

## *Changes to artisanal identity and status in SA: Implications for policy*

### **Executive summary**

Technical vocational education and training (TVET) has been a subject of debate nationally and globally. Unemployment, economic weakness and rapid migration of an increasingly globalised workforce have provided an opportunity to look anew at the purpose, nature and results of skills development.

Global trends constitute an important context in which to understand changes to artisanal work in South Africa. A series of quite radical changes to artisanal training over the last three decades include the strategic official transition from apprenticeships to learnerships in 2000, followed by a shift back to recognising the importance of apprenticeships; the recognition of four routes to becoming a qualified artisan (around 2007); and more recently (August 2012), the gazetting and associated recognition of a set of 125 occupations as artisanal trades. Over the same period in the labour market, the profile (age, race and gender) of those employed as artisans has changed. Clearly such changes are likely to have impacted on perceptions of the quality of training and on the way in which the 'new' artisan emerging from this training is viewed in the labour market. While the implications of these changes have not yet been fully assessed, their

impact on the status and identity<sup>1</sup> of artisans needs to be better understood, as these are sure to affect individuals' occupational choices, as well as national skills development outcomes.

To this end, this policy brief shares findings from a recently completed Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) and Manufacturing, Engineering and Related Services SETA (Merseta) study that has investigated artisanal skilling and employment in South Africa since 2005, through secondary data analysis, as well as in-depth case studies of selected artisanal trades. The aim is to understand the characteristics that define the country's artisanal skilling and employment systems and consider the impact of changing artisanal identity and status. Three study findings are highlighted, which have implications for policy.

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1 We use the term artisanal identity to refer to 'a work-based self-concept, comprised of a combination of organizational, occupational, and other identities that affect the roles people adopt and the corresponding ways they behave when performing their work' (Walsh & Gordon 2008: 46). The link between identity and status is made explicit in the fact that an individual will, depending on the particular situation, continually seek to adopt the identity that bestows the highest esteem. We use the term 'notion' to refer to a general idea about what it means to be an artisan, which includes perceptions of both artisanal identity and artisan status.

## **Research finding 1: Artisanal identity is strongly constructed by local contexts, which include demographic factors.**

Perceptions about the race and gender of those deemed appropriate for involvement in artisanal training and work (as influenced by historical and local community contexts) continue to impact on the level of interest school leavers have in this type of work. These perceptions explain, for instance, why fewer women and black people participate in apprenticeships and artisanal work.

**Policy recommendation:** *If we want to change the demographic of those involved in artisanal work (as it is currently understood) to include more women and black people, there is a need to examine the local (community and workplace) contexts, to enable a more positive identification with artisanal work.*

## **Research finding 2: Artisanal status is closely associated with labour market demand.**

While prevailing societal perceptions regarding artisanal work still influence status, labour market demand was found to be most closely associated with artisanal status. In this regard, the research findings show the status of an artisan to be highly dependent on the demand of a particular trade, in relation to a sectoral labour market.

**Policy recommendation:** *Raising artisanal status requires intervention in the labour market, alongside strategies that can contribute to more positive societal perceptions of artisanal work. In the labour market, this can be done through evaluating mechanisms that impact on wage levels, as well as through efforts to ensure that local institutions improve the quality of artisanal training. The recently gazetted list of occupations recognised as trades, which incorporates a range of new occupations within its ambit, can play a major role in altering conventional societal perceptions of artisanal work.*

## **Research finding 3: Artisanal status is more amenable to change in comparison to artisanal identity.**

Artisanal identity is closely linked to the historical and country context, influences that are pervasive and difficult to change. Status, however, is closely associated with labour market demand and more easily changed, due to the rapidly changing work contexts characterising labour markets today.

**Policy recommendation:** *The study highlights the nature of each of these concepts; this enables a better understanding of how interventions should be attempted. However, findings caution against radical intervention and instead recommend incremental changes to institutional mechanisms, which carry strong association and trust in relation to their ability to produce quality artisanal skills.*

## **Introduction**

Technical vocational education and training (TVET) is a facilitator of rapid economic growth in some countries and is perceived as a significant contributor to reducing levels of unemployment in others. TVET continues to be perceived by governments as playing a vital role in preparing youth for the rigours of a changing employment context. However, it is evident that in many countries TVET is considered to have a low status, in comparison to other forms of post-school education and training and their related occupations, for example a university degree in law or medicine.

