

Averting the Plight of Military Veterans through Colleges of Further Education and Training

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KEYWORDS Development. Education. Democracy. Participation. Repositioning

ABSTRACT Colleges of Further Education and Training (FETs) are a relatively new development in the transformation of education in South Africa. There are still uncertainties and hence reservations among community members about FET's. Despite the suspicions and unanswered questions, FETs still attract a large number of students. These students enrol at FETs for various reasons, some of which are that courses obtained from these institutions allow those who graduate to join the economy fairly quickly. Some students have not been able to complete their formal schooling and others enrol with a view to being granted a qualification based on Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), after having been exposed to other education systems outside South Africa. This article reports on the potential role of FET colleges in resolving the impasse of military veterans who find themselves at the periphery of civil life. A study was conducted through qualitative research method.

INTRODUCTION

The social, economic and educational status of demobilised ex-combatants, commonly known as Military Veterans is tenuous. Many live below the poverty line, especially those without any formal qualification or skills or some of those who studied outside South Africa and did not have their qualifications aligned. Also, a large proportion of the potentially economically active population of this group is unemployed. The ripple effects are an increasing rate of HIV and AIDS spread, increasing social instability, crime and increasing dependence on the State. Motumi and McKenzie (2007) warn that if ex-combatants cannot find work there is a danger that they will fall back on what is often the only skill they have namely, the use of war tactics in resolving whatever problem they experience no matter how minor. This view is shared by Makwetla (2009), who argues that the neglect of military veterans in South Africa forces them to use the main skill they know namely, the use of weapons resulting in increased crime and possible insurrection.

Aims and Objectives

The study aims to unveil the circumstances of military veterans and to achieve the objective of the constitution of South Africa as refined in the Medium Term Strategic Framework (MTSF) of the military veterans namely, that all should have access to education and thus be able to participate in the economy of the country.

Contextualisation of the Study

From the 1990s, with the unbanning of political organisations, a whole host of mainly Black South Africans who were in exile returned to the country. These returnees joined the military veterans who were always in the country. Most of the military veterans experienced problems with the recognition of qualifications that they obtained outside of South Africa while in exile.

Several studies conducted on military veterans have established that most carry burdens of a socio-psychological nature which hinders their participation in the South African way of life. Many of them need counselling for traumas they experienced in their years in exile, in camps or in combat (Suttner 2009). Very often they are not aware that they suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome that manifests itself in their failure to participate in civilian life. Some members of society treat the military veterans with suspicion and elbow them out of decision making structures in the local structures (Mbunyuza and Holloway 2007). These experiences add to the previous traumatic experiences and get multiplied by the non-recognition of education that some of the military veterans acquired while in exile.

Over the past seventeen years efforts have been made to address the needs of military veterans through different strategies. Despite various actions taken, the plight of military veterans remains a threat to their lives and seriously so to

the country. Their experiences, skills and education have to be channelled for uses that they have not anticipated. Suttner (2009) avers that in these difficult circumstances education should rank high in efforts to help military veteran's lead sustainable lives.

Who is a Military Veteran?

According to the Military Veterans Act No. 17 1999,

“A Military Veteran means any person who-

(a) Either voluntarily or under conscription or called-up as a member of-

(i) The Union Defence Forces or any military force of a country allied to the former Union Government during the Great War of 1914 to 1918. The Second World War being the war which commenced on 6 September 1939, or the hostilities in Korea from 1950 to 1953; or

The South African Defence Force, or any defence force of a territory to which prior to the commencement of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1993 (Act No. 2000 of 1993), enjoyed the status of an independent state in terms of a law of South Africa.

(ii) The South African Defence force, and has not been dishonourably discharged, is retired or no longer serves in the South African National Defence Force and is a citizen of the Republic, and irrespective of whether any service envisaged in subparagraph (1), or (ii) has been remembered in a permanent or in a part-time component or part-time capacity, or

(a) Is a “war veteran” as defined in section 1 of the Social Assistance Act, 1992 (ACT No. 59 of 1992); or

(b) Served as a member of any non-statutory force as defined in section 1 of the Demobilisation Act, 1996 (Act No. 99 of 1996); or

(c) Belongs to any other prescribed category of military veterans.

