



Q&A: With the new JET Chief Operations Officer, Nathalie

1. Please take us through your background and experience?

I wanted to be a journalist and in the 1990s, a number of civil wars raged; the closest event to South Africa then was the Rwandan civil war. My political sciences assignment in my third year -1997, was on this war which was later declared a Genocide. I was flabbergasted to discover the close proximity of this horror and the little information and awareness we had about this event at the time. I did not become a journalist, could not crack the veneer into the sector; and of course the wars continue globally but with heightened awareness, and real time information available.

Instead, I 'accidentally' entered the development sector by successfully applying for a secretarial position at a small South African-European Union funded cultural project. Within a few months, I was offered the operations officer position, including management of a number of funded projects and participated in the call for proposals for non-government (NGOs) and non-profit organisations (NPOs). I was hooked and have been entrenched in the development sector for the past 18 years.

My experience with international development partners includes negotiating funding, programme formulation, overall programme cycle management, and keeping recipients of funding accountable. I have been fortunate to work in various capacities in the conflict and governance sectors, education, health and justice clusters, and also to fund research institutions (universities, think tanks, NGOs), enforcing South Africa's shift towards the adoption of an evidence-based policy-making and evaluation. My experience is with the public sector, working directly with and for the National Treasury and Presidency; and the

development partners includes the European Union, member states – e.g. Germany, Kingdom of Belgium; Canada, USAID, Kingdom of Switzerland, Global Fund, Japan and China. My last employer was the National Treasury and as part of the Budget office, our unit negotiated, facilitated all bilateral official development assistance (ODA) to SA.

JET's approach of "with the government" is spot-on as these partnerships between NGOs and the public sector can optimise the sustainability of developmental investment and outcomes.

I obtained two Master degrees over the past years – MPhil: Development finance (USB, 2016) and a Magister in Development studies (UFS, 2011).

2. What attracted you to this important role at JET Education Services?

This is a multi-faceted role and in a relatively new sector, having worked primarily in the public sector and with international development partners. I have exposure to the NGO sectors at arm's length, looking inward and being informed on challenges, opportunities and its contributions to development; mostly responding to the need for support and funding.

JET Education Services will be my foundation to have an immersive experience and importantly, create and contribute directly to more tangible development. As a public official, you often only enjoy the data and research conclusion to verify value-addition; my future experiences with JET and its partners anticipate a closer view and experience to actual beneficiaries of developmental investments – our communities.

JET is also a highly credible and resource-valid institution. I would love to be part of this high quality and relevant organisation and invest my experience and skills into further extending its strengths and taking opportunities towards participating actively in shaping education for relevance for the future.

3. What is your vision for JET as COO?

JET has proven to be agile and refine and evolve; the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) is our next challenge as a modern society. Development cooperation globally is changing and while developed countries have shifted to fund and support emerging economies to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), this is mostly by optimising domestic resource mobilisation efforts. SA remains one of the most unequal societies although we are deemed as an upper-middle income (UMIC) country, translating in less grant receipts for future development.

We still lack the quality education although this sector receives the bulk of voted funds. I want to contribute to JET's approach to work with relevant and diverse stakeholders and partners towards accelerating quality education provision. Development partners are focusing investment towards direct beneficiaries and implementers; JET's capacity to attract and implement targeted interventions is established and can be harnessed to extend internationally. I will focus on the tested longevity of JET, the resources and partnerships required to now create reach and 'fit' internationally, building on the regional footprint established thus far.

The world is learning and comprehending what 4IR means, requires and changes required based on individual country, and sector, contexts. JET's strong research and evidence-based focus can be up-scaled to generate and contribute to big-data needs. The value chain to enforce and support applied learning; targeted, catalytic and innovative educational investments with diverse and active partners; and measurable development outcomes is my vision for JET.

4. What are some of your priorities/goals for your first few months in this role?

I am looking forward to knowing my new team, the board and key partners and stakeholders. I will be walking into a well-run institution and the big challenge will be to work within the Covid-19 pandemic emergency conditions, limited movement and access requiring business-unusual arrangements.

However, JET has started to develop its new 5year strategy and I want to actively contribute to this plan and vision. The resourcing (human and financial resources) and operationalising of this strategy post board approval, will be my key future focus.

5. During the interview process, is there anything that specifically stood out for you?

The recruitment process was rather intense and very creative. It has been a paradigm shift from the onset of the process with the JET team introducing a "Culture Fit" element, supplementing the normative panel interview. This was an exciting addition and critically important as energy portrayed, a world view and our 'six-sense' remains important when determining who we share our spaces and experiences with. Another element that stood out was the comradery of the formal interview panel. Walking out of this second interview, I realised that I truly wanted the job and be part of this community.

6. What are some of the challenges you've noticed that educational NPOs face, and how do you think these issues can be faced?

Globally, NGOs, registered as NPOs, are often created based on project and short-term financing. This responsive approach and business-model is a general phenomenon and challenge. Educational NPOs are mostly dependent on government and private sector funding and must have resources and capabilities to respond to these funding opportunities, be eligible and proof compliance for bureaucratic scrutiny. Further, they must remain relevant, responsive to government strategies and infuse the local context to ensure implementation is demand-driven.

One study by the National Development Agency (NDA, 2016) found that 24/40 national government allocated and spent an estimated R2.4bn on NPOs (FYs 2012/13 and 2013/14). An overall R35bn to NPOs was from government-wide support during this period. The DBE at national level provided R21m to NPOs. This might look like a massive investment and certainly is, however, NPOs would have to spend down all the funds as a service provider and often lack the financial backing to reinvent or modernise their approach and operations.

Rural education remains our Achilles heel; the NPOs servicing this demographic might have less resources to compete and access funds; less capabilities to digitalise; etc. More

investment could be made by financially sound and capable NPOs to work with smaller entities. Government and private funders should be encouraged to second professional educational staff/officials (auditors, financial advisors, M&E experts, etc.) to provide in-kind support, providing professional capacity needs.

When we understand challenges and engage with NPOs as partners in development, the solutions we can formulate will be participatory and optimise the sustainability of capabilities invested in.

7. What do you like to do when you're not at work/ working?

I have a demanding work life and an evenly demanding family and social life. I have two teenagers, and a husband that (thankfully!) works from home, and two dogs. We love to binge watch our series episodes on a Friday evening with lots of 'feel-good' food (Mom's definition – junk!); eating out and sampling new restaurants; and of course – going to the movies. The Covid-19 lock-down made me value these luxuries even more.

I love hiking, reading, cooking and having lazy braais or fancy get-togethers with friends and family. And I have been trying to 'find' a hobby – the search continues...

8. JET employees embrace our new slogan "Think education. Think JET" what does this slogan mean to you?

We live, operate and are expected to thrive in a fast-changing world; evolution ensures that we have little complacency to move ahead and survive. Education is our most powerful tool for survival, growth and enjoyment. If we adopt an inquisitive mind, we will question more and aspire to find those answers – as individuals and as a community. Education requires a community and JET has developed and invested in connecting a diverse community. For me, to think education requires an openness to listen, observe, apply, experience and refine.

The saying by Chinese social philosopher, Confucius (died 479 BC) still resonates in the twenty-first century: "If you are the smartest person in the room, then you are in the wrong room."