In South Africa, extending the reach of TVET has been a subject of critical

debate in development discourses, especially as a response to the serious challenges of poverty, unemployment and inequality. However, the apartheid legacy left its mark on the TVET system, stigmatising vocational education (CDE 2012), particularly in terms of race. For this reason, the post-1994 national agenda on vocational education and training has clearly been aimed at ensuring that a much higher number and broader demographic of South Africans, especially unemployed youth, become skilled through the system. The role of TVET skills in responding to national development imperatives is thus clearly recognised by government.

The business sector has continued to lament the low numbers of artisans and the poor quality of artisanal skills in

the post-apartheid era.<sup>2</sup> More recently, the importation of large numbers of technical skills into South Africa has been particularly highlighted, as the education and training system struggles to respond to the new technical skills needed by industry.

A recent Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) and manufacturing,

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, the JIPSA initiative (March 2006), which, as part of its overall intent to grow priority skills in South Africa, had to 'recognise and deal with the legacy of skills underdevelopment amongst the majority of South Africa's citizens, caused by the systematic denial of opportunities to black South Africans to acquire skills under apartheid and the challenges faced by the education system in the democratic dispensation' (The Presidency 2010: 3).

engineering and related services SETA (Merseta) study explores such issues by reviewing the nature of artisanal employment and skilling in South Africa since 2005. The study also presents in-depth case studies, which illuminate the impact of changing artisanal identity and status over time. The findings provide insights that could result in better outcomes for artisanal identity and status in the future and highlight the implications these hold for labour market preparation and retention of such skills. A set of technical reports (Roodt et al. 2012; Wildschut et al. 2013) provide the empirical evidence for the trends discussed here.

## Study findings

### Artisanal identity is strongly determined by demographic factors

The first key finding relates to artisanal identity. The study respondents were often found to construct artisanal identity in relation to the attributes

considered important for an artisan to possess. However, while many continued to place emphasis on manual ability and technical prowess, analytical ability was increasingly being foregrounded.