This definition is all-encompassing and covers a whole spectrum of membership that comprises of different ages and different socio-economic backgrounds. It is for this reason that any bid towards educational upliftment of military veterans has to be designed to meet the individual needs of all those affected. Mbunyuza (2005) argues for a scaffolding process, an idea which falls within socio-constructivism. On

their return from exile military veterans who spent most of their lives in the military have to find employment and re-integrate into civilian life through a process of demobilisation. Demobilisation has for decades been applied in reintegrating people that have been actively in warfare and have been dislocated from their homes as was the case in countries like Zimbabwe, Namibia and Angola. In South Africa military veterans who participated in the struggle for liberation from within the country as it is the case with many AZAPO affiliates whose formation history and period differs from that of the ANC and the PAC.

The picture above further complicated the demobilisation process in South Africa, a process that is its nature complex involving social, material and psychological redress

Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration

The American Heritage Dictionary defines disarmament as the act of lying down of arms, reduction or abolition of a nation's military forces and armaments. According to the Graduate Institute of Medicine in Geneva (1981: 24,467-482) this is a critical stage of ending a war in that it moves way beyond collecting and destroying of small arms, and light weapons whose possession and use promote public security. Practical disarmament is often combined with, but distinct from disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration. This is a stage that South Africa bypassed in its end of war measures. After military demobilisation military veterans assumed the status of civilians. Like all citizens they are protected by the constitution of the country (George 2006). It is, however, evident that military veterans face problems that debar them from accessing benefits espoused in the Constitution Act No. 108 of 1996. Some of the benefits are education, jobs, housing and health care and it is evident that the health of many was affected either through the use of weapons or exposure to other psychologically draining situations (Suttner 2006: 179.). Some of them do not have the national documents that are necessary to access social grants on the grounds of their age and state of health (Mbunyuza and Holloway 2007). This makes it difficult for them to register at any education institution in the country.

The Role of FET Colleges

Metcalf 2010 in her address to delegates at an education summit summarises the role of FET colleges thus;

“... of the 2 million young people, there would be a normal distribution of intelligence-some of the most gifted in the world; ultimately this represents wastage of our future, our human resource. They need hope-they are doing their best in conditions in which they live to make a go of it-getting up on rainy days to stand at street corners – we owe them something....”. Most of the respondents to the study fall within the description painted by Metcalfe (2010).

The role of FET colleges and their contribution to resolve the impasse is already noted. A few examples from Esayidi College of Education and King Hintsa FET College testify to the potential of FET colleges if tapped into and used properly. South Africa needs a form of education that prepares students both for employment and self-employment. Military veterans could work as tutors while furthering their studies. In this way they would share their experiences, regain their integrity and in the process adapt to the reality of South African civilian life in an empowering environment. With the economic meltdown such a demand is more emphasised and FET colleges seem best placed to handle this task.

Theoretical Framework

For the education system to succeed in transforming an individual, it has to intervene in the development process of the given individual. Intervention strategies should be the lever for advancing the development goals. As Pityana (2008) argues that for development to happen, students should actively participate in their education the same philosophy fits well with the circumstances of the military veterans. This can only happen in an enabling environment for example the FET colleges where the prospective students will learn and share their experiences without being treated like learners. The environment so envisaged should cater for groups whilst in the process it is empowering the individuals.

The study draws strength from socio-constructivism theory as espoused by Vygotsky (1978). According to Vygotsky, the functioning of a human being develops well in a socio-cultural setting.

The importance of such an education is that it focuses not so much on the student passing with good grades, as much as it focuses on the cognitive development of the individual.”FET colleges in South Africa cater for qualifications that are a response to local needs” (Nkosi 2008:89). Local needs are given birth to by socio-cultural circumstances.

Du Plessis et al. (2007:3) summarised socio-constructivism as follows:

- ♦ “It emphasises learning and not teaching; encourages and accepts learner autonomy and enquiring.
- ♦ It acknowledges and incorporates the critical role of experience in learning.
- ♦ It makes extensive use of cognitive terminology such as predict, create, and analyse.
- ♦ It encourages learning to engage in a dialogue with others, as well as with the teacher.
- ♦ It involves learners in real-world situations.
- ♦ It considers the beliefs and attitudes of the learners irrespective of the origins of these understandings”.

