Change Management in TVET Colleges

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chapter 5

PREPARING TVET COLLEGE GRADUATES FOR THE WORKPLACE
EMPLOYERS' VIEWS

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Introduction

Recent government policies, for example the White Paper on Post-School Education and Training of 2013, emphasise the need for public technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges to strengthen relationships with the workplace in order to improve learners' chances of obtaining both practical training experience and longer-term employment. The Institute for Post-School Studies, through its vocational studies arm, the Further Education and Training Institute (FETI), has, to date, conducted at least three studies concerning transitions of TVET college graduates into employment.

The first study (McGrath, Needham & Wedekind, 2010) theorises the concept of employability of college graduates and provides an important conceptual backdrop for the subsequent two empirical studies discussed. The second study, a research project conducted for the Department of Economic Development and Tourism in the Western Cape (FETI, 2013), investigated the training of artisans for Engineering industries, where qualified artisans were likely to find employment, and what prospective employers' views were on the preparedness of artisans for work. The third study was concerned with identifying employer needs with the intention of linking employers and TVET colleges in order to create pathways for students into employment opportunities. All three studies have yielded data that suggest how employment prospects of college graduates might be improved, particularly through curricular enhancements that make college graduates attractive to employers.

Research and scholarship in relation to the first two studies contributed towards the framing of the third, an applied research study which took the form of a project designed to facilitate employment opportunities for N6 college students. Employers in three fields of college provision were asked for their views on employability of college graduates within their respective sectors and what they require of entry-level employees. Armed with this information, the project developed a 'work readiness programme' which college graduates participated in just prior to their work placements. Students were midway through their placements at the time of writing, but some indicative feedback from employers and students on the work experience was available and we report on this later.

This chapter consolidates the learnings of these three research projects and presents the employer's perspective with reference to expectations regarding the skills of college graduates entering into three areas in which colleges have traditionally offered training programmes, namely the Tourism and Hospitality, the Engineering, and the Wholesale and Retail industries. The chapter begins with a literature review on TVET college training for work and goes on to describe the project in more detail.

Views from the literature

This overview of the literature relating to TVET colleges' preparation of graduates for finding and retaining employment is organised into three sections that relate to each of the three studies mentioned above. The first section deals with theorising employability, the second with the preparation of Engineering artisans, and the third with curriculum enhancement towards improving employability.

What is employability?

In a comparative study of understandings of employability in the South African and United Kingdom (UK) contexts, McGrath *et al* (2010) critique reductionist notions of employability that focus narrowly on skills required by employers, noting also the personal and economic circumstances that impact on the availability and take-up of employment opportunities. The literature reviewed in the study contributes substantively to widening the debate on what constitutes employability, particularly in the TVET sector. The authors (McGrath *et al*, 2010: 6) cite Hillage and Pollard's (1988) concept (albeit contested) of employability:

> [E]mployability is understood as an individual's ability to gain initial employment, maintain employment, move between roles within the same organisation, obtain new employment if required and (ideally) secure suitable and sufficiently fulfilling work. (McGrath et al, 2010: 6)

Although much of the argument made in regard to economic factors that inhibit employment is still valid at the present time, it may be argued that the current policy environment offers greater potential for partnerships that enable employment of college graduates. This change has been brought about by the formation of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), within which both education providers and Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) reside, together with the associated skills funding mechanisms. Statements emanating from the office of the Minister have strongly urged employers, SETAs, and colleges to work together to create on-the-job learning spaces for TVET students in order to improve youth employment prospects and thereby contribute to the economic upliftment of communities.

A number of other writers have sought to develop typologies of employability (see Hillage & Pollard, 1998; De Grip, Van Loo & Sanders, 2004; Fugate, Kinicki & Ashforth, 2004). For the purposes of our discussion, we use the model proposed by McQuaid and Lindsay (2005), as the 'factors of employability' they identified resonate with the studies we examine in this chapter. More specifically, the emphasis on personal skills and competencies as factors which influence employability is echoed in the empirical work undertaken by us in this regard. The following 'individual' factors, or elements of 'education for employability', are extracted from McQuaid and Lindsay's (2005: 209–210) table. Limitations in the scope of this chapter prevent us from setting out the full extent of the model, but the skills and attributes listed below are mirrored in the data gathered from employers in our research some years later. McQuaid and Lindsay (2005: 209–2010) mention the following (employability) skills and attributes, inter alia:

- **Basic social skills:** honesty and integrity; basic personal presentation; reliability; willingness to work; understanding of actions and consequences; positive attitude to work; responsibility; self-discipline.
- **Personal competencies:** proactivity; diligence; self-motivation; judgement; initiative; assertiveness; confidence; act autonomously.

