

NATU TEACHER DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE: REFLECTIONS SINCE INCEPTION

By

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1. INTRODUCTION

In this report I reflect on how the NATU Teacher Development Institute was founded, what has been done since inception, and the major developmental milestones reached. In the last part, I reflect on the aspirations and prospects going forward.

2. THE ANTECEDENTS

The founding of the Institute goes back to one of the resolutions of the 93rd NATU National Conference in the year 2011. The resolution stated that an Institute be established to respond to the professional needs of members. This resolution was informed and inspired by the adages, generally accepted worldwide, that “great teachers produce great learners,” and that “an inspiring and informed teacher is the most important school-related factor influencing learner achievement.” Further, the 93rd Conference emphasised the importance of NATU’s participation in professional teacher development campaigns – given that professional development was a career-long need for all practising professionals. Thus, the inauguration of the NATU Teacher Development Institute and Conference Centre on 21 August 2014 at this very place, symbolised a very significant milestone in the implementation of the 2011 NATU resolution. Such was the magnitude of the event that it took the Minister of Basic Education, the Honourable Angelina Matsie Motshekga, to officially inaugurate the birth of the Institute. We’re also happy and grateful that she is in our midst today. Her continued and unwavering support for this Union is, indeed, sobering. We’re truly greatly honoured, knowing that many other duties and responsibilities of national importance await her.

In attendance at the inauguration in 2014 was not only the Minister and some senior officials from her Ministry but also representatives of other stakeholder organization, including the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), as well as multitudes of

the rank and file of NATU membership. All came to witness this rare event which signalled a new era in the annals of professional teacher development in the country; never before had a labour union taken such a step as to make such a huge investment of its own resources to purchase and establish a Centre to promote teacher professional development, with a view to achieving greater and greater effectiveness, efficiencies, and economies of both scale and skill in the classroom performance of its members. This was what made the event unique, eye-catching and eyebrow-raising. For some, it was also a mouth-watering event – awakening rare and insatiable appetites for knowledge, skills and professional embellishment. Indeed, this was a legacy project, as the erstwhile NATU President, Mr SL Ngcobo (the longest serving President of the organisation) referred to it at the time – and we're also happy and honoured for his presence here today. Accordingly, as an organisation, NATU would be justified to stand tall, proud, contented and satisfied that it had now created a platform through which teachers and other educators could begin to reach for the stars in the realisation of their dreams and aspirations, as professionals. So, it must therefore be the hope and trust of every NATU member that this educational platform exist – and it is at their service, individually and severally.

3. THE PHYSICAL LOCALE OF THE INSTITUTE

As an established entity, the seat of the NATU Teacher Development Institute is right here where we're today: At Section 3, Madadeni Township, Newcastle, KwaZulu Natal Province. As we all know, it is not just a registration requirement to have a physical location, but it is important for the purpose of both identity and pride of place for everything that exists to have a place. In Africa, one's identity is defined in terms of one's place, which acts a base from which one exercises one's presence. When people look for you, in Africa, they look for your place; once they arrive at your place, even if you are not there at the time, they have arrived. So, a person's identity and his or her place cannot be separated. That is why we are, today, proud to be gathered at this place to celebrate the life of the NATU Teacher Development Institute.

4. THE MANDATE OF THE INSTITUTE

The Institute was opened with a mandate to carry out nine major tasks:

- a) Develop and sustain a new generation of school leaders, namely: school principals, deputy principals and heads of department. These were to be imbued with the knowledge, skills and dispositions best suited to meet the current and future needs of South Africa's education system.
- b) Build capacity among school authorities on how to handle school finances and human resources.
- c) Ensure that both novice and experienced educators were adequately trained, assisted and supported to improve their teaching skills.
- d) Provide adequate and appropriate orientation programmes for newly qualified educators prior to them taking up their first teaching posts – thereby giving them the confidence to arrive on the first day of their teaching career believing that they are properly equipped for what lies ahead.
- e) Ensure that newly qualified teachers are coached and mentored by experienced educators such that they learn from experienced senior and master teachers, but also encourage them to increase their enthusiasm for teaching as well as share with older colleagues the up-to-date knowledge and skills in respect to the latest pedagogical methods.
- f) Encourage longer serving, and highly qualified teachers to stay in touch with recent developments and continue to challenge their practice, as demanded by the rapid pace of social and technological change in this era characterised by knowledge explosion.
- g) Facilitate the sharing of good classroom practice with regard to the command and understanding of disciplinary or subject matter content.
- h) Share the methods used for identifying learning barriers and how to create a safe, supportive, welcoming and open environment for learners so that they can volunteer information about their lives, including problems they may be facing.
- i) Encourage member participation in curriculum development and implementation programmes to ensure that the intended or espoused curriculum is properly understood and implemented.