The above emphasise placing knowledge and learning activities in the hands of the learner rather than having it placed in the instructor. According to Maree and Fraser (2004: 79),

“a learner’s choice to behave is determined by his affective state, namely feelings, emotions, attitude, values, preferences and interests”. The experiences that the military veterans already possess should be considered in creating meaningful learning opportunities.

According to socio-constructivism knowledge is socially constructed. Relationships between the military veterans and education institutions are central in the developmental process of military veterans. Gergen and Gergen (1997: 6) emphasize collaboration among parties as critical to understand diverse viewpoints.

METHODOLOGY

The investigation was conducted as a response to the main question namely, can FET’s colleges help the military veterans in quest for educational support?

A descriptive survey was conducted through qualitative research method. The aim is to reach the participants in their natural settings and to

tap into their social reality. Military veterans from the provinces of South Africa namely, Kwa Zulu Natal (KZN) and the Northern Cape, were used in the study. The provinces were divided into regions, three regions in the Northern Cape because of its vast thinly populated area. Kwa Zulu Natal was divided into twelve regions because of its vast geographical space and its dense population. The research used purposive sampling which allowed a convenient sample. Cooper and Selindler (2005:201) state that a convenient sample is appropriate in surveys as studies of exploratory nature. It allows the researcher to draw from the information-rich participants who are chosen because of the obvious amount of knowledge they have about the matter in question. Committee members in the region participated in interviews to give the overall state of the circumstances of the military veterans. The other members of the region were put together in focus groups so that they could support one another. This was necessary especially with many of them physical weak from hunger and illnesses and others showing signs of amnesia and other mental illnesses. The primary target population is the group of military veterans who fall within the potentially economically, viable age bracket. Most of these ex-combatants have been through some form of schooling as well as have gathered experience in different fields during the time of the struggle for liberation mostly outside South Africa.

The purpose of the research is to determine the possible contribution that FET colleges can make in recognition and alignment of the group's qualifications and experiences with the principles of the South African education system. Also, the study aims to explore possible reciprocal processes between the military veterans and the country. The intertwined nature of problems relating to the upliftment of the lives of military veterans has been well documented. While this particular research seeks to investigate the role of FET colleges in resolving the impasse it invariably touches on other aspects that thwart prospects to improve the lives of the military veterans this has landed the study in qualitative research. In the beginning the researcher conducted in-depth interviews. The interviews were selected because of the need for detailed analysis of a rather complex phenomenon namely the feelings of human beings, the military veterans in this case. The choice was also based on the

stressful nature of the circumstances under which military veterans live. Because the whole exercise touches the lives of individuals it can be rather confidential as some experiences of one's life can be sensitive and rather embarrassing to share. Macmillan and Sara (2010) argue that interviews allow respondents to talk and share what would otherwise be embarrassing and difficult to talk about in the normal plan of life. Martins et al. (2005: 162) argue that "interviews are best suited in extrapolating information that is deep seated in an individual's emotions".

There is a lot of information that military veterans showed reluctance in sharing hence the choice of interviews.

The researcher is well suited to undertake the research of this nature as a military veteran herself and can thus able to relate to the experiences of the respondents to a great extent. Information was given though reluctantly but with the understanding that the researcher was also in the same boat at the same stage. The use of natural settings like the old shack dwellings where the respondents usually held their meetings or spent time together lamenting the difficult and unkind situations they find themselves in after the independence of the country they fought so hard for and nostalgic of the past away from South Africa proved helpful in putting the respondents at ease. It became easy to establish rapport with the respondents, an attribute that Tustin et al. (2005: 113) present as pertinent to the success of in-depth interviews. Respondents related their experiences and feelings to the past with laughter and cry in between.

Respondents related the events of the past to the present setting. The researcher's standing helped to draw out information by looking at the respondents and nod affirming and even comforting the respondents as the situation dictated. White (2003) avers that the way respondents react is influenced by the present *hence some of the military veterans broke down into tears during interviews. Hopes that were cherished as well as promises by the leaders of the liberation struggle have come to naught* (Maleki 2011).

