

## **An assessment of the effectiveness of learnership programmes in the South Africa Construction Industry**

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### **Abstract**

The objective of this paper is to investigate the effectiveness of learnership programmes in the South African construction industry. This will be achieved by first establishing whether the Learnership System introduced under the Skills Development Act No. 97 of 1998 is an appropriate system for training construction professionals and by investigating the quality of the learnership outcome. The paper is also aimed at investigating the major obstacles faced in delivering effective learnerships in the construction industry. The methodology for the research was solely a literature review. The literature review was based on literature focused on the legislation governing the learnership programmes, stakeholders involved in the delivery of learnership programmes, the outcomes of learnership programmes and major obstacles hindering the effectiveness of learnership programmes. The literature survey revealed that there is a considerable confusion and ignorance amongst training providers. This factor was found to have a negative impact on the delivery of efficient and effective learnership programmes in the construction industry. Further findings also revealed that other factors contributing to the ineffectiveness of construction learnership programmes are poor administration and bureaucracy within the Construction and Education Training Authority, poor outcome of learnerships, dissatisfaction with the system amongst learners and employers for different reasons and technical incompetence amongst trainers. Learnerships in the construction industry have not been effective and efficient in terms of skills development as predicted. This is attributable to many factors such as ignorance and confusion amongst stakeholders, bureaucracy and poor administration within CETA, lack of support from various relevant stakeholders and low levels of employer participation in the delivery of learnership programmes.

### **Keywords**

Learnership, construction industry, skills shortage

### **1. Introduction**

Unemployment is one of the key challenges facing the economy of South Africa and a major driver of poverty and social problems. One of the contributors to the rate of unemployment in South Africa is the deficit of skilled people. Another factor contributing to the growing unemployment rate in South Africa is a mismatch between the skills that employers are looking for and the skills available and supplied in the

labour market (University of Cape Town, 2006). The unemployment rate is said to be an alarming rate of 24% in South Africa as of 2010 (Stats S.A., 2010). Unemployment leads to poverty which hampers the growth of the South African economy.

The professional skills shortage remains a problem for the economic growth of South Africa. One of the factors that contribute to the alarming shortage of professional skills is emigration. The few skilled individuals are drained away to other countries because they are valuable and tradable in the attractive global market. Better incentives offered in other countries also contribute in emigration of professionally skilled individuals. The South African government introduced Learnerships as a mode of learning and training in order to improve the skills of its citizens. With skills, the people of South Africa stand a better chance of finding employment. This will reduce the alarming unemployment rate. According to Sector Education and Training Authority system (SETA), a big percentage of the people who are unemployed in South Africa have little training and few skills. Over 50% of the people who pass grade 12 every year do not have sufficient basic skill to get work in any sector of the economy.

The South African Parliament approved the Skills Development Act in 1998 which established the SETA system. The SETA system was created in order to develop a series of sector skills plans within a defined framework of the National Skills Development Strategy. In 2000, the then minister of Labour Membathisi Mdladlana formerly established 23 SETAs, each with its own sector and sub sectors. The SETA was established to overcome deficit of skills in the South African economy in the form of inter alia, learnership. Before the establishment of SETAs, there were already 33 industry training boards that covered all sectors within the economy of South Africa. Their responsibility was education and training in the form of apprenticeships. Unlike the former training boards, the SETAs were given much more responsibility. Both learnership and apprenticeships focus on education and training but they are different in how they are applied. Also, the national skills programme was officially launched by the then minister of the Department of Labour (DoL) in 2000. SETAs were established in 2000 by the then minister of labour Membathusi Mdladlana for all sectors of the national economy. All SETAs were to be responsible for both private and public sectors within their own sector as a whole. In terms of The Skills Development Levies Act, All SETAs are to collect levies from employers in each sector. This will serve as funding for SETAs for the establishment and operation of amongst others, learnership programmes. The functions of SETAs include the establishment of learnership and promotion and registration of those learnership. These functions are to be performed in accordance with the Skills Development Act and its constitution. Each SETA is funded by levies collected from businesses in its sector (Skills Development Act, 1998). Other funds are from the National Skills Fund, income earned from surplus money deposited or invested, income earned on services rendered and grants, and donations and bequests made to it. The funds are then used to fund the performance of its function and to pay for its administration.

The Skills Development Act and the Skills Levies Act were passed by government in 1998 and 1999 respectively, to transform skills development in South Africa. One of the main purposes of this act is to develop and improve the skills of the South African workforce by encouraging learners to participate in learnership programmes and other training programmes. The Skills Development Act also encourages employers to use the workplace as an active learning environment and to provide employees with the opportunities to obtain new skills. It also encourages workers to provide opportunities for new entrants to the labour market to gain work experience and to employ persons who find it hard to find work. These were all targeted increase the levels of investment in education and training authority. The purposes of the Skills development act are to be achieved by establishing an institutional framework comprising SETAs and the National Skills Authority. The National Skills Authority liaised with SETAs on the national skills development policy and the national skills development strategies. Hence the objective of this paper is to investigate the effectiveness of learnership programmes in the South African construction industry. This will be achieved by first establishing whether the Learnership System introduced under the Skills Development Act No. 97 of 1998 is an appropriate system for training construction professionals. The

paper is also aimed at investigating the major obstacles faced in delivering effective learnership in the construction industry.

