BACKGROUND

Efficient and effective data management is a key component of a monitoring and evaluation system. Data management refers to the practice of organising and maintaining data processes to meet ongoing information needs. A data management system should support the capturing, gathering, storage and retrieval of data while simultaneously enhancing collaboration and the creation of new insights and knowledge. In the case of the SETA system, the flow of skills development data from industry and training institutions, through the respective SETAs, to DHET and interested departments and agencies is central to the SETA data management systems. The effectiveness of the M&E system (the ability to learn and make effective skills development decisions) depends critically on the integrity and comprehensiveness of the various data management systems.

SETAs manage data from a wide variety of sources, all requiring and feeding into different levels of reporting. SETAs collect skills training reports from SETA funded programmes, mainly used to track progress on skills development by SETAs themselves. SETAs also rely on industry employers to submit Workplace Skills Plans and Annual Training Reports that contain important data on skills development needs and initiatives related to business and industry. In order to strengthen the SETA M&E system, significant strides have been made within the SETAs, DHET, employers and training providers with regard to data management. As of March 2019, all SETAs create and submit electronic data files in standard formats for inclusion in the Skills Education and Training Management Information System (SETMIS). Despite significant progress on the data management systems, substantial challenges remain in terms of the efficiency and effectiveness of data management within the broader M&E systems in the SETA environment. TAs within the broader skills development policies, plans and strategies.

SETAs play a vital role in addressing a number of key challenges in South Africa, including skills shortages, unemployment, inequality and a globally competitive economy, thus many stakeholders demand data on skills and skills development. But how do we develop this data to move beyond compliance and towards organisational learning and systemic improvement?
INSIGHTS

Given the vital role that SETAs fulfil in terms of addressing a number of key challenges in South Africa, including skills shortages, unemployment, inequality and a globally competitive economy, many stakeholders demand data on skills and skills development. This has resulted in a proliferation of expected outcomes and indicators to track achievements relative to these outcomes. This in turn has led to what has been referred to as ‘a burden of reporting’ beyond what the data management systems have been capable of responding to. This has contributed to a focus on input and output reporting with an emphasis on easily measurable metrics driven by a culture of compliance rather than a commitment to organisational learning and systemic improvement.

The mandatory and discretionary grants provide important mechanisms for collecting data on skills needs and skills development within and potentially across sectors. However, this assumes that employers have the requisite capacity to manage and supply quality data. This assumption is not always valid as many employers do not have trained skills development facilitators resulting in very low participation rates particularly amongst small and medium sized employers. This undermines the representativity and reliability of data being submitted to the SETAs.

Many of the data entry and retrieval processes linked to the SETAs are still manual placing an additional burden on technical staff within the SETAs. Data passes through a number of “hands” before it is captured in the system. This increases the probability of human error. The manual capturing process also increases the time taken to capture the data which may, in turn, result in the data becoming outdated for meaningful decision making. One challenge in this regard is that SETAs have relied on external management information system contractors due to a range of procurement issues including the (until recently) impermanent structure of the SETA systems.

Much of the data management within the SETAs appears to be driven by internal reporting and compliance requirements. This results in SETAs tending to report on skills programmes they are funding while skills initiatives being managed and implemented by industries within their sectors are not recorded in the data management systems. This tends to skew national planning and provision data. There is also the risk that as SETAs work independently on data management that duplicate reporting within the skills/ higher education system may occur. In addition, unless a more concerted effort is made to consolidate data and consider its implications, it is likely that skills needs and skills provision for occupations and livelihoods that span multiple SETAs will not be accurately reflected.

While many of the challenges outlined above were mentioned in documents reviewed and interviews conducted, it was also evident that a great deal has been achieved particularly with regard to the Skills Education and Training Management Information System (SETMIS) since 2017. The publication of specifications for data submission, validation and transmission as well as submission schedules have gone some way to addressing the challenges outlined above. Furthermore, a series of workshops and site visits with the SETAs between 2018 and 2019 has clarified both the process and the purpose of data management through SETMIS.
RECOMMENDATIONS

1. DHET and the SETAs to clarify the purpose of data management within a broader monitoring and evaluation system and to move from a narrow compliance orientation to institutional learning and systemic improvement.

2. DHET and the SETAs to clarify the indicators to be used based on alignment between the various policy documents, the National Skills Development Strategy and reporting requirements within government.

3. Although multiple datasets can be entered into SETMIS, it is recommended that a small number of key indicators be identified and represented through an accessible “dashboard” for responsive management of the skills system.

4. Key indicators need to move beyond a focus on inputs and outputs to enable more insightful evaluative insights into outcomes and impact.

5. The new SETA landscape should be used to move management information system capacity inhouse to ensure greater ownership of and responsibility for data management.

6. DHET and the SETAs need to work together to address duplicate reporting/incompatibility of data across various management information systems. This process should also ensure the integration of data across sectors to ensure better skills planning and provision.

7. Capacity to use the data for both monitoring and evaluation needs to be built to ensure efficient and effective use of this key resource.
DISCUSSION BRIEF QUESTIONS

1. Are SETAs still generating data manually? If so, what impact does this have on the reliability and timeliness of data submissions into SETMIS?

2. Is SETMIS a quarterly reporting tool that has to be complied with within the performance monitoring of the SETAs?

3. Is the current data collection contributing to monitoring and evaluation against indicators that are focused on organisational learning and systemic improvement with regard to skills provision and the goals set out in the National Skills Development Plan and the National Plan for Post School Education and Training?

4. Would it be possible to identify a few key indicators so that the data for monitoring and evaluating these indicators becomes more robust? What are the implications for data quality of expanding both the number of indicators and related data collection?

5. Does the current data management enable longer term tracer studies? Does it enable a focus on outcomes and impact within the skills system, and potentially its impact on the economy and livelihoods?

All SETA M&E Project Reports and other deliverables are available at www.ru.ac.za/elrc/projects/meinasetaenvironment/publicationsusefullinks/deliverables

All DPME M&E Guidelines are available at www.dpme.gov.za/keyfocusareas/evaluationsSite/Pages/Guidelines.aspx