5. IMPLEMENTING THE MANDATE

The first step taken to implement the Institute's mandate manifested in the identification and appointment of the founding Director of the Institute – about which I am extremely proud to have been appointed in that capacity. As a former Executive Dean of Education Faculties at both Tshwane University of Technology and the University of Zululand, NATU's Central Executive Board, deemed me to be a suitable appointee to conceptualise what the Institute needed to look like, against the mandate which I have just enunciated.

In retrospect, the best way to characterise my assumption of the duties and responsibilities of the position of Director of the Institute is that I had to hit the ground, not only running but sprinting. Effectively, my appointment signalled the *de facto* implementation of the Union's vision of having a platform to address its members' professional development needs – the Institute having been inaugurated a few years previously, but not yet offering programmes in a sustained way. Indeed, my appointment in May 2017 came at a very opportune time, buoyed levitatingly by a series of events organised to celebrate the 99th year anniversary of the National Teachers' Union, running in tandem with the NATU Presidential long-service celebrations. The timing was opportune in two ways: First, it gave me an opportunity to be introduced to the depth and breadth of the NATU membership in the various regions, and second, the celebratory events gave me an opportunity to sample NATU members' aspirations about their training priorities – which I established through a baseline survey. These two activities were both a great success and, through them I was orientated (almost baptised) to the environment of Unionism, while being introduced to the broad membership of the organisation; it was such a privilege. For its part, the baseline study yielded some important information and gave me the evidence I needed for the direction that I needed to take, going forward. Quite unexpectedly, *albeit* with some amount of pleasure, the findings of the survey gave NATU considerable visibility in the print media as well as on radio and television. Altogether, there were over five radio interviews conducted by the Director concerning the findings of the survey, and perhaps an even higher number by the erstwhile Deputy

President (the late Mr Allen Thompson, MHSRIEP) on the findings of the baseline study. In addition, I received e-mail enquiries about the findings.

At an operational level the original mandate of the Institute has been simplified and rationalised along the Mission of NATU, which is, “To teach the children of the Nation like never before and bring joy to the classroom” – as well as the Union’s goal of improving South Africa’s level of education “through quality teaching and learning.” Thus, the mandate of the Institute has subsequently been construed as follows:

- a) To customise programmes to teachers’ individual needs and provide professional development opportunities in targeted subjects and specialised areas, such as languages, phase specialisation, mathematics, science and technology.
- b) To develop programmes for endorsement by the South African Council for Educators (SACE) to enable members to earn continuing professional teacher development (CPTD) points through their participation in the Institute’s programmes.
- c) To coordinate teacher development opportunities for members and encourage their participation in professional activities.
- d) To establish partnerships, collaborations and linkages with governmental and non-governmental organisations that support teacher development.
- e) To promote a positive and close collaborative work environment with local leadership structures of the organization.
- f) To support the Central Executive Board (CEB) as needed.

6. ORIGINAL THINKING

The original concept of the NATU Teacher Development Institute was one which may be characterised as a centralised model, whereby most of the work of the Institute was to be performed right here. In this centralised model, the Institute would serve as an open centre with equipment and facilities to enable teachers to easily come in and out to prepare lessons, consult, and utilise materials assembled at the Institute. Accordingly, the Institute would:

- provide conference rooms equipped with the latest technologies, including WIFI internet access, audio visuals and video conferencing.
- house a modern Business Centre that would offer work stations with full internet access as well as printing, faxing, copying and scanning capabilities.
- be one of the few establishments in Madadeni Township with the capacity to host over 1000 conference guests at once.
- house a Resource Centre where teachers may borrow printed material, such as books, policy documents and audio-visual material (e.g. DVDs, CD, data projectors, movies and/or Models) that are useful for teaching and learning.
- have a platform to give teachers access to electronic search engines to be used by teachers to search for information.
- offer full qualifications and/or credit-bearing modules to help members further their qualifications.

However, in practice, three main challenges militated against the adoption of this model. The first one was security. To operate the Institute in this way required the place to be adequately secured and fortified to protect the equipment and other resources that were to be kept at the Institute. At the time when the Institute began to operate, there wasn't even a security wall around the premises – and this took several years to put in place. In the meantime, the second challenge came to our realisation: that is, it soon became apparent that it was too costly to operate a centralised model whereby members were brought in from various places around the country to come to this one location and be trained here. Almost invariably because of the distances involved, the Union would have to offer them room and board, in addition to reimbursing them for their travel. This was not sustainable in the medium to long run. What became both affordable and sustainable was to pay one, two or a few facilitators to travel to where the members were and offer them training nearest to their homes. Even when venue hire costs were factored in, this model was still much less costly. So, a more decentralised model emerged and it is only occasionally that the centralised model is used.

