering the ACE course with the first pilot cohort (one worked with two provinces). Researchers observed between one and three contact sessions in each HEI. The universities offered diverse models of delivery:

- Block teaching over several days.
- Friday afternoon/evening sessions.
- Saturday sessions.

The delivery model does not appear to produce different levels of satisfaction from candidates. More significant is the size of the learner group, which ranges from 25 to 200. Despite the aspirations of most lecturers, interaction is very limited in the larger groups, thus working against the philosophy of the programme. In practice, these sessions usually comprised content delivery rather than interactive learning. Some participants complained that their experience was not being taken into account in planning contact sessions.

Most universities deal with the problem of scale by also providing smaller group facilitation activity. These sometimes lead to successful, interactive sessions, as observed in KZN, Gauteng and Western Cape. However, they may simply be used for administrative purposes, as observed with one Mpumalanga group, or result in 'no proper group work', as in the Eastern Cape. In the small group sessions, as well as in the main contact sessions, the settings sometimes inhibited interactive learning.

The teaching materials and the contact sessions may be regarded as the 'content' of the ACE course. However, it is important to find an appropriate balance between course content and the processes required to link knowledge acquisition to school-based leadership and management practice (Bush, 2008). Mentoring, networking and site-based assessment are the processes included in the ACE programme. The next sections consider the extent to which these modes of delivery achieved their objectives.

Mentoring

Mentoring is a distinctive and central feature of the ACE programme, designed to facilitate the transfer of learning to candidates' and school practice. Effective mentoring provides strong potential for deep learning. There is substantial international evidence supporting the efficacy of mentoring and coaching for leadership development. Pocklington and Weindling (1996: 189), for example, argue that "mentoring offers a way of speeding up the process of transition to headship".

The literature suggests that the effectiveness of mentoring for adult learners depends on the following features:

- Thorough training of mentors.
- Careful matching of the partners.
- Allocating sufficient time to the process.
- Adopting a peer stance rather than an apprenticeship model.

- Avoiding a prescriptive approach. (Bush *et al.*, 2007b).

Selection of mentors

The matching process between mentor and mentee is critical to its effectiveness. This also links to the selection procedure. Some universities employ people who have worked with the HEI on other similar programmes. These are often retired principals, whose professional experience is seen as directly relevant to their role. In Gauteng, the mentors are principals but are also graduates of the MGS LG ACE programme, which began before its national equivalent.

Mentoring practice

In many provinces, including Eastern Cape, Limpopo and Mpumalanga, there is a two-stage process:

- Group ‘facilitation’ as part of, or separate from, the formal teaching sessions at the University.
- Visits to candidates’ schools to provide on-site support.

Mentors are responsible for a number of candidates, ranging from nine in Eastern Cape to 38 for some in the Western Cape. The facilitation sessions take place in groups or ‘cohorts’ (Mullen, 2003) and do not match the generally accepted definition of mentoring, which assumes a one-to-one relationship (Bush, 2008). In Gauteng, the mentors do not visit candidates’ schools so any ‘mentoring’ takes place during cohort sessions and through telephone conversations.

Another consideration, in several provinces, is the tendency for mentors to prescribe solutions rather than to encourage mentees to develop their own context-specific responses to school management problems. Achinstein and Athanases (2006:167) suggest that mentoring fails where it is over-prescriptive and directive with only one right solution.

The overall picture suggests the need for a review of mentoring practice within provinces, HEIs and the national Department of Basic Education. A well-functioning mentoring programme would be a major asset for this programme and could contribute in a powerful way to developing school leaders and their schools. However, it is clear that there are two major constraints on effective practice; the cost of providing one-on-one mentoring, and the limited availability of well-trained and motivated professionals, with good experience of leading township and rural schools, who are also free to visit candidates’ schools during the working day. The success of the ACE programme is likely to depend on resolving these problems.

Networking

The creation of local or district networks, to promote mutual learning, is also a distinctive feature of the ACE programme. Bush *et al.*’s (2007b) review of the leadership development literature concludes that networking is the most favoured mode of leadership learning. Its main advantage is that it is ‘live learning’ and provides strong potential for ideas transfer. Visiting other schools, particularly those in similar contexts, appears to enhance leadership learning. Brundrett (2006) adds that inter-school networks are ‘powerful tools for school development’. Hence, the intention for the ACE to include an emphasis on school managers working and learning together in networks or clusters is well founded in international practice.