## **2. Research Methodology**

The research was conducted with reference to existing theoretical literature, published and unpublished literatures. The study is mainly a literature survey/review and looks at the literatures relating to legislative policy documents governing learnership programmes in the South Africa Construction Industry, the background of learnership programmes, stakeholders involved in the delivery of learnership programmes, the outcomes of learnership programmes and major obstacles hindering the effectiveness of learnership programmes in the South Africa CI. A thematic content analysis of the relevant document as outlined was conducted. The research method falls within the qualitative research methodology.

## **3. The learnership system in the South African construction sector**

### **3.1 *The National Skills Authority (NSA)***

The National Skills Authority was established in terms of section 4 of Skills Development Act No. 85 of 1998. The functions of NSA are to: advise the Minister on the policy and strategy of the National Skills Development, guidelines on the implementation of the National Skills Development strategy, and the allocation of subsidies from the National Skills Fund; liaise with SETAs on the National Skills Development policy and the National Skills Strategy; report the progress made in the implementation of the National Skills Development Strategy in the prescribed manner to the Labour Minister; and to investigate any matters arising out of the application of the National Skills Development Act.

SETAs were established in 2000 by the then minister of labour Membathusi Mdladlana for all sectors of the national economy. All SETAs were to be responsible for both private and public sectors within their own sector as a whole. In terms of The Skills Development Levies Act, All SETAs are to collect levies from employers in each sector. This will serve as funding for SETAs for the establishment and operation of amongst others, learnership programmes. The functions of SETAs include the establishment of learnership and promotion and registration of those learnership. These functions are to be performed in accordance with the Skills Development Act and its constitution. Each SETA is funded by levies collected from businesses in its sector (Skills Development Act, 1998). Other funds are from the National Skills Fund, income earned from surplus money deposited or invested, income earned on services rendered and grants, and donations and bequests made to it. The funds are then used to fund the performance of its function and to pay for its administration.

Although learnership were implemented to improve on apprenticeships and improve the overall skills of the South African nation, they have been criticized and said to be inefficient and ineffective. The structuring of learnership in a way that integrates theory and on-site practical training means that learners will be able to test their newly acquired knowledge and skills immediately within familiar surroundings of their own schools and places of work. It is clear that the concept of Learnerships as a mode of delivering learning programmes may be used to train construction professionals in South Africa. The greatest benefit or advantage is that learners will gain practical experience under the guidance of experienced and qualified professionals as mentors. However, there is still confusion amongst various stakeholders and trainers involved in learnership as to exactly who may approve, register and establish a learnership and under which condition. The SETAs must approve all learnership before they can be forwarded to the Department of Labour for registration. SETAs have been given this role because they are considered to be in the best position in order to assess if an intended learnership will be able to meet an identified need and

whether this need exists in an occupation where there are likely to be future employment or self-employment opportunities.

#### **4. The satisfaction of relevant stakeholders with the learnership system**

In a study undertaken by Mummmenthey (2010) in the Western Cape, training providers, learning institutions and learners who had completed construction learnership programmes were given questionnaires to answer on the satisfaction and appropriateness of construction learnership programmes. Training providers (construction companies) and learning institutions demonstrated a higher dissatisfaction with the learnership system with almost 21% of training providers being unaware or informed about the system to an extent that they could not comment on their satisfaction with the system. The reasons for the dissatisfaction among the employers included:

- the availability of and access to information about learnership;
- the support and administration; formal procedures and bureaucracy; and, funding and finances;
- the availability of industry-suitable learnership with suitable content; and
- the quality of learnership outcome.

The employers in learnership programmes are the party that get to determine the quality of learnership outcome since they employ learners during and after completing the learnership programme. Contrary to the trainers and employers, a further analysis of the answers indicated that the learners expressed an 89% satisfaction with learnership programmes. The small percentage of dissatisfaction in learners was attributable to, amongst others, “Non-completion: Due to financial controversies between the training provider and CETA”. All these reasons for dissatisfaction amongst learners and employers are the responsibility of CETA. In another study undertaken by HSRC (2008), 15% of the interviewed 6819 learners indicated that they terminated their learnership due to “...poor quality of training in either the practical component at the workplace or, in the theoretical component in the classroom”. The learners revealed that the classroom work was not related to the workplace training. This indicates that there is a mismatch within the two components of learnership- practical training and classroom theory. The survey further revealed that the learnership system has a positive labour market outcome for those who completed learnership.