The question of offering full or part qualifications was even more complex because of accreditation requirements. To offer full qualifications in given specialisations, there

would have been a requirement to comply with certain minimum standards in terms of infrastructural space and equipment, complement of fulltime staff versus parttime, approval of curriculum offerings by accreditation bodies, and so-on. The legislation requires such an institution to either be a private or a public entity. Public entities are government supported institutions and private one stand on their own. So, one has to “hurry slowly” through matters on this level of complexity and intrigue.

7. MILESTONES REACHED

Over the past five years, a lot has been achieved on each of these activities. The achievements made are summarized below, taking each one of these key performance areas at a time.

7.1 Providing professional teacher development opportunities in targeted subjects and specialised

Compared to sole reliance on face-to-face, or contact delivery modes only, blended learning delivery modes of teacher development programmes could be very efficient and effective with regard to their reach and flexibility. For this reason, designing and developing a blended learning platform was judged to be an important priority. Although this transition was accelerated with the advent of Covid-19, steps towards establishing blended learning platforms had been taken prior to the unwelcome arrival of the pandemic.

From the results of the first survey undertaken in 2017, the following priorities emerged:

- a) Assessment techniques
- b) Strategies / techniques for classroom / school discipline
- c) School organization, leadership and management
- d) Curriculum management / development
- e) Classroom management

Undoubtedly, the sudden and unwelcome arrival of Covid 19 accelerated the metamorphosis from a heavy reliance on face-to-face learning to other non-contact modalities of teaching and learning. The nomenclature of teaching and learning

platforms rapidly changed. Suddenly, terms such as E-Learning and Teaching, Online Learning and Teaching, Digital Learning and Teaching, and Virtual Learning and Teaching surfaced – often without much clarification in terms of what they meant, and whether or not they were different concepts or they were synonyms. To gauge the impact of the pandemic on the sense of adequacy of members, another snap survey was conducted on what they saw as the most urgent training needs. The following five top priorities emerged:

- a) School leadership and Management
- b) Skills in e-learning, online and virtual teaching and learning
- c) Computer literacy skills – Microsoft Word, Including Excel & PowerPoint
- d) Digital/ Electronic communication skills – Zoom, MS Teams, Skype; and
- e) Curriculum management

Training has been conducted in all these priority areas – either inhouse or by external experts. Overall, the following training has been conducted since the opening of the Institute: Assessment for Learning (1600), SMT Training: School Leadership and Management (333), Orientation to Research and Proposal Writing (376), Advanced Labour Law Certificate(180), National School Certificate Accounting Support (160), SMT Training: Poor Performing Schools (186), Leadership and Management (01), Interns (08), Primary School Reading Improvement Programme (PSRIP) (667), Online SMT Training: Curriculum Management – Amajuba District (133), Conflict Management and Dispute Resolution (120), Orientation to Union Matters (400), SMT - Positive School Culture (224), PSRIP Phase 4 (Virtual Training) (05), Course on English Language Teaching and Learning (COELT) – (Virtual Training) (12), Skills for a Changing World: Coding and Robotics (4000), (NECT Pilot Winter School (02), Entrepreneurship (430), Teaching Mathematics in the Intermediate and Senior Phases: Space and Shapes (60), Teaching Euclidean Geometry at FET (22), and Reading and Assessment for Foundation Phase teachers (50).

This has been made possible with financial support from the following bodies with whom we have had collaboration agreements: the DBE, NECT, ETDP SETA (National & Gauteng Province), Maskew Miller Learning, and the British Council.

Our observation is that whereas many learners are increasingly shifting from a reliance on contact, face-to-face learning to more independent ways of learning which depend on the use of modern technologies, the majority of teachers are still heavily dependent of contract, face-to-face teaching modalities. So, learning preferences are fast drifting from teaching practices. Unless teachers take a quick “shot left” or “shot right” the instructional chasm is likely to reach a breaking point, sooner rather than later, as the two groups drift farther and farther away from each other. At the Institute, we have noticed that whenever we place teachers on programmes that are based on digital learning platforms, the attendance and throughput rates are very low. On the other hand, our face-to-face programmes have very high completion rates. So, we are really worried about this because it is highly unlikely that learners’ preference for digital learning platforms is going to reverse. So, increasingly, instructional delivery will need to be carried out, more and more, through digital, online and virtual platforms. It is for this reason that for the past two years, the Institute has intensified its focus on empowering our members with digital and entrepreneurial skills.