Most of the provinces have some form of network activity, usually initiated by the mentors or the candidates themselves. The survey findings are positive, with 76% saying that ‘developing networks’ are of ‘great help’. This is surprising because the evidence from the case

studies is that groups in most provinces meet rarely and that the sessions are often informal and voluntary, with variable attendance levels. The prime focus almost everywhere was on working together to complete assignments, not to share experience in order to improve their schools. This does not suggest sustainability, and there is little evidence of the networks continuing following the completion of the course.

Assessment

One of the distinguishing features of the national ACE is its stress on site-based assessment, so that learning can be applied to candidates' leadership and management practice. The main assessment tool employed by the HEIs is the portfolio, which is intended to include all the assignments, plus school-based documents, student reflections and a research project.

Wolf *et al.* (1997:195) define a portfolio as 'the structured documentary history of a carefully selected set of coached or mentored accomplishments, substantiated by samples of student work'. Peterson *et al.* (2001) identify seven serious problems with teacher portfolios, two of which are particularly relevant for leadership development activity:

1. They are difficult to use for judgements because of a lack of uniformity.
2. Teachers may not be objective when portfolios are used for summative purposes, particularly those related to career development.

Both these reservations are relevant to the ACE programme. Assessors need careful training to ensure that portfolios, which are difficult to standardise, can be evaluated on a consistent basis. Moreover, candidates may be reluctant to reflect on any perceived weaknesses. Despite these limitations, portfolios have a valuable role to play in candidate evaluation and leadership development, and represent a potential improvement on formal examinations and theory-based essays.

Researchers scrutinised the portfolios of the case study candidates. While the quality was variable, most portfolios were well organised and included school documents as well as school-based activities. However, very few of them showed evidence of reflection, despite 63% of respondents saying that 'opportunity for reflection' is 'of great help'. It is clear from the analysis of portfolios that many candidates are finding it difficult to go beyond description to adopt a reflective approach, leading to changes in leadership practice. The research team's conclusion is that the portfolio was regarded as an assessment chore rather than a starting point for school improvement (Bush *et al.*, 2009).

The case study candidates in all provinces were critical of the assessment process, as were some of the lecturers and mentors. Participants say that the ACE has too many assignments and the research team concurs that the course is over-assessed. Feedback on assignments, and on portfolio tasks, was also often late and limited in scope.

Improving the assessment process

Candidates offered suggestions for improvement that were remarkably similar across provinces and are strongly endorsed by the research team:

1. Reduce the number of assignments
2. Provide timely and constructive feedback

A robust, fair and transparent assessment process is essential for any qualification and is particularly important where national certification is envisaged. The research team (Bush *et al.*, 2009) recommends that the NMLC develops a cross-institutional moderation process, linked to the national standards for principalship.

The Impact of the ACE on Leadership and Management Practice

The ACE programme was conceived as a practice-based programme and was intended to lead to enhanced leadership and management practice. Most candidates claim to have improved their management practice and this was sometimes confirmed by their role sets, notably the district officials, and by shadowing and scrutiny of school policy documents. Areas of improvement include policy implementation, improved relationships with educators, more delegation to other SMT members, enhanced financial management, and conflict management. A minority of candidates had also introduced classroom observations, designed to improve teaching and learning.

Candidates were asked to identify their strengths and weaknesses and, subsequently, to comment on any improvements. They mentioned gains in several personal attributes, including enhanced confidence, improved self-control, and better relationships with educators and SMTs. Some also claim skills' development, including ICT, problem solving, financial planning, and better team work. Caution is required in interpreting these self-reported claims but some of these gains were also confirmed by role set members, notably the increased confidence and enhanced team work.

School achievement

As noted above, the international literature (e.g. Huber, 2004; Leithwood *et al.*, 2006) suggests that effective leadership is likely to promote favourable school and learner outcomes. The survey evidence shows that most respondents (75%) claim that their school is 'improving'. However, the secondary school case studies show that only 12% have produced clear improvements in matric results while performance has declined slightly at 38% and fallen significantly at 50% of them. It is not possible to reach firm conclusions on such limited data but it is clear that the ACE programme has not led to short-term gains in matric results at the case study schools. However, this finding needs to be set against the national data which show that overall matric results have declined since 2006 (2006: 66.5%; 2007: 65.2%; 2008: 62.5%). The composition of learners was offered as a reason for decline in some cases but the research team also found examples of weak management. These data suggest that the initial effects of the ACE programme on learner achievement were, at best, neutral although there was also evidence of principals beginning to implement their leadership learning.

