



M&E FOR THE DISCRETIONARY GRANT

8



BACKGROUND

Discretionary Grants are used by South Africa's Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) to implement their Sector Skills Plans, to address scarce and critical skills in their sectors and to contribute to national developmental targets. According to the national Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), the grant should be used for

“occupational and professional programmes to support economic growth and development, encourage employment creation and enable social development”

In order to ensure that the distribution of the Discretionary Grant across this range of funding options is fair, transparent and cost effective, SETAs are required to develop a Discretionary Grants Policy and update it annually. This policy needs to set out how the activities funded by the Discretionary Grants will contribute to the achievement of the SETA Sector Skills Plans (SSPs) and Annual Performance Plans (APPs).

It is important that the use and impact of Discretionary Grants are carefully monitored and evaluated

given...

- The amount of money and other resources invested in the Discretionary Grant,
- The importance of the discretionary grant for achieving SETAs' objectives,
- The scope of initiatives that could be funded, and
- The diversity of institutions and beneficiaries eligible for discretionary funds.

The National Evaluation Policy Framework (South Africa. Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, 2011) and various guidelines have been produced to support the implementation of Discretionary Grants. As the NEPF notes “one of the ways of assuring quality, particularly when there is limited capacity, is to avoid reinventing tools” (ibid., 20). This draft M&E framework therefore incorporates different kinds of evaluation proposed by the NEPF and subsequent DPME guidelines. It is not the intention of this Discussion Brief to replicate this information. Rather we have sought to provide a framework that uses the various forms of evaluation to support processes of organisational learning and improved performance in relation to the Discretionary Grants.



INSIGHTS

There is a growing awareness within the SETAs of the need to enhance the alignment between the various planning and policy documents related to the SETA grants. In particular, a review of SETA grant funding policies revealed an emerging trend towards expressing and tracking strategy and implementation from the SSP, into the Strategic Plan and Annual Performance Plan, and then into the funding policies and procedures relevant to achieving the planned impact. In this process, the disbursement of discretionary funds is managed to achieve the intended goals and strategy across these documents.

This larger strategic goal of the discretionary funds is not always reflected in the monitoring and evaluation processes designed and implemented by the SETAs in relation to the Discretionary Grant. In a number of interactions with SETA staff, it became apparent that in many instances little more was done than monitor the financial transactions and numerical targets associated with a particular Discretionary Grant.

Where the monitoring and evaluation processes extend to a broader focus on strategy and impact, a number of insights were highlighted in various reports. It is noted, for example, that while the absorption of learners not previously employed completing apprenticeships, learnerships and internships is high, unemployment and skills shortages continue to rise. This raises questions related to the intended impact of these programmes as well as issues of scale when responding to very large systemic issues such as the economy's capacity to provide employment.

In addition to the ability of the economy to absorb beneficiaries of Discretionary Grants, the scale of provision of PIVOTAL skills is an important issue related to quality.

While both employers and trade unions agreed that skills development had contributed to improved productivity, reduced errors in the workplace and improved quality of product or service, a majority of employers still stated that skills development had not achieved what they hoped for in terms of improving the supply of needed skills.

This kind of tension or contradiction provides an important focus for monitoring and evaluation work in relation to the Discretionary Grants.

Other than core skills provision, the SETAs use the Discretionary Grants for an extremely wide variety of other activities that are considered important for achieving the objectives articulated in the Sector Skills Plans and other strategic documents. Challenges noted in various reviews include the integration of these activities both within and beyond individual SETAs, as well as a lack of data and the ability to compare data across SETAs. By way of example, while many SETAs produce career guides, evaluative data suggests that few people either know about, read, or make use of the guides. Part of the problem appears to be a lack of mechanisms for enabling and supporting use of guides through the Department of Basic Education into schools or through the DHET's National Career Advice Portal. In addition, the NSA have noted that there is little consistency on how SETAs report on their career guidance activities.

While many SETAs produce good career guides, it appears that few people either know about, read, or make use of the guides.