Looking at their past experiences, military veterans are greatly disillusioned by the disparities between themselves and the few military veterans who are successful from generating funds by holding senior positions in government. Haavelsrund (2011: 3) warns that ".....in

case you are poor and unemployed you will perceive a very different world from the rich and employed.”

This statement fits well with the divide that pertains to the military veterans of South Africa where some military veterans constitute the top bracket in the wealth of the country and the others right at the bottom of the ladder. Some military veterans indicated that they feel foreign in their own country, seeing their “former comrades” as representing the master of the old regime.

The respondents communicated in their language and even used some of the terms they used when in exile, for example, “*umgwenye, amanyhwaru, isystem*” and the researcher understood the terminology used.

During site visits observations, interviews were conducted with the help of chairpersons from different organisations of affiliation namely, Umkhonto wesizwe (the MK), Pan African Congress (APLA) and the Azania People’s Organisation (AZAPO) as well as the South African Defence Force (the SANDF). These four groups together with the defence force members of the then homeland military forces fell under the same umbrella after demobilisation. Data consisted of tape recordings of interviews. These were transcribed into text for analysis. Responses were coded according to themes

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

It is common practice that demobilisation is a forerunner to the reconstruction of a given country and the main characteristic thereof is peace building. Most of the military veterans feel that this stage was overlooked. They say that

“Reconstruction was never considered.....all that was done was to give the country on platter. Daar kan geen vrede wees hos’na education, without preparation for jobs.”

Malan (1996) argues that the final stage of demobilisation is the dispersal and rehabilitation of belligerents. To this he argues that where there is peace building should be a post conflict action that can help the country to settle and solidify a political settlement in order to avoid a return to conflict.

Against the backdrop of the argument above one reaches a conclusion that the process of demobilisation was never taken to finality in South Africa. According to the committee structures of military veterans, the most impact of

demobilisation is seeing the settlement of all citizens especially those “who were most unfortunate and displaced by the system that led them to war”

A great percentage of military veterans live in destitute conditions with neither decent homes nor jobs. Mbunyuza and Holloway (2007) argue that information from reviewed literature, discussions with national and international experts (meetings with the heads of Military Veterans in the South African Embassy of the United States in South Africa as well as the German Embassy in South Africa) as well as responses from the military veterans themselves confirm the demobilisation was not fairly conducted and was not finalised. This has resulted in great discrepancies among the people who were once involved in a common cause and bound by the same views and aspirations.

There is a cry among military veterans for help to build on the skills and in some cases university studies that they commenced in countries outside South Africa.

“You see suster I did my course in Bee Nurturing in Bulgaria; Sophie, and now I do not get any recognition in this country. They say I did not even finish u ten wam so how can I go to tertiary? Is tough my suster-asibonelelwa”

A few of them completed their university qualifications but the difference in education systems of countries makes it difficult for these graduates to use their qualifications to access job opportunities in South Africa. Those trapped in such an unfortunate situation feel that the government of the day doesn’t concern itself with its problems. One interviewee had this to say;

“Here in Kimberly there is a lot of diamond cutting, you know mos comrade; and the FET here even has a section daar by die Galashewe campus where they deal with diamond cutting. If these guys, I mean government, had not forgotten us they could take me there. I could get certificate at least. I mean they know that my certificate is genuine. Those Germans were serious about die onderrig van South Africans”.

Some went into exile at a young age without attaining secondary education. Most of those who fall in this sector gathered skills while they were in exile. They lack proof of either a qualification or experience that they acquired through exposure and active participation in education while in exile. Some had to return to the country

at the instruction of their leaders at the time of the unbanning of political organisations. With the uncertainty that came about with the unbanning there was provision for potential any untoward reaction from the opponent as soon as the exiled returned. It was a precautionary measure of the then leaders of the struggle for liberation to instruct some cadres to return to the country in preparation for the unforeseen (Maleki 2011). Some had to leave the countries of exile in response to the needs of the struggle. For this reason they are unable to join the mainstream and participate actively either through completing their studies or engaging in active employment or even self employment. With the knowledge they possess as alleged to by George (2007) and Makwetla (2009), there is potential risk in leaving their development to chance. All avenues have to be explored to channel the skills so attained to fruitful use.

