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Government urgently needs to provide additional bursaries to train talented teachers

The world's population reached 7 billion last month, just as South Africa's national census was completed. Most of this growth has occurred within the last century – the global population stood at just 2 billion in 1927. Steven Sinding, director of the US Agency for International Development, has remarked that 'Clearly we are living through an extraordinary period in human history, an era of unprecedented growth in our species'. Africa is the continent with the second largest share of the world's population – just over a billion people, but population numbers in sub-Saharan Africa, where birth rates have not been falling significantly as they have been elsewhere in the developing world, are predicted to double by 2050. At last count (in 2005), South Africa's 50 million residents comprised just less than 5% of the continent's population. The present census should enumerate the extent to which our population has grown, with an expected reduction in fertility associated with increasing urbanisation likely to be exceeded by increased migration.

South Africa's problem is that a remarkably low proportion (41%) of the population that is of working age has a job (formal or informal). Raising the employment rate to the global norm of 60% would require 6 million additional jobs over and above the 13 million jobs that exist today (http://www.cde.org.za/article.php?a_id=400). Our economy, based historically on agriculture and in the more recent past on mining, is likely to remain resource-based, despite its development into the hub of the continent's financial services and educational sectors. The trick is to find ways of adding value to products both by using skilled labour and advanced technology; and by filling niches in the global supply chain for goods produced by relatively unskilled workers using more basic technology.

This may be easier said than done. Sarah Britten has opined that while South Africans are unlikely to compete with the Chinese in terms of industriousness, they might have the edge when it comes to creativity (<http://www.businessday.co.za/Articles/Content.aspx?id=156763>). So what is holding our creative talents back?

According to the National Planning Commission, the country's two key challenges are poor education and youth unemployment. Disenchanted youth comprise 70% of South Africa's unemployed, as evidenced by the recent march on Pretoria by the ANC Youth League. Their latent talents are being constrained by an educational system that leaves them unemployable on leaving school on account of a lack of skills, and few opportunities to gain work experience. There are few signs that government is paying serious attention to improving the education system which it has largely neglected for the last seventeen and a half years. The appalling legacy which it inherited in 1994 becomes less of a valid excuse with each passing year. But a recent report (http://www.cde.org.za/article.php?a_id=406) from the Centre for Development Enterprise provides some insights for education reform.

Crucially, the report identifies addressing teacher shortages as the key to solving our educational problems. With two-thirds of teachers being older than 40, the focus should be on recruitment – currently we are producing only a third of our required 25 000 new teachers each year. This problem was identified by Naledi Pandor, then minister of education, and 18 391 bursaries were awarded to prospective teachers between 2007 and 2009. But this initiative has lost momentum under the present government; last year (2010) there were 30 000 applicants competing for only 2000 new bursaries. Many more bursaries should be offered, with the majority of bursaries for secondary school teachers earmarked for subjects in which there are scarcities, such as mathematics, science and languages. No one can claim that there are not fine potential teachers amongst the 2.8 million 18–24 year olds in South Africa who are neither in employment nor in tertiary education. The challenge, made somewhat easier in a recessionary climate, is to identify these potential teachers and support them financially. The tertiary education sector will need to respond by greatly expanding teacher education programmes to provide these recruits with good-quality training.

In addition, special efforts will be required to retain recruits, as a quarter of newly qualified teachers are currently not even entering the profession at all. Brazil, in particular, has been able to retain teachers and improve the quality of their teaching by providing performance-related remuneration and appropriate career opportunities. If these steps require taking on the teachers' unions, then we need a minister courageous enough to do so.