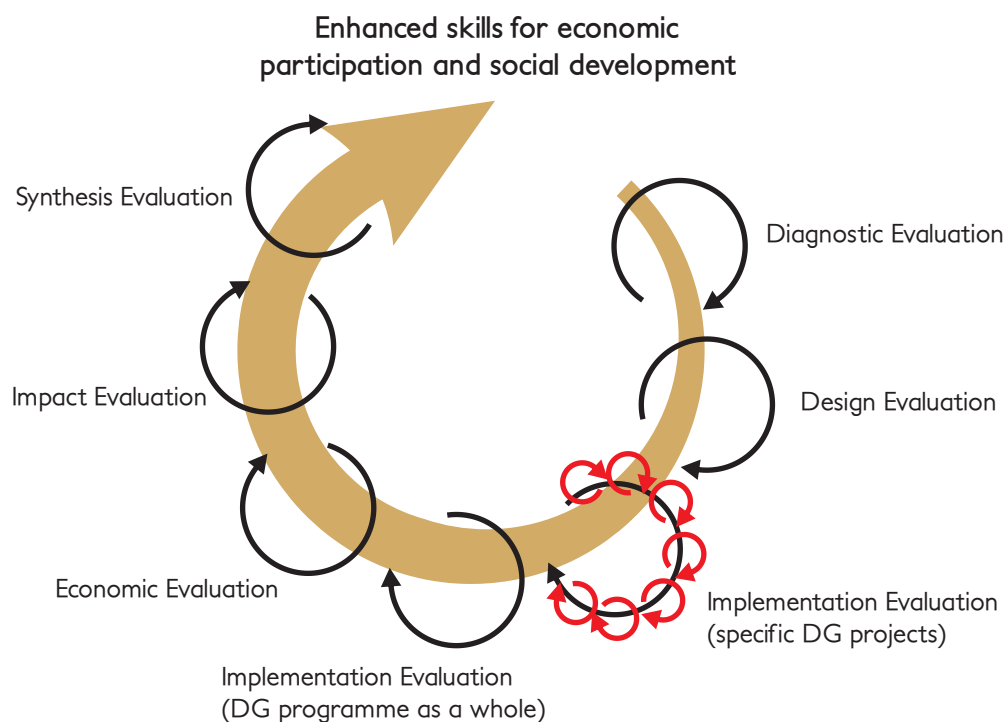


RECOMMENDATIONS

Working across these different dimensions of the Discretionary Grants (PIVOTAL and non-PIVOTAL), questions and contradictions arise that stimulate new approaches and have implications for the design, implementation and review of skills development initiatives. Addressing these questions and contradictions stimulates new practices and learning. In particular, we recommend exploring in greater detail how an expansive learning framework can link the forms of evaluation suggested in the National Evaluation Policy Framework into an expansive learning spiral. This expansive learning spiral will enhance the ability of SETAs and associated skills development partners to understand and respond to internal and external challenges and opportunities linked to the Discretionary Grants.

The expansive learning framework builds on a simple project cycle of analysis, design, implementation and evaluation/ review and uses it as the basis for a more sophisticated process of organisational learning within and across activity systems

A consolidated framework is shown in the diagram and expanded below.



- 1 Evaluate the alignment between the SSP, the SP and the APP, and from this, identify the monitoring indicators and expected outcomes in relation to the Discretionary Grant. (Diagnostic evaluation)
- 2 Evaluate the design logic of particular Discretionary Grant initiatives to ensure that the theory of change and logical framework match the monitoring indicators and expected outcomes/ impacts identified in step 1. (Design evaluation)
- 3 Conduct a formative implementation evaluation of individual initiatives based on the project design evaluated above. This needs to be done using a standardised implementation evaluation framework. (Implementation evaluation undertaken, for example by SETA programme staff)
- 4 Conduct a synthesis evaluation of the implementation evaluations. This can be done at the SETA level (i.e. internally) and across SETAs, e.g. by the NSA. (Synthesis evaluation)
- 5 The above synthesis evaluation could include considerations of summative implementation evaluations (at the outcome level) and economic evaluation.
- 6 Independent evaluators should be contracted in to work with SETA research and evaluation units to do impact evaluations that could be supported by the current work on Tracer Study Protocol and CBE tool being developed as part of the SETA M&E project.
- 7 The synthesis evaluations and the impact evaluations are summarised into accessible briefs that are used to inform the subsequent development of the SSPs.

DISCUSSION BRIEF QUESTIONS

1

Is the Discretionary Grant contributing to the achievement of the SSP, AP, SP in a coherent way or are other demands being made of the SETAs with regard to the focus of the Discretionary Grants?

2

How is the Discretionary Grant currently being monitored and evaluated, and what are the associated challenges? (Include data, processes, resources, focus, workflow, policy and framework alignment, among others.)

3

Does the current M&E of the Discretionary Grant support the building of a coherent and holistic picture of the contribution the grants are making to the achievement of the SSPs and the broader development objectives?

4

How are M&E findings on the Discretionary Grant currently being used to improve SETA effectiveness and impact?

5

How can realist evaluation be used to evaluate selected aspects of Discretionary Grant implementation more deeply?

6

How can an expansive learning – activity system approach to be used to evaluate selected Discretionary Grant implementation more deeply?

7

Given the above, how should the implementation of the Discretionary Grant be monitored?

8

How should the implementation of the Discretionary Grant be evaluated?



FURTHER READING

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

Ward, M. and Rosenberg, E. 2019. SETA M&E Project 6: Develop a Monitoring and Evaluation Framework for the Discretionary Grant: Scoping Report. Rhodes University, Grahamstown