The case study data suggest that candidates focused on preparing their ACE assignments *instead* of managing their schools, often using the school day for this purpose. It is possible that the benefits from the programme will become more evident now that the assessment requirements have been completed. Firm evidence on the links between the ACE and school achievement would require a longer-term study. At present, the evaluation data do not support the wider evidence (e.g. Lumby *et al.*, 2008) that specific school leadership preparation leads to school improvement.

Significant, and sustained, school improvement is likely to require principals to redefine their role as professional leaders, with a central focus on leadership for learning (Bush *et al.*, 2010). This approach has three main dimensions:

- Modelling good practice in classrooms.
- Observing educators' practice and providing constructive feedback.
- Monitoring and evaluating learner outcomes and putting in place strategies to address weaknesses.

School and community relationships

Most schools in the survey, and in the case study sample, serve deprived township or rural communities, with high levels of poverty, unemployment, child-headed families, drug and alcohol abuse, and, in secondary schools, teenage pregnancy. This provides an unpromising context for learner achievement. While effective school leadership and management are important, they cannot readily compensate for such difficult socio-economic challenges.

Most of the survey respondents (84%) claim significant improvements in relationships with their communities. Leithwood *et al.* (2010) suggest that leadership engagement with families can have a powerful impact on learner outcomes. Given the fragmented nature of many South African families, with child-headed and granny-headed units, the ‘family pathway’ (*ibid.*) is likely to be an important route for school improvement. The case studies provide more nuanced data, with some principals claiming enhanced engagement while other stakeholders often express doubts about this. The high survey figures suggest that participants are now aware that they should increase their community involvement, but progress in implementing such engagement has been slow and uneven. The case study evidence suggests that many principals and educators limit their work to their contracted hours and are rarely available to parents and communities at other times.

Accountability

Candidates’ attitudes towards accountability provide a guide to their management practice. Most participants referred to multiple accountabilities; to the hierarchy, via the District, and to parents, the SGB, learners and educators. However, most principals said that their main accountability is to the district office. Answerability to the hierarchy is logical in what is still a bureaucratic structure but greater accountability to school and community-based stakeholders is essential if school and learner outcomes are to improve.

Conclusion and recommendations

Introducing the national ACE programme was a bold and imaginative decision, recognising the pivotal role of principals in leading and managing schools. This is part of an international trend to provide specific leadership preparation for current and aspiring principals (Lumby *et al.*, 2008; Van der Westhuizen and Van Vuuren, 2007). The international research shows that new principals experience great difficulty in adapting to the demands of the role. The process of professional and organisational socialisation is often uncomfortable as leaders adapt to the requirements of their new post. Developing the knowledge, attributes and skills required to lead effectively requires systematic preparation. There is a growing body of evidence that effective preparation makes a difference to the quality of leadership and to school and pupil outcomes (Bush, 2008; Lumby *et al.*, 2008).

While the need for effective leadership preparation is widely accepted, the extent and nature of such provision varies substantially across continents. The flexibility and initiative required to lead and manage schools in periods of rapid change suggest that preparation should go beyond training principals to implement the requirements of the hierarchy to developing rounded and confident leaders who are able to engage all school stakeholders in the process of school improvement for the benefit of learners and their communities. As Brundrett, Fitzgerald and Sommfeldt (2006:101) argue, “educational programmes are required that develop the kind of reflective knowing and higher order cognitive abilities that will undoubtedly

be required by leaders in the increasingly complex world of educational leadership in the 21st century”.

Programme delivery

All the five providers in the first pilot cohort provide lectures to large groups of students, ranging between 39 in the Eastern Cape to 200 in the Western Cape. At best, this is a vehicle for delivering knowledge and universities should operate smaller groups. The lecture format is supplemented by small group sessions, variously described as ‘mentoring’, ‘facilitation sessions’, or ‘cohort sessions’. These provide more potential for interaction but are sometimes used for administrative purposes rather than for linking course content to school practice. Many lecturers lament the inability of candidates to apply theory to practice so these group sessions should be used to help candidates to develop such skills (Bush *et al.*, 2009).

