

Press Release

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SOUTH AFRICAN
INSTITUTE OF
RACE RELATIONS

South Africa's Leading Research and Policy Organisation

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Business urged to do more to develop skills

The South African Institute of Race Relations has said that companies invested in South Africa could overcome some of the skills constraints they face by doing more to identify and fund tertiary study opportunities for potential graduate professionals.

The Institute's Pule Motaung has warned that there is too little funding available to meet the demands of potential black students. As a result South Africa is not fully exploiting its skills potential even as business and government identify skills shortages as a constraint on growth.

He said the Institute, which has been funding tertiary education since 1935, and counts Nelson Mandela as an alumnus, annually receives over 5 000 applications from poor but academically deserving students to pursue tertiary study. Typically at least 10% or 500 of these will be very well qualified to pursue tertiary study in professional fields. However bursary providers are able to source funding for only a fraction of these.

Mr Motaung said that students from poor backgrounds could succeed well at university if they were provided with sufficient counseling and support structures, and full funding to meet 100% of their study and living expenses.

He said that it was misleading to think that poverty was a determinant of a student's capacity to succeed in tertiary study. He cited the example of the 92 students funded by the Institute in 2011, the majority of whom came from backgrounds featuring per capita incomes of less than R4 000. However, this same cohort recorded a 96% pass rate in degree fields such as medicine, engineering, science, law, and education in 2011.

Mr Motaung said that South African corporations could easily take advantage of South Africa's untapped skills resources if more was done to fund opportunities for young black school leavers. He said a particular responsibility rested with the black business community which had not done as much as their white compatriots to support skills development in South Africa. He said, 'I annually see the hundreds of potential students that South Africa allows to slip through its fingers. It is very frustrating and very shortsighted.'

He said that a strong business case could be made for South African companies to develop their own skills pipelines. This could be done by identifying potential candidates while these are still at school and funding their studies through to graduate or post-graduate level. That way companies would be able to guarantee that their potential employees benefit from a sound school education as well as obtaining an appropriate tertiary qualification. While it could rightly be expected that the Government should play a leading role in producing skilled school leavers and graduates, it was not doing so. There was also nothing in education policy to suggest that government-led initiatives would relieve skills shortages in the future. If companies wanted better employees they were left with two choices: either train them yourself or import them.

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