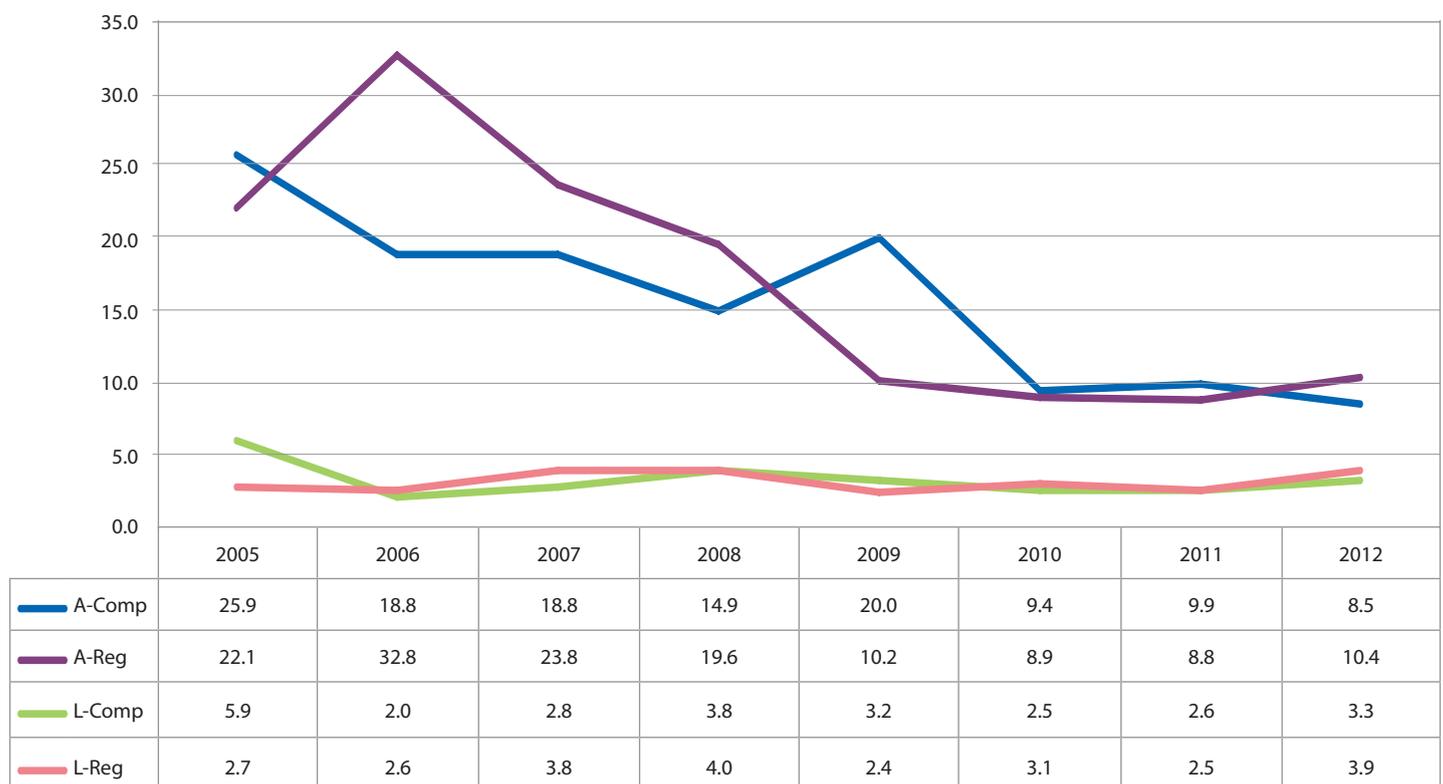
The study also found artisanal identity to be strongly influenced by race and gender. Given the particular history of vocational education and employment in South Africa, this is not a surprising finding. As shown by studies of professions, an occupational identity is often constructed in relation to prevailing societal norms and values; occupations will therefore often reflect discriminatory practices inherent in society (Mclean & Wilson 2009). In other words, construction of a particular occupational identity is strongly related to cultural notions of the appropriate class, gender, race or age group of the ideal worker within a specific occupation.

The persistence of gender inequalities in artisanal skilling and employment

in the country, for example, can be seen as an outcome of such constructions of identity. This is true in national employment, not only in the rate of women's participation in artisanal work, but also in the nature of that participation, which tends to concentrate in 'gender-appropriate' areas (Adams 2005; Mclean & Rozier 2009). On the skilling side, gendered and racial constructions clearly continue to influence the nature of participation.

Looking at the two predominant pathways to becoming a qualified artisan (learnerships and apprenticeships), the study found a predominance of younger black females in learnerships, whereas participation in apprenticeships was dominated by older white males. Based on these indicators, it was concluded that the learnership system provides greater access to vulnerable groups than does the apprenticeship system. Figures 1 and 2 reflect gender and race trends in learnership and apprenticeship

**Figure 1:** Comparison of the male-to-female ratios of the subgroups of the skills development system in the Merseta sector



participation. While this is only applicable to the Merseta sector, it is still significant, given that this sector accounts for a sizeable proportion of artisanal training and production in the country.<sup>3</sup> Figure 1 indicates, for instance, that in 2012, for every 1 female apprenticeship completion, an average of 8.5 males completed apprenticeships; for every 1 female learnership completion, an average of 3.3 males completed learnerships.

Figure 2 indicates that Africans are more likely to participate in learnerships, as opposed to apprenticeships. While the trend data indicate positive changes, in that African and female participation has increased overall in both systems since 2005, these shifts have been most pronounced in the learnership system (Wildschut et al. 2013).

<sup>3</sup> This is based on data from the recent impact assessment of learnerships and apprenticeships under the National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS) II (Kruss et al. 2012). It shows that Merseta accounted for 13% of all learnership completions, 60% of all apprenticeship completions, 17% of all registered learnership participants and 47% of all registered apprentices countrywide.