- **Basic transferable skills:** prose and document literacy; writing; numeracy; verbal presentation.
- **Key transferable skills:** reasoning; problem solving; basic information and communications technology (ICT) skills; basic interpersonal and communication skills; emotional and aesthetic customer service skills.

In addition, the model refers to formal and job-specific qualifications that are necessary, as well as a range of 'job seeking' skills, all of which were corroborated during our interviews with local employers. The next section looks more closely at conditions that improve employability prospects, particularly for artisans in the Engineering industries.

Preparing artisans for the workplace

In the Engineering industries, artisan training has historically been by way of apprenticeships based on the official National Accredited Technical Education Diploma (NATED) programmes of the Department of Higher Education and Training. Since 2007, with the introduction of the National Certificate Vocational (NCV), attempts have been made to map this new and very different curriculum structure onto the artisan preparation pathway. This has been a protracted and difficult process. We found that Engineering industry employers appear to be more familiar with the traditional artisan development route through the NATED programmes, and their impressions of college training are based largely on their experience of NATED graduates and on personal experience of having come that route themselves.

Our research delved into the comparative literature on good practices in Engineering training, and we now highlight some of the discernible themes and meta-analyses that have been published pertaining to artisan/apprenticeship training in TVET colleges (Field *et al*, 2009; Rauner *et al,* 2012; Steedman, 2012).

Cooperation and partnership

Steedman (2012), in examining lessons learnt and the conditions necessary for the development of apprenticeships, argues that a vital dimension of successful apprenticeships is that there are good partnerships between the workplace, education providers, the state, and other social partners (e.g. trade unions and employer bodies). It is well understood in the literature that this kind of cooperation is a hallmark of the dual system in Germany and Switzerland (Field *et al*, 2009; Hoeckel, Field & Grubb, 2009; Hoeckel & Schwartz, 2010; Pilz, 2007). Rauner *et al* (2012) argue that the successful establishment of a dual TVET system depends on certain prerequisites being fulfilled. One of these requirements is leadership from government, both local and national, in facilitating partnerships which bring together the relevant role-players and promoting the dissemination of information to all the parties involved (Steedman, 2012: 8, 11):

> *For well over a century now, governments in apprenticeship countries such as Austria, Germany and Switzerland have sought to rebalance the potentially*

unequal relationship between employer and apprentice by legislation which gives the apprentice a legal status and the right to acquire general transferable education and skills alongside more firm-specific skills in apprenticeship. Having insisted on this right, government also pays for this component of apprenticeship thereby becoming a major player in the apprenticeship bargain.

and

Apprenticeship is strongest in countries where both employer and employee representative organisations wholeheartedly support and promote apprenticeship and the conditions necessary for its success. Ongoing social dialogue is the necessary prerequisite for this commitment.

Quality training provision

Quality training – on and off the job – is a cornerstone of good apprenticeship systems (Field *et al*, 2009; Rauner *et al*, 2012; Steedman, 2012). Among other key features, apprenticeships need to be geared to produce high-quality, adaptable, and independent apprentices with robust work identities, and the system needs to be cost- and time-efficient. In this regard, vocational teachers, trainers, and assessors should be well trained, and countries should offer trainer certification (Hoeckel *et al*, 2009; Steedman, 2012). Apprenticeship programmes usually require the apprentice to spend part of his/her time learning off the job in a publicly funded vocational college. Other options are to provide the technical and knowledge elements in the workplace using electronic media. In Australia, in addition to publicly funded colleges, private training providers provide off-the-job training for apprentices and are paid from public funds. Field *et al* (2009) argue that quality control must be carefully applied to apprentice training to ensure that the employers involved deliver on their training responsibilities. At the same time, the quality requirements should not be so demanding as to inhibit employer participation.