7.2 Development of Programmes for SACE Endorsement

Currently, there are a number of SACE endorsed programmes developed by the Institute. These include:

- a) School Financial Management
- b) Assessment for learning
- c) SMT Training – School leadership and management
- d) SMT Training – School discipline: Alternatives to corporal punishment

7.3 Promoting and Coordinating Professional Teacher Development for Members

There have been various ways in which professional teacher development has taken place beyond formal training avenues such as face-to-face workshops, online and virtual training. Indeed, the strength of a member-based organisation, such as NATU, depends on the active participation of members in the various activities which make the organisation visible. Working closely with the Vice President for Professional Matters, Mrs Brenda Z. Mbatha, the Institute regularly co-ordinates many professional teacher development activities for members, which include their attendance of

meetings, workshops, serving on subject panels, and taking part in many other activities on behalf of the organisation. The added benefit of this to the individual members is that through their active participation they learn many hard and soft skills. Furthermore, the networking that inevitably takes place as a result of such participation is often very important in broadening one's horizons – intellectually and socially. Accordingly, it is very important not only to encourage but actually promote member participation in the various affairs of the sector.

7.4 Partnerships, Collaborations with Governmental and Non-Governmental Organisations

Thus far, the Institute has secured partnerships and collaborations with a number of institutions, including the following: The Department of Basic Education (DBE), the National Educational Collaboration Trust (NECT), Maskew Miller Learning (MML), ETDP SETA (national), ETDP SETA (Gauteng), University of KwaZulu Natal (UKZN), University of Johannesburg (UJ), University of Pretoria (UP), Tshwane University of Technology, Nelson Mandela University, Karen Walstra Consulting, and Intel Skills for Innovation.

It is both impressive and pleasing to note that eight of the above collaborations were secured recently during 2022 and 2023, namely: University of Johannesburg (UJ), University of Pretoria (UP), Tshwane University of Technology, Maskew Miller Learning (MML), Nelson Mandela University, Karen Walstra Consulting, Intel for Skills for Innovation and the ETDP SETA (Gauteng Province).

7.5 Promoting a Positive and Close Collaborative Work Environment with Local Leadership Structures of the Organisation

The decentralised model whereby training has been conducted throughout the country where there are NATU members and attendant structures has made it both possible and inevitable to forge close collaborative work environments with local structures. Furthermore, the orientation of local structures to fully understand their duties and responsibilities, particularly following electoral conferences, and the facilitation of members to participate in various professional activities have helped the Union to find unity of purpose.

7.6 Support the Work of the Central Executive Board (CEB)

Typically, the TDI Director supports the work of the Central Executive Board in two main ways: (a) strategic support, and (b) representing the organisation at events and other occasions. As an organic organisation, NATU needs to stay abreast with developments – both taking place within and outside the organisation. Accordingly, from time to time the organisation needs to position itself on issues that emerge. In handling these emergent issues, the CEB periodically works with the TDI to research various matters and prepare positions that are evidence based.

8.0 RISK IDENTIFICATION AND MANAGEMENT

While embracing the ever-evolving information communication technologies which are relevant to education has become an imperative of the modern educational practice, this requires procurement of a reliable learner management system (LMS) to deliver and administer the training effectively and credibly. Nonetheless, one major benefit of e-learning, online education and virtual platforms is that training can be made available to all interested members, irrespective of geographical location.

Typically, teacher development programmes rendered through educational technologies are meant to support contact tuition. So, although some training can be conducted by using educational technologies from beginning to end, the value of contact training sessions cannot be dismissed. In fact, much as digital learning platforms may be effective, desirable and preferred by some people, we know from diversities in learning styles that not everyone will find them optimal for their own learning. The same goes with teacher effectiveness in the use of electronic/ digital teaching media and strategies – not all teachers will be able, or desire, to use educational technologies in their teaching. As much, some training will need to be conducted through contact sessions – an approach which also offers interactive varieties and can be effective if appropriately applied.

The second risk factor pertains to the perennial connectivity challenges associated with (a) the unreliable communication networks, and (b) unstable electricity supply. The fourth industrial revolution is based on the presupposition that electricity supply is

readily available. Electricity is a precondition for the success of the fourth industrial revolution – meaning that we cannot enter the fourth industrial revolution without it.

The third risk has been non-availability of devices and connectivity data. These two factors have slowed down the adoption of new technologies and the transition to the ‘new normal’ in classroom practice.

However, one facility which has ameliorated much of the discomfort associated with the above risks has been the TDI’s utilisation of the WhatsApp platform each time there has been training. Through this platform, information has been shared among participants, facilitators and organisers. This has included information on logistics, sharing documents and for general information pertaining to the training. Overall, WhatsApp groups have been very popular and effective.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is quite clear that although there has been a shift from the original model of the Institute, the shifts that have been made have been for the better. A lot has been achieved. Nonetheless, revisiting the original concept is useful because there are some elements of the centralised model which are still worth pursuing. Certainly, the notion of a vibrant Centre offering facilities that can empower teachers in different ways (especially those close enough to the Centre) would be a good idea. Furthermore, it is possible to create a platform which can be accessed from a distance – such as an electronic database and/or library. However, sponsorships and collaborations will continue to be avenues through which much of the operations of the Institute will need to be sustainable.

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