It is clear that traditional notions, resulting in identification with occupations that are considered appropriate for certain social groups, remain pervasive in artisanal skilling and employment. The importance of understanding this complexity is illustrated by Lloyd et al. (2011) in their assertion that a recognition of the centrality of work identity for individuals will assist South African organisations in applying human resource initiatives to evoke the highest levels of work-based identification. This in turn can foster positive effects on overall organisational effectiveness and performance.

### **Artisanal status is closely associated with labour market demand**

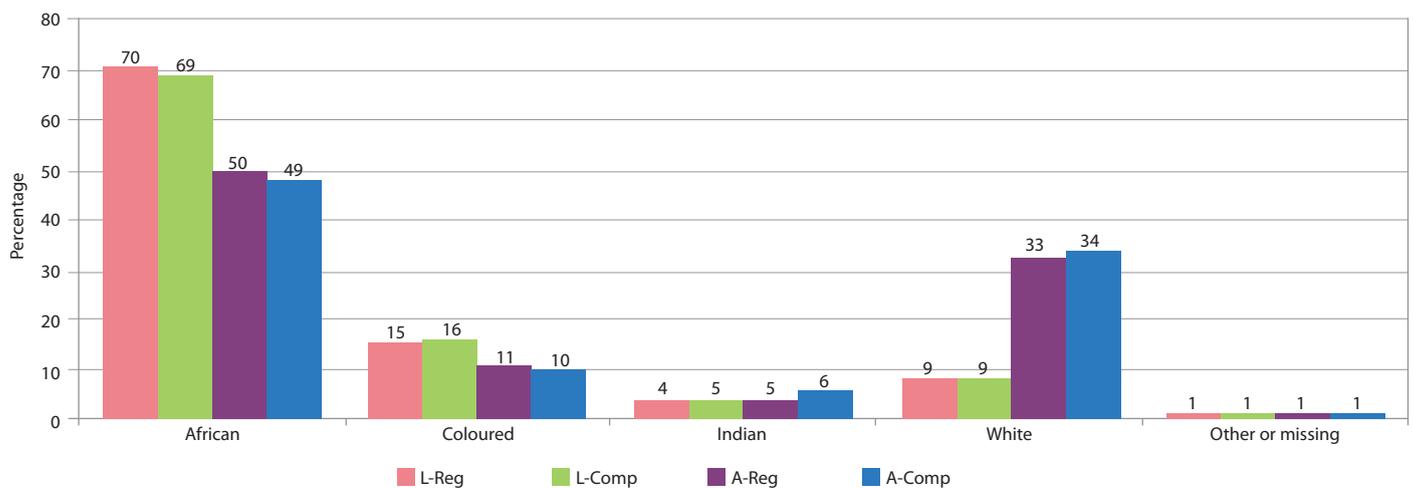
The study findings indicate that artisanal status is influenced by the prevailing societal perceptions of this occupational group, which tend to be quite low. While respondents were very aware of negative societal perceptions of the status of artisans, they did not accept this and argued that their work requires high levels of technicality, reasoning ability and knowledge, inculcated through extensive training and practical experience. Respondents

also reflected, however, that they had noticed a positive change in this regard, due to their perception that society is becoming more aware of the need for artisans and also a growing understanding of what an artisan does. This is indicated by an employer in the automotive sector, for example:

There was a time when training for an artisan was not considered a high status career and people would ask why you would not go to university ... but I think it's changed and people realise if you go to do a trade your chances of employment are better than going to a university in many instances. I think there is a swing back to focus on trades and that will change the perception people have of artisans.

The study findings also highlighted the extent of labour market demand for particular artisanal skills to be a strong determinant of artisanal status. In this regard, the status of a specific trade was found to be strongly dependent on the demand for that trade, in relation to a sub-sectoral labour market. Consequently, if a sub-sector is in need of a particular artisanal trade,

**Figure 2:** Learnership and apprenticeship registrations and completions by race, 2001/2–2011/12 (%)



Key: A – Comp (Apprenticeship completions), A – Reg (Apprenticeship registrations), L – Comp (Learnership completions), L – Reg (Learnership registrations)

respondents perceive that trade to have a high status. This shows how sub-sectoral labour markets can be an important determinant of artisanal status. Because of this close link to changes in labour market demand, and given the rapid rate at which such changes are likely to occur in the current environment, artisanal status appears to be more susceptible to change, compared to artisanal identity (Malerba 2002).