Curriculum development

A related matter is the availability of strong and current curricula for quality apprenticeships (Field *et al*, 2009). Rauner *et al* (2012) argue that the curriculum should be derived from the professional work tasks the apprentice will be required to perform, should be developmental in nature, and should form the base of the vocational learning processes in both the enterprise and the vocational school.

Allowing employers to lead curriculum development can be important, as employers know what is needed in particular fields. Hoeckel *et al* (2009) found that Swiss employers had a direct influence on every aspect of apprenticeship – from curriculum content to recruitment, qualifications, and assessment. However, according to Field *et al* (2009), employers may underestimate the generic skills needed for mobility. The strength of the German system in ensuring that short-term benefits do not outweigh educational goals could well be emulated.

Continuous versus sequential training and the need to allow for flexibility

Field *et al* (2009) note that the classic dual apprenticeship training approach involves one or two days of schooling in the TVET institution and three or four days of training and working in the company throughout the three or four years of apprenticeship training. Some occupations demand substantial theoretical and practical training before an apprentice is able to do meaningful work. In such situations, it may be that apprentices need to spend long periods (months, or even up to two years) in a TVET institution or in specialised training centres before working in a company. When prior theoretical knowledge has to be acquired over a long period before the apprentice is able to do meaningful work, and the benefits to the company are slower to materialise, it may be useful for prior practical training to take place in TVET institutions. Alternatively, training organised by a group of companies could be more cost-effective. Most effective systems offer firms the flexibility to choose the system best adapted to their needs. Flexibility regarding the duration of the apprenticeship training is important for both employers and apprentices: flexibility helps ensure that apprentices reach their training objectives, and that the costs and benefits of the training to employers will be in balance (Field *et al*, 2009).

Incentivising employers to offer apprenticeships

A key feature of the German and Swiss systems in particular is the high degree of ownership and engagement by employers. Dif *et al* (2012) note that while employers are fundamental to the success of apprenticeship training, they do not always feel their needs are fully understood. Steedman (2012: 6) goes so far as to argue that incentivising employers 'is the most fundamental requirement of a successful apprenticeship system'. Finegold and Wagner (2002) argue that 'it may be difficult to establish an apprenticeship system where one does not already exist, or even to maintain a successful system if the content of the training and the balancing of the costs are not continually updated to ensure they remain attractive to employers' (Finegold & Wagner, 2002: 683).

The incentive for employers to provide apprenticeship places depends on the benefits employers expect to gain and the costs they expect to accrue. Wolter and Ryan (2011) note that employers may be reluctant to offer apprenticeship places if they anticipate a net cost to themselves. On the other hand, as these authors point out, employers can gain both a production benefit (from apprentices doing productive work) and a recruitment benefit (from being able to identify good potential employees). There are two kinds of apprenticeship costs to employers: firstly, apprentice wages; secondly, the resource costs of training (including teaching materials, the time of experienced employees, mistakes by inexperienced apprentices and wasted resources, remuneration of training staff, and administrative costs). The costs of apprenticeships depend on the quality of the training provided, whether special training is provided to supervisors of apprentices, whether supervisors are granted some additional status and remuneration to reflect their role, and so on. Securing trainers who are experienced, knowledgeable, and eager to teach may require companies to invest in wages to make training positions attractive to highly experienced workers (Field *et al*, 2009).

Steedman (2012: 6) argues that for successful apprenticeship training employers need:

- as little bureaucracy as is compatible with good administration;
- good information and ongoing support from a local organisation/college;
- the right set of incentives to balance costs and benefits; and
- young, well-motivated applicants with a good level of general education.

Flexible pathways

Apprenticeship systems should strive to allow for the mobility of apprentices and the opening up of potential career paths. Fuller and Unwin (2007) argue that progression of apprentices is facilitated by access to underpinning knowledge and the workplace curriculum (the mapping of knowledge, skills, and tasks to be learnt). Further, apprenticeships should afford opportunities for participation (providing breadth and depth), teaching, and learning. Resulting qualifications should be fit for purpose, recognised by higher education institutions and professional bodies, and linked to professional qualification pathways. In companies, employees responsible for apprentices' progress should be designated. Lastly, clear post-apprenticeship pathways and career development should be set out.

