

Lecturers abandon colleges

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STUDENTS SUFFERS AS STAFF SEEK BETTER JOBS THOSE EMPLOYED BY COLLEGES ARE SPITTING MAD BECAUSE THEY EARN LESS THAN TEACHERS

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GRIM RESULTS: At East London's Buffalo City FET College only 2219 of 7020 students passed last year

The Department of Education's plan to improve students' poor results at its 50 Further Education and Training colleges has suffered a severe setback as a result of lecturers leaving in droves because of poor salaries.

Only 65217 of the 125372 students who wrote the new national certificate (vocational) courses for the first time in 2007 passed. The Free State's results are not included.

The Department of Education said this week that almost all subjects showed "steady improvement" when compared with the previous year's pass rate. The department has not published the latest results because the supplementary examinations are still in progress.

But Umalusi, the body that certified the results, said in its report that the loss of experienced and qualified lecturers to the private sector, "insufficiently prepared" lecturers and the inability of colleges to attract suitable students posed huge challenges.

The FET colleges are meant to produce much-needed tradesmen. They also train students for jobs in the secretarial, tourism and hospitality industries.

Last month the department issued a circular to colleges, granting each college council's academic board the discretion to allow students to move to the next level, even if they failed their supplementary exams. This means that students who have been battling to pass seven subjects will have to study for as many as 11 subjects in a year.

Several students at the Buffalo City Public FET College in East London are repeating four subjects in information technology and computer sciences for the fourth time in the past two years.

Only 2219 of Buffalo City's 7020 students passed their subjects last year, and only 636 out of 2329 passed at the King Hintsa FET College in Butterworth.

A similar scenario exists at most of the other 50 colleges countrywide.

Mike Myburgh, Gauteng chief executive of the National Professional Teachers' Organisation of SA, said the exodus of teaching staff as well as the problem of inexperienced staff was a "rapidly approaching crisis".

Vacancies and resignations at colleges include:

- Seventy vacancies at the Motheo FET College in Bloemfontein;
- Eighteen vacancies at the King Hintsa FET College in Butterworth. Thirty-nine new lecturers were appointed in January;
- Eight vacancies at the Hammanskraal campus of the Tshwane North FET College; and
- Two resignations this week at the Ekurhuleni West FET College.

Dissatisfaction over salaries has been brewing among lecturers since January last year, after they agreed to be employed by the newly created college councils instead of the provincial departments of education. At least 3845 of the 5624 lecturers opted to be employed by the college councils, while most of the rest were redeployed to schools.

Those employed by college councils are spitting mad because they are not receiving the same salary as teachers.

A new lecturer with a four-year qualification earns R94932 at some of the colleges — R35000 less than his counterpart with the same qualification in the teaching profession.

The department said some colleges had filled vacancies but it was still an "area of concern", adding that a lecturer development plan had been drawn up. — govenderp@sundaytimes.co.za