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## What Vocational Schools Are Accomplishing In Haiti

By J.O. Haselhof

The open-air room buzzed with activity, while the instructor made notes on this first practical exam. One team of vocational school students strung lines to define the 25-by-25-foot area they would tile. Another mixed mortar, adding sand that his colleague shook through a wire screen.



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31 Mar, 2021

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Students and staff at computer, electrical and tiling workshops offered via HAPITech and in the agriculture and construction programs available through the L'Ecole Vocatonelle de Duchity. Courtesy: HAPITech and L'Ecole Vocatonelle de Duchity.

A young woman, one of only three in the class, added water from a gardening can. Her teammates gave her feedback "Ase," enough; "Yon ti kras plis," a little more. The look on her face suggested that she would stop when she, and not the others, thought it was the right amount.

This scene, in 2018, at L'Ecole Vocatonelle de Duchity is typical of the many employment-oriented schools in Haiti. Today, classes are popular and well-attended during positive economic times but less so with crop devastation after recent hurricanes and the work slowdown amid the pandemic.

The efforts of these schools are impressive. They determine appropriate classes, line up qualified teachers, fund scholarships, recruit capable students, teach the trade and put qualified workers into the job market. Yet, the availability of trained graduates doesn't always correlate directly with jobs in Haiti. Too often, the primed and energetic new worker cannot find employment.

Vocational schools in Haiti developed in the 1920s and 30s under the American occupation. The focused approach appeared to be the best way to help nonacademic students secure employment. Maurice Darligue, a Haitian-born international education professional and the nation's first education minister, reformed the system in the 1940s so that Haitians replaced American teachers and administrators and approached education in a way that was relevant to the country.

The Bernard Reform of 1982 first developed a language policy for teaching in Haiti. It also offered sixth-grade students the opportunity to move into a vocational tract. After the earthquake in 2010, many nongovernmental organizations introduced training schools. Haiti's National Institute of Vocational Training, by 2016, had registered 190 vocational schools — 1,010 more existed without that official recognition.

### HAPITech opened its vocational school in 2018

HAPITech, in Mizak near La Vallée-de-Jacmel, is part of the larger U.S.-based Haitian Assets for Peace International (HAPI), founded in 2007 as a women's artist collective. It has since established a successful medical clinic, maternal care program and, for the last five years, its vocational school, which caters to students 15 years and older.

One of HAPI's founders, Valerie Celestin-Mossman, cited the founders' desire to "build capacity" — a phrase used in the nonprofit world that reflects the effort to improve effectiveness and future sustainability through better business practices. HAPI staff recognized that after the earthquake in 2010, little or no money went to Haitian-run organizations. HAPI wanted to create the potential for future connections. They offered English as a second language and computer literacy (Word, Excel and the skills to build a website) in addition to computer troubleshooting, ceramic tiling (like L'Ecole in Duchity) and electrical training.

Community surveys help keep their curriculum current with local needs. They're considering a plumbing program, though Celestin-Mossman worries that the subject will not attract women in an equal number to men — an important objective within their student population of 135. She remembered HAPI's research in 2011, which determined that Mizak's young women, if not married or working, were considered a "burden" in their community.

The vocational school in Mizak maintains a high bar for student success, requiring students reach the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile to pass (many schools require 60 percent). Staff also knows their students rely on them to deliver training. Participants in last semester's English class spoke weekly to students at the University of Michigan over the internet. When WiFi service failed in Mizak, HAPITech loaded the entire class on the back of motorcycles to finish the class in Jacmel, where it could find a strong signal.

HAPITech enrolled 25 students its first year. Enrollment increased when staff changed its enrollment model to focus on skilled trades and connect graduates to jobs. They expected 50 enrollees the second year but cut off at 105 applicants. From the point of view of Mario Demas, HAPITech Coordinator, if you have a well-run, effective school, people will come. HAPITech could handle 500 students. He said that once he finds additional resources to keep the students supported, "I can make it happen."

### Vocational training continues in Duchity

Back in Duchity, Jn D. Felix began L'Ecole Vocatonelle de Duchity in 2014. He grew up in the community and partnered with the Vermont Haiti Project (VHP), which had established a primary school in Port-au-Prince.

L'Ecole became, more or less, financially independent from VHP last year. The center fights local perceptions that, if an American organization is involved, a student doesn't pay tuition. Many students have had financial difficulties these last few years. Recently, the center asked its agronomy students to pay fees that would help buy materials for the class. "Unable to pay, one-third dropped from the program," Felix said.

The center, depending on student demand for these programs, has the capacity to offer English, computer sciences, and ceramic tiling as well as construction, welding and agronomy.

Before Felix and VHP began to design their program at L'Ecole, Felix went to the U.S. He returned to Haiti excited about including auto mechanics, a trade for which he was trained, in the new curriculum. He looked at the many cars and expensive equipment required as well as the difficulty to find and afford a teacher with the right skills. He decided it wasn't the right fit for the program at L'Ecole. Felix hears positive feedback from the many students in the area who have other skills — thanks to the school — and said, "I have no regrets."

### Are Haiti's vocational schools meeting the need?

If the need in Haiti is to train workers, these two schools are fine examples: They offer classes to meet the perceived needs of the job market and graduate students, adding to the number of trained people in Haiti.

If the need, however, is to immediately employ graduated students in their field of training, success is difficult to evaluate. No central source nationwide, such as a bureau for labor statistics, collects the data that could help match vocational training to the jobs market nationwide. And job opportunities are scarce as the Haitian economy shrank in 2020 and foreign investors continue to shy away because of poor infrastructure and other difficulties for conducting business.

When asked about employment for HAPITech's graduates, Celestin-Mossman said, "It's too early to tell." She acknowledges that job opportunities for graduates vary by year and program focus, though the English tract continues to be popular.

Coordinator Demas recognized many of those graduating from the program's computer literacy section were teachers. "They used their skills," he said, "to help their own students understand computers."

Some courses of study at L'Ecole in Duchity are more effective than others. "All the agronomists who attended the center for at least two years have work," said Felix. "Every one of last year's construction students were employed upon graduation." And most built houses for their families. Unfortunately, the employment rate has been less in areas like computer technology.

Should vocational schools continue to train students if many are unsuccessful in finding jobs? By doing so, Haiti has a trained workforce. And, as Felix pointed out, "Any kind of skill improves employability."

HAPITech staff may have the logical next step towards improving employability. It wants to offer business classes, hoping its students will begin the new ventures that hire other students. However long that process may take, it moves the thinking, and the learning, in the right direction.

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J.O. Haselhof is the author of "Give & Take: Doing Our Damnedest NOT to be Another Charity in Haiti." She co-founded "Yon Ede Lan" (One Helping Another), a nonprofit that worked with volunteer groups in La Montagne (Lamontye), Haiti from 2007-2013. She lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

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