#### **5. The quality of the learnership outcome**

Some relevant stakeholders perceive the currently outdated learnership content as one of the challenges/obstacles hampering the success of the learnership programme in the construction sector (Mummmenthey, 2010). The quality of the outcome is directly related to the future employability of learners after completing the learnership programme. In a study by Mummmenthey (2010), most training providers indicated that the learnership programme did not yet provide satisfactory levels of work-readiness. The majority of employers indicated “fair” or “poor” in rating the competence of learners at the work place. The employers commented that in order for learnership to be effective, the duration should be at least 24 months.

#### **6. The appropriateness of the learnership system in training construction workers**

There seems to be different perceptions in terms of the learnership programme as the best tool for tackling the issues of skill shortage and unemployment in South Africa in different sectors of professions. Mummmenthey (2010) also noted that the larger majority of the respondents regarded the system as an appropriate means for developing artisans and that evidence existed that the criticism on the learnership system was not fundamental but was concerned with issues of practical implementations and the set-up of

processes which are the responsibilities of CETA. Those findings correspond with the findings in another study by Fester (2005), in which it was found that the problems with regard to learnership programme delivery seem to lie in both the conceptualization and implementation of learnership.

## **7. Obstacles faced in the delivery of effective learnerships**

From the literature review undertaken, most training providers do not fully understand the learnership system. This is alarming considering that these training providers' roles include teaching learners the theory part of learnership which should correspond with the practical component. The obstacles found to be hindering the efficiency and effectiveness of learnership programmes include:

- ignorance and/ confusion amongst relevant parties;
- technical capacity of trainers;
- funding and finances (CETA);
- conceptualization and implementation; and
- Low percentage of company participation.

The construction industry is mostly labour-intensive. It is one of the major contributors to the current Gross Domestic Production (GDP %) in South Africa. It uses basic skills and is regarded as one of the key drivers for reducing unemployment and poverty. The latest available submission rates of the Workplace Skills Plan indicate that participation in Learnership programmes in the Construction sector is low with only 1443 employers out of 23979 levy paying employers participating (CETA.2007; cited in Mummmenthey. 2010). This means that only about 6% of Construction Companies submit Workplace Skills Plan (WSP). The low percentage of levy-paying employers participating in learnership is a major setback to the skill-development plan. The SETA for the construction sector is called Construction Education and Training Authority (CETA). CETA's function is to administer all construction learnership.

One of the factors that contribute to the ineffectiveness of learnership programmes in the education sector is that the majority of people in the education faculties at South African universities and universities of technology are still very confused and ignorant with regard to learnership as a mode of delivering learning programmes (Potgieter, 2003). In another study conducted by Fester (2005) on the perceptions of learnership programme delivery at a further education and training institution, participants raised a variety of concerns such as technical capacity amongst some members of the staff in terms of learnership. Some of the issues raised were about funding for learnership

## **8. Conclusion**

This paper unpacked the background of learnership programmes in the introduction. The main reasons for the introduction of these programmes were discussed together with the legislation governing them. The objectives of this study will enable the author to determine the effectiveness of construction learnership programmes. A literature review of a number of primary sources was undertaken to address the objectives of this study and to make a conclusion on the research topic.

From the study, it was established that the learnership system is an appropriate tool for training construction workers; however it is faced by many obstacles in its implementation and delivery. Also, parties involved expressed dissatisfaction with the system. It was also established that some trainers are not fully knowledgeable about learnership and do not fully understand what learnership are all about (Fester, 2005). There are a number of learners who were forced to drop out of the learnership programme due to funding and finance problems within the CETA. The quality of the outcome which affects the employability of learners after completion is also another challenge with regard to the system. In conclusion, the learnership system as a concept is an appropriate model for training construction workers

as it combines theory and practical training throughout the programme. In practice/ implementation, this system has not been effective due to reasons which mostly stem from the CETA.

## 9. Recommendations

Most of these obstacles or challenges can be overcome by simply practising and enforcing the legislation and policies governing the learnership programmes. According to SETA, all training providers should undergo training to familiarise them with the learnership system. This will ensure that there is no confusion amongst training providers and employers with regard to the learnership system. It will also ensure that training providers provide learners with relevant training which correlates with the practical component offered by employers. Ultimately, this will produce the best quality outcome, improving the employability of graduating learners. The content of the learnership should continuously be updated to keep up with the evolving technology and methodologies in construction.

Hofmeyr (2009), a representative of the MBA referred to the Skills Development Act and CETA as an administrative burden and a bureaucratic nightmare plagued by internal political wrangling and charges of mismanagement. The department of labour should vigorously monitor the CETA to ensure that all systems and processes are carried out efficiently and in accordance with the policies of the SETA. This will avoid problems such as shortage of finance or funding which has resulted in certain learners dropping out of learnership programmes.

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