Integration of education and training

Field *et al* (2009) summarise good-quality workplace training as:

- Providing a strong learning environment for both hard and soft skills;
- Improving the transition from school to work by allowing employers and potential employees to get to know each other;
- Contributing to output; and
- Linking the provision of training to real labour market needs.

They add that it is

> complemented by other education and training, since some skills are more effectively taught off the job and workplace training may not always be available because of regional economic weaknesses or economic downturns. (Field et al, 2009: 79)

Conclusion

The foregoing literature review sketches the largely international knowledge base on what enables successful transition by vocational college students into employment. Whilst conditions for good quality training are largely in the context of training that takes place 'on the job', the conditions identified are also instructive for good-quality pre-employment training, and the project we proceed to describe below, aimed at students still in college, incorporated some of these principles.

Views from the ground: An applied research project

Given the learnings gleaned from the comparative literature and from desktop research, we now turn to the third study referred to in this chapter – an applied research project which solicited local employers' views on the training provided by TVET colleges and used this input to enhance current college programmes. The intention of the research was ultimately to enable college graduate transitions into workplaces and to create sustainable pathways into work for college students.[23]

A reference group comprising provincial education department curriculum officials as well as SETA representatives advised on college curricula as well as sector-related issues, while a specialist college working group brought student support services members into a forum to advise on implementation. It was recommended by the reference group that NATED N6 students be targeted as recipients of the project, as these students are required to obtain internships as a compulsory component of their qualification. In addition, the N6 programme was considered a more flexible option for curriculum enhancement in comparison with the tightly structured and relatively crowded NCV programme which leaves little room for curriculum adjustments to be made.

With the assistance of the relevant SETA, 10 employers per industry sector were identified for in-depth interviews which interrogated the potential capacity of each company to employ new college graduates, as well as the criteria, attributes, skills, and knowledge that the company considered necessary for entry-level employment. In the Engineering sector, 11 companies suggested by the Manufacturing, Engineering and Related Services SETA (merSETA), including two automotive companies, seven manufacturing companies, and the electrical department of a municipality, were inter-viewed. In the Wholesale and Retail sector, four of the companies interviewed were large food/grocery retailers, three were medium-sized fashion retail stores, two were suppliers in building and construction, and one was a media company. In the hospitality sector, 10 organisations were identified, seven of which were hotels and three of which were other industry-related organisations and forums.

Employers in the Engineering sector

Engineering firms interviewed said they require new entrants to have a range of practical, academic, and attitudinal skills in order to be employable, and expect the formal college syllabus to cover the basic academic and practical training needed. Some companies reported using psychometric testing, including assessments of diagnostic skills and motor coordination/dexterity skills, to assess new entrants.

Regarding practical skills, companies were concerned that the NCV does not provide students with sufficient practice, and one large company in particular mentioned that students frequently fail internal tests set by the employer as part of the employment interview. Similar concerns were raised about students who had NATED theoretical qualifications, although it was noted that some of these students had acquired workshop

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hand-tool skills as part of their college training. Engineering firms view students with college training in practical skills as more employable, since this means 'less work for the company to do'. An additional concern is new employees' exposure to health and safety procedures within Engineering workshops, as well as their experience of working in a workshop environment. One of the firms interviewed felt that students should be able to apply at least 30% of their practical skills to working with workplace machinery. Additional concerns related to the current negative economic environment: since companies are forced to adopt leaner, 'just-in-time' manufacturing approaches, they need students who are reasonably 'work ready'.

Relevant Mathematics and Science knowledge is considered to be a prerequisite underpinning an apprentice or trainee's ability to work in the Engineering sector, specifically in relation to reading and understanding Engineering drawings and specifications. While trainees' knowledge of trigonometry and Pythagorian principles is often found to be lacking, companies indicated that they are unwilling to provide training in mathematical and scientific concepts that they feel should be covered by colleges. New employees embarking on an artisan pathway are also expected to have passed Mathematics, Science, and English at Grade 12 level and have an N3 or N4 qualification. In addition, they are expected to have ICT, electronic communication, and administrative skills. A number of Engineering firms stressed the need for employees to be able to invoice accurately and perform basic administrative functions within the firm.