Findings

Most military veterans, particularly those from the non-security forces the MK, APLA and AZAPO live in abject poverty and under unfavourable social conditions. The data on access to education reveals a fractured, insecure community which exists on the margins of the mainstream social life. Research shows that, as a group, military veterans exhibit high levels of dissonance and dissatisfaction. Some feel that they should be assisted to customise the educa-

tion qualifications they received while in exile to the local education training. While social funding is sorely needed to alleviate the plight of the military veterans, their problem goes way beyond making finance available. Sustainable solutions to the needs of military veterans require educational intervention strategies.

Research as conducted both in Kimberley and Kwa Zulu Natal shows that Colleges of Education do offer a number of qualifications that are related to the qualifications that the military veterans were either pursuing or had already obtained. This is testified to both by the utterances of the respondents as the information contained in the calendars of Sayidi FET college in Mbumbulu (KZN) and the Galashewe campus of the Northern Cape FET college as well as the Uppington campus brochure on modules and qualifications offered

Identified Trends

Striking trends emerged from the profiles of military veterans in the Northern Cape and Kwa-Zulu Natal. More than half were between the ages of thirty (30) and fifty (50), a time of life when one should be gainfully occupied in formal economic activities. As Figure 1 indicates, 354 of the interviewees were from the Northern Cape and 258 were from Kwa-Zulu Natal. Of the interviewees, 179 (51%) in the Northern Cape and 141 (54%) in Kwa-Zulu Natal were found to be in their thirties. Another astonishing fact was that

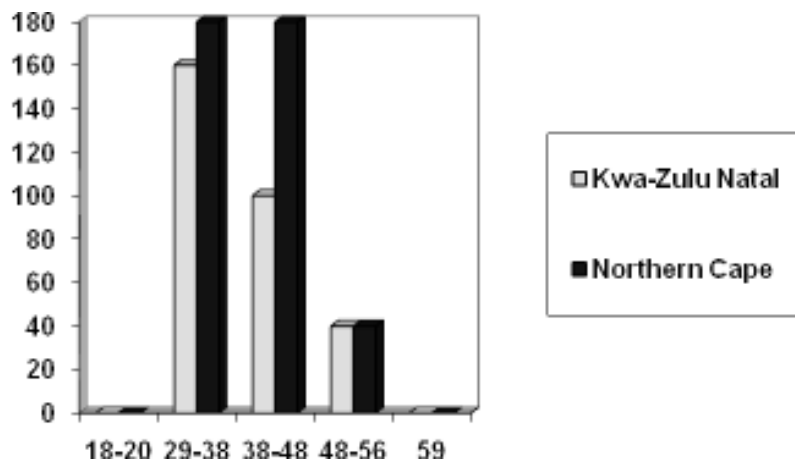


Fig. 1. Veterans age profile in Kwa Zulu Natal and Northern Cape

the population of military veterans was still firmly located in the period where people should be economically active. Indeed, most military veterans are well below the age of 65, what Swane-poel (2007) describes as being at the height of one's economic career. A great number of them should be assisted to participate in the economy of the country.

In 2007 with the run-up to the 2010 FIFA World Cup, and given South Africa's position as a favoured tourist destination, one would have expected that more participants would seek employment in the construction and tourist industries but even suggestions to this effect were not well received by military veterans who described such opportunities as short lived and not helping them to use what they already possess (Mbunyuza and Holloway 2007). Certainly these sectors present considerable opportunities for growth and for the absorption of under- and unemployed people. In discussion with them one realised the pride that they had about what they believed as quality skills form outside South Africa and their intention to guard jealously against their hard earned possession. Further, the skills required for entry are catered for by the FET colleges.

Military veterans boast a lot of skills, some of which are:

- ♦ panel beating
- ♦ plumbing
- ♦ manufacturing
- ♦ building and construction
- ♦ welding
- ♦ boiler making
- ♦ small scale farming

Some of the military veterans have formed projects wherein they share their expertise, for example the "Saphinda Sakho" and Shaft 17 projects, to mention but a few. Only a handful gain access to participate in these projects and many remain unoccupied. This leaves them with skills that are not relevant to any formal qualification and thus remain unable to participate in and enjoy proper recognition by the country.