Raising artisanal status thus requires intervention in the labour market, alongside strategies that can contribute to more positive societal conceptions of status. The study findings, however, support a cautious approach to policy intervention, indicating that respondents continue to perceive major changes to the artisanal system negatively. As previously stated, the past few decades have been characterised by substantial changes to the institutional arrangements and routes for artisanal skilling, which respondents perceive to have hampered the development of a more positive artisanal identity and status. What emerged from the analysis, for instance, was a clear and positive association with the system of apprenticeship, and distrust in the newer routes to becoming an artisan. While there is evidence of positive shifts in perceptions of the contribution of newer routes, it is clear that industry sectors instituting newer models of artisanal training should make a greater effort to garner wider trust and support. As pointed out by Akoojee and Brown (2013), the success of new training routes, such as the Accelerated Artisan Training Programme (AATP), is dependent on building an institutional framework within the current stakeholder environment that sustains the implementation of the programme into the future.

The research highlighted a further aspect which has implications for

artisanal status. The challenges experienced by the study in trying to quantify artisanal skills supply and demand illustrate the importance of clarifying and creating synergy in relation to what is meant by the term 'artisan' across disparate labour market and skills system data sets. Currently, labour market data record as artisans all those who claim to be carrying out such work, with no guarantee that these individuals indeed have the requisite artisanal qualifications. There is also no comprehensive system or dataset that captures the number of artisans being trained through all four training routes. Concerted efforts towards a single trade test system, as well as the piloting of a system that will create a national registry of qualified artisans in the country, will greatly contribute towards addressing such concerns.

### ***Artisanal identity and status in the future***

In sum, since 2005, there has been considerable change in the profile of individuals traditionally involved in artisanal employment and skilling. Both the supply and demand side trends reflect important shifts in the nature of artisanal skills over time. While much progress has been made towards better age, racial and gender representation, the extent of gender inequalities remains a concern. Further investigation of the reasons for the persistence of such trends is important in a context where training models may require prolonged and intense interaction between, for example, an older white artisan and a younger black trainee, even without the added dimension of gender. The workplace as an environment for situated 'being' or 'doing' is an important, yet often overlooked, aspect in an individual's learning process in vocational training (Tanggaard 2007).

This field of research and policy-making is understandably highly political.

Interventions have been proposed and instituted in a well-considered, empirically researched and well-meaning manner, but possibly with not enough regard for the strong societal institutions embodied through these skilling pathway systems. While the negative consequences of the apprenticeship system under apartheid needed to be addressed, the strong association with, and trust in, this institutional mechanism to deliver quality artisanal training was underestimated. Thus, while the findings highlight key entry points for policy intervention, at the same time they caution against radical changes.

While negativity still surrounds the newer routes to becoming an artisan, there is increasing acknowledgement of the gains starting to be realised through these routes. The study findings, for example, show how the learnership system has contributed to increased access to artisanal skilling for vulnerable constituencies. Other research also emphasises the contribution of both apprenticeships and learnerships in support of smooth transitions into the South African labour market (Kruss et al. 2012). The question now is how to change cultural value systems and beliefs in relation to artisanal skilling, so that TVET can be recognised as a highly valued route to the labour market.

In this regard, the study findings raise hope in noting some qualitative shifts in understanding the term 'artisan' in response to changes to the nature of work, its related skill sets and its organisation over time (see, for example, Scrase 2003). Respondents appear to be moving away from more traditionalist notions of the artisan as dirty and unkempt to a notion of 'artisan' that embraces an image of a more technically, technologically skilled and knowledgeable worker, who has to deliver within a context where higher levels of automation, information

technology and different materials are required. These aspects will surely impact on the future status and identity of artisans.

The policy brief highlights three critical issues related to artisanal identity and status that hold implications for occupational choices and national skills development outcomes, and also relate to productivity in the work environment (Van Rooyen et al. 2010). The information in the brief should enable policy-makers to engage with tough questions around the TVET system and its linkages with and impact (or lack thereof) on the nature and success of its related labour market. Indeed, the brief highlights how questions around artisanal status and identity are significant in charting the future direction of artisanal training and employment in the country.

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