Companies were vocal on the need for broader cross-cutting skills which fall outside the ambit of the formal curriculum, for example the capacity to think logically in order to interpret and develop appropriate solutions and the ability to read, write, and converse in English. Communication skills were also identified as important, particularly the ability to communicate with a team and individually with peers, mentors and clients. In this regard, a number of firms feel that younger employees often do not show sufficient respect to older, more experienced employees. A few Engineering firms reported holding regular diversity workshops to encourage greater communication and respect within their workforces.

In addition, all of the firms mentioned attitudinal skills as a key factor for employability. Potential employees are expected to show a commitment to learning, and not assume that they have sufficient knowledge for the job on entry. One employer challenged college students' attitudes as follows:

> *The attitude of 'I know everything' must cease – we also have the challenge of dealing with students who feel that 'I deserve more money' – many of these students do not want to start at the bottom.*

It was noted by one company that apprenticeships in the Engineering sector remain 'old fashioned', and that issues of 'respect, neatness, presentation and punctuality' are still very important. Honesty was cited as an important ethic, as well as having sufficient humility to admit to making a mistake. An auto manufacturing employer stated that new employees should demonstrate a passion for the work they are involved in, and that the company preferred an employee with obvious passion to a graduate with better qualifications.

Discipline, punctuality and ethics were stressed as desirable attributes by most of the Engineering firms interviewed. A few companies stated that they need to instruct new employees on mobile phone etiquette, cleanliness of the workstation, and being more environmentally aware. A number of employers asked that career guidance be built into college curricula, as they often received applications from graduates who have little idea of or interest in the specific Engineering job applied for.

Overall, the employers interviewed were concerned that cross-cutting and attitudinal skills critical to maintaining a job and being successful in the workplace are seen as less important than academic and practical training. Companies were not aware of students being prepared in these aspects and asked that colleges address this shortcoming.

Placement prospects

Engineering firms interviewed were asked whether they would be willing to participate in a project to place N6-level college graduates. Most companies were cautious about committing to placement, but did not object in principle, being more concerned about paying stipends which they might not have budgeted for or be able to afford.

Furthermore, companies said they could not commit to employing a particular number of students, as the number they could afford to employ depends on the business cycle; companies indicated they would rather commit to internships than promise direct employment. Graduates would need to 'prove themselves' and would have to follow the companies' internship programmes. The placement process is linked to 'filling the gaps' left in companies as people exited the system.

Respondents stated that there needs to be closer relationships between industry and the colleges regarding work placement, and that companies should be involved sooner rather than later in the process. It was suggested that prospective interns be exposed to companies before being placed to gain an understanding of the rigours of the job and be enabled to make an informed decision about accepting a placement.

Employers in the Tourism and Hospitality sector

Hospitality firms, being located within the Services industry, placed significant emphasis on the need for attitudinal skills, although respondents indicated that foundational academic qualifications and specific occupational qualifications are also necessary to access employment in this sector. Companies added that while practical skills are valued, they are not a prerequisite, as skills are taught on the job on an ongoing basis.

Hotels, as well as the in-house Hospitality training providers interviewed, confirmed that a matriculation certificate is generally seen as a minimum qualification for entrance into the Hospitality sector; however, entrance requirements are not rigidly applied across the industry. An in-house training provider for a chain of hotels said students with Grade 10 and Grade 12 qualifications would be accepted, but would be channelled into specific occupations within the sector that may have limited career mobility. Hotels specified a range of qualifications necessary for career progression, most notably diplomas and degrees for management staff. There are also specific require-ments for entry into particular fields, such as having a Diploma in Professional Cookery in order to be trained as a chef. The NCV is recognised within the Hospitality industry

as a matriculation equivalent, albeit not well known or understood, and NATED courses also carry recognition within this sector. A few hotels noted the need for candidates to speak English fluently and to have excellent communication skills. Although many hotels recruit graduates from hotel schools that offered post-matric qualifications, TVET colleges are also seen as a source of potential employees.

Despite the requirement for formal qualifications, the hospitality industry allows employment and progression without formal qualifications based on years of experience within the industry. Most employees are appointed in entry-level positions and are expected to work