



A skilled worker handling an angle-grinder

Photo: Brian Odwar, Pixabay

SKILLS DEVELOPMENT FOR THE WORKPLACE:

THE LABOUR MARKET INTELLIGENCE PARTNERSHIP

Since 1994, the South African government has made an effort to develop the country's post-school education and training system. The challenge was that the skills taught at tertiary institutions often did not equip young people for the workplace. In 2012, the HSRC was commissioned to lead a five-year research programme, in partnership with the Department of Higher Education and Training, coordinating a consortium of university research units to address the skills-planning gap in South Africa. *Dr Glenda Kruss* reports.

The challenge for any government is to estimate and anticipate the education and skills required to support societal development and a productive and inclusive economic growth path.

Since 1994, there have been efforts in South Africa to plan for the skills needs of the country. However, until the formation of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) in 2009, and the creation of

a coherent post-school education and training system, skills planning in South Africa tended to be fragmented and uncoordinated. The lack of coordination and alignment between the Department of Labour and the



*A welder using his skills in a factory.
Photo: Jon Kline, Pixabay*

Department of Education meant that basic and higher education were planned in isolation from training, skills development and labour market demand.

A mismatch

The trend was that providers of education and skills training decided what programmes and qualifications to offer, and young people decided what courses to study, based on their own preferences, capabilities or financial resources. The system produced higher education graduates who struggled to access available jobs and caused severe shortages of artisans and professionals with high-level skills. Outdated intermediate-level curricula did not equip individuals with the new technological skills required in the rapidly changing workplace. The post-school education and training system did not facilitate progression and mobility. A large group of unskilled youth were not working in the

formal economy, and many regarded them as unemployable. Such critical problems constrain inclusive growth and socioeconomic development and restrict opportunities for young people, particularly black women located in rural areas and informal settlements.

A partnership for better data

From 2009, as part of the outcomes system, the government articulated the goal to establish a 'credible institutional mechanism' for skills planning.

The DHET began a process to improve administrative data on post-school education and training supply in universities, technical and vocational colleges, community colleges, and through learnerships, apprenticeships and private providers.

However, the government lacked datasets and evidence on rapidly changing labour market demand, and it did not have a framework for

effective skills planning in the context of inequality and high levels of unemployment.

In 2012, the HSRC was commissioned to lead a five-year research programme, in partnership with the DHET, to coordinate a consortium of university research units to convene the wide range of expertise required in economics, education and sociology. The Labour Market Intelligence Partnership (LMIP) was created as a research and capacity-building programme, a unique project designed and implemented with a strong 'research-policy nexus' to meet the needs of its users (www.lmip.org.za). It aimed to address the skills-planning gap in South Africa, in terms of reliable labour market information, and strategic labour market intelligence, to inform DHET policy, strategy and funding allocations. A key assumption was the need to build on, adapt and consolidate what was already in



A traffic officer supervises a points-duty class as part of a community outreach programme training local young people to be traffic wardens.

Photo: Chris Kirchoff, Brand South Africa

place, and propose ways to facilitate more optimal functioning of the skills-planning system. The research aimed to inform government thinking and the development of models for a skills planning mechanism, a process that required ongoing engagement between researchers, data managers, skills planners and policy makers.

Between 2012 and 2018, the LMIP produced 53 research reports and learning guides, 35 concept notes, 12 journal articles, 2 peer-reviewed books and 21 research policy briefs. In addition, it was involved in 19 high-level policy engagements, 9 research roundtables, 5 learning sessions, 19 HSRC-LMIP seminar presentations, and it provided 22 honours and master's bursaries in market studies and skills development. The LMIP also established a repository of literature on skills development, with over 800 entries.

Building an information system

One focus of the LMIP was to identify available administrative and research datasets that could be used to build a labour market information system. Another was to create a repository of literature on skills planning across the post-school education and training system, particularly the 'grey literature' of commissioned and consultancy

reports that are not easily available in the public domain.

A third focus was to pilot new datasets, proposing how they could be institutionalised in the future. Research was conducted to create national tracer studies across the post-school education and training sub-systems, to understand the mismatch or alignment between what the subsystems produced and what the labour market demanded. Other research teams developed methods to create more fine-grained, firm-level data on education and training needs and practices than what was covered in the Statistics South Africa Labour Force Survey.

The LMIP's core work informed structures for skills planning, through comparison of international best practice and reviews of existing skills development policy and systems. The researchers engaged with DHET planners to design a methodology to identify occupations in high demand.

A final focus was to create labour market intelligence, through a range of studies attempting to provide evidence and insights from those involved in firms and production processes, higher and vocational education and skills-training systems, and those responsible for implementing policy in specific

sectors or regions. A set of projects interrogated the changes in artisanal occupations and milieus, in response to changes in the workplace, particularly digitisation and automation of production.

Contribution

The main analytical contribution of the LMIP was producing a framework focused on the complexities of skills supply, demand and mismatches in South Africa, as opposed to assumed relationships drawn from international experience. An understanding of skills demand involves an exploration of three interrelated aspects: the characteristics of the employed and unemployed who make up the labour force; the state of the economy; and current and intermediate demand from the analysis of changes in the structure of employment. The researchers juxtaposed the signals of demand against the supply of skills coming out of the formal school education system, the post-secondary education and training systems and the workplace. The interaction between supply and demand provided the basis for interpreting signals on the nature and extent of skills shortages and mismatches facing South Africa.

The HSRC is confident that the LMIP research programme has laid a solid research and evidence foundation for the DHET to build on to create a credible institutional mechanism for skills planning.

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Additional sources:

<http://www.lmip.org.za>, the *Government Gazette*. Vol 636. No. 41728. June, the *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*. 60 (1): 1-18 and *Post-schooling educational trajectories and the labour market in South Africa* published by HSRC Press.