BACKGROUND

As indicated in South Africa’s National Development Plan (NDP), a key mission of government is to strengthen the role of the Post-School Education and Training (PSET) sector in better preparing young people for the labour market. The White Paper for Post-School Education and Training makes reference to the important role that a range of PSET institutions play in bridging the gap between education and work. In this regard, the workplace-based learning (WBL) programmes supported by SETAs are critical, both for addressing the problem of high youth unemployment and for developing the skills needed in the economy. SETAs support four different types of WBL programmes and these include: internships, learnerships, apprenticeships and learning programmes.

The importance of labour market intelligence has been highlighted at a number of different forums, and in a number of documents, by a wide range of key PSET role players. In particular, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) attaches a great deal of importance to pathway and destination (tracer) studies. Destination studies track or trace the completers of PSET programmes after a pre-determined amount of time in order to identify whether the completers of the programmes are active in the labour market and, if they are, whether their training is perceived to be relevant to their employment. Over the past five years, DHET has invested in developing the structures, tools, and capacity to undertake regular tracer studies across the PSET sector. Such studies form a crucial part of skills planning and, if implemented regularly and rigorously, can also form a key component of monitoring and evaluation.

Currently, SETAs conduct tracer or destination studies on a regular basis. These studies, however, are not designed or conducted in a coordinated way. As a result, it is difficult to develop a holistic picture of the outcomes of SETA supported WBL programmes at the national level.

From a monitoring and evaluation perspective, an important goal would be to develop a standard set of tools, protocols and frameworks that all SETAs use to trace the outcomes of WBL programmes.
INSIGHTS

Both internationally and, to an increasing extent, in South Africa, the development of a ‘best practice’ approach to using tracer studies to monitor the outcomes of education and training programmes is a focus of government. In South Africa, the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) has been conducting tracer studies for a number of years across different segments of the PSET system. Most recently, the HSRC coordinated the Labour Market Intelligence Partnership (LMIP) which developed this work further. Between 2012 and 2017, the LMIP instituted a range of tracer studies with a view to developing further the methodologies, tools and protocols of South African tracer studies in line with international best practice. A further goal of this initiative was to develop a sustainable approach which ensures that tracer studies are institutionalised across the South African PSET system.

Institutionalising tracer studies involves a comprehensive business capability approach which includes: an identified business need and model, defined operational processes, a data system, technology solutions, human resources, dependencies and an enabling environment, and a change management system. Based on a project which aimed to develop tracer study capability in the South African TVET sector, the following broad requirements of a viable tracer study capability (adapted for the SETA environment) were identified:

- SETMIS database architecture
- SETMIS database structure
- Assurance: Can this data be relied on and which set is required for the tracer study?
- Elements of the SETMIS data needed for the tracer study
- Tracer study foundation database from SETMIS data
- Testing of database to support testing of survey instruments, survey technology, tracer study outputs

Within such a business capability framework in the SETA sector, it is possible to develop and test a tracer study design to track and trace the completers of SETA-supported WBL programmes. As such, the introduction and development of tracer studies to monitor the outcomes of WBL programmes require both a dedicated research component, designed according to best practice, and a defined business capability framework.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Two broad recommendations are given in this Discussion Brief for consideration, along with a number of questions that may help to probe the implications and validity of these recommendations.

The first recommendation is that, given the experience of testing a coordinated and centralised SETA WBL tracer study design, future SETA tracer studies should be centralised even further. The model used by the Rhodes Chair adopted a centralised design approach (where all SETAs used the same sampling method drawn from SETMIS and implemented the same research tools), however, each SETA commissioned its own service provider to undertake the survey fieldwork. The result was that a number of SETAs did not comply with the centralised protocol, response rates differed according to the capacity of survey providers, SETAs conducted the fieldwork at different time periods and the quality of the research outcomes differed significantly. While some of these challenges are likely to have resulted from a lack of research capacity, it seems as though most were caused by the difficulty in coordinating a single study across 21 SETAs. In other words, the current model of conducting 21 different tracer studies simultaneously requires reconsideration.

The second recommendation relates to the improvement of data capturing at DHET. As indicated above, the tracer study foundation database was derived from SETMIS. However, the research process revealed that the quality of learner contact information, in particular, was uneven across the SETAs. A number of SETAs did not submit any contact details for data capture and the quality of those that were submitted was variable. Given that the single greatest source of bias in tracer studies is linked with the quality of contact details, this is an urgent priority for DHET. While it is acknowledged that the SETMIS database is a work in progress, it is recommended that SETMIS be evaluated carefully before further resources are allocated to conducting tracer studies in a SETA environment.
DISCUSSION BRIEF QUESTIONS

1. How should SETAs use the results of tracer studies in their performance plans?

2. What would a comparative study of employment outcomes across all SETAs and all WBL programmes add to existing monitoring and evaluation activities?

3. Who are the stakeholders in the assessment of SETA WBL employment outcomes? What are the roles of the DHET Skills Branch and the NSA?

4. Related to the above, who are the 'owners' of the research process which would coordinate and centralise the tracing of SETA WBL completers?

5. Who are the stakeholders responsible for the regular and accurate transmission of data to SETMIS?

6. What is required to improve the flow of information between SETAs and DHET in order to populate the SETMIS data successfully?

7. What associated benefits and challenges are experienced by all role players in the use of SETMIS?