It is apparent that recognised qualifications are a major challenge facing the military veterans. Year after year the National Financial Budget tabled by the Minister of Finance records an increase in the allocation for education. No mention is made of the military veterans and their unique circumstances. Even the number of alleviation strategies, for example loan schemes, can-

not benefit them, thus leaving a void in their efforts to access educational development.

Finance being the main challenge in any effort towards accessing educational opportunities, this study makes a recommendation of a reciprocal nature in the form of a trade partnership between FETs and military veterans. Military veterans should teach and share the skills they possess with their peers and in turn receive a stipend from the colleges. The bulk of the money should pay for their studies. Such an approach would bring about a monetary gain to both military veterans and FET colleges.

Culture is closely tied to the values of a nation and it is better acquired within a particular country or context. Most of the military veterans went to exile just at the time when they were almost due for initiation into major societal and cultural processes. There is therefore a cultural void in their lives. This is attested to by Njoku (2001: 2) who observed that there is a common tendency in African countries for people to stay away from their countries for lengthy periods of time and become divorced from their communities. The matter is compounded by the fact that a number of military veterans started families in foreign countries. On their return to their countries, they brought spouses and children of foreign origins. As heads of their households, they have a duty to initiate their family members to the South African way of life. FET colleges have a great potential to help the military veterans to play their roles in their homes with confidence and to take their position in society.

Mbunyuza (2005: 2) argues that: "*Positive instructors are powerful models. Other mentors and role models play a role in advising, counselling, and coaching as subsidiary components to the concrete teacher or instructor.*"

Teachers and instructors of FET colleges should be of an exclusive brand because they deal with, amongst others, mature people who are knowledgeable in specific areas. They should be experts in specific skills and be committed to contribute to the agenda of government to turn around skills shortage. Nkosi (2008) rates FET colleges high in the ladder of skills development and says,

"*The Further Education and Training colleges are the delivery arm of government in skills training programmes, which are primarily suited to the development of human resources in South Africa*". Research portrays FET col-

leges as institutions with potential to develop skilled members of society.

The ongoing discussions and deliberations by many stakeholders have influenced the establishment of the Department of Military Veterans (DMV) wherein concerns and specific plans to address the plight of military veterans are articulated. This assured that military veterans' affairs are acknowledged at an executive level of government. Aligning with the Military Veterans Act 18 of 2011, which seeks to provide national policy and standard on socio-economic support, the strategic plan 2012-2016 of the department of military veterans seeks to improve the entrepreneurial skills of the military veterans. This goes with the call to enhance partnerships and service agreements with the other government departments like the Department of Health and the Department of Education. On analysing courses, offered by colleges of Further Education and Training, it became evident that there is direct correlation between the courses and skills that some of the military veterans already possess. Enrolling in the programmes of these colleges, would avail the military veterans the opportunities they yearn for to gain qualifications in the area of the skills they possess. With the introduction of Curriculum Application Strategy (CAPS) in 2012 and the envisaged full roll out in 2013, the military veterans can fit in directly as the syllabi are since articulated in subjects as against learning areas of the of the National Curriculum Statement.

The Department of Military Veterans has eleven Medium Term Strategic Framework (MTSF) outcomes with outcomes one (1) and (4) placing emphasis on improved quality basic education for all and decent employment through inclusive economic growth, the role of the colleges for Further Education and Training becomes evident.

CONCLUSION

Responding to the quest of the military veterans for educational support cannot be an overnight process: there can be no quick-fix plan. Whilst lessons from other countries should be built on absolute duplication of strategies would not be a viable solution. Different countries have their specific needs. South Africa is a complex society and as such, planned strategies should accommodate the challenges of redress and upskilling of those members of society who are likely

to benefit from such a process. Military veterans stand to benefit from FET colleges in that the skills they already possess will be adapted to meet local needs and they will also get accredited certificates as proof of completion of qualification. Military veterans have been vocal about their needs and all attempts to address their plight should take heed of their aspirations. The experiences that the military veterans already possess should be considered in creating meaningful learning opportunities. Their development should be about them, for them and with them.

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