Teaching materials

The universities use the national materials in different ways but several regard them only as supplementary material and it is clear that the varied ways in which the course is offered undermines the notion of a ‘national’ programme. If a decision is taken to make the programme (when modified) an entry-level requirement for new principals, it will be necessary to decide what degree of consistency is required to justify the status of a ‘national’ qualification.

Mentoring

The inclusion of mentoring in the ACE programme is widely applauded, by candidates, lecturers and the mentors themselves. Many survey respondents, and interviewees, regard it as the key component of the course, which is likely to have a critical impact on whether it succeeds or fails. The international research evidence is overwhelmingly positive (Barnett & O’Mahony, 2008).

However, the model of ‘mentoring’ used in the ACE programme falls short of best international practice. Much of the mentors’ work is with groups rather than individuals and group sessions are led by the mentors, who largely determine the agenda, and dominate the discussion. Where mentors do work directly with the candidates, they often provide ‘solutions’ rather than asking questions. This reinforces a dependency model rather than providing a vehicle to develop mentees’ confidence and skills. Improving this part of the programme, to provide genuine one-on-one mentoring, would require increased funding, would depend on being able to find sufficient numbers of potential mentors with successful experience of township and rural schools, and would need an extensive training programme to develop mentoring skills (Bush *et al.*, 2009).

Networking

Networking is another powerful leadership development process that has received strong endorsement in the international literature (Bush, 2008). In practice, however, the development of networks is patchy, with a few operating successfully, but most barely functioning or still requiring development. Where they do exist, the overwhelming evidence is that the purpose was to discuss assignments rather than to share management practice. Generating and sustaining effective networks is likely to require either the active involvement of district officials, or to involve ‘organic’ development, led by the candidates themselves (Bush *et al.*, 2009).

Assessment

A practice-based professional qualification for potential principals requires an innovative approach to assessment. While there are assignments in the ACE programme, they are supplemented by a site-based project and by a portfolio, which provides the potential for an integrative approach to assessment. The evaluation shows that the course was over-assessed and based primarily around the prescribed content of the course. A stronger focus on leadership and management *practice* is required to develop more effective principals. Universities also need to provide timely, and formative, feedback to underpin candidates' management learning (Bush *et al.*, 2009).

Developing an Entry-Level Qualification for New Principals

There is widespread recognition that principals require specialist preparation and training (Crow *et al.*, 2008, Huber, 2004). There was almost unanimous support, from providers and participants, for the principle that the national programme should become an entry-level qualification for new principals. This is because the programme is seen as 'profound', 'very applicable to real life situations' and because 'it is good for school leadership' in South Africa. The programme, as an ACE or at Advanced Diploma level, is potentially suitable as an entry-level requirement for aspiring principals as soon as there are sufficient qualified candidates to meet the demand for new principals, subject to four provisos:

1. Consideration should be given to holders of other qualifications in educational management, subject to a conversion process to demonstrate the application of theory to school-based practice.
2. Similarly, consideration should be given to holders of the national ACE programme (the current programme) if the programme is upgraded to Advanced Diploma level.
3. Consideration should be given to helping potential principals who do not obtain the support of their principals. This might require the movement of ACE candidates to other schools where they can receive appropriate support.
4. Consideration should be given to the selection process for the programme. Applicants should be restricted to deputy principals and HoDs, except in very small schools. (Bush *et al.*, 2009).

Subject to these points being addressed, the research team recommended that the national programme becomes an entry-level qualification for new principals as soon as there are sufficient qualified candidates, directly or following the conversion process, to meet the demand for new principals. A statement of intent is required, with a carefully articulated timetable leading to entry-level status for the revised qualification (Bush *et al.*, 2009).

Notes

1. The research reported in this paper was commissioned by the former National Department of Education and funded by the Zenex Foundation. The views expressed in the paper are those of the authors and not the Department of Education or the Zenex Foundation.
2. The research team for this project included Ntombozuko Duku, Derek Glover, Soraya Kola and Vuyisile Msila, as well as the authors.
3. The Department of Education was split into two departments in 2010; the Department of Basic Education and the Department of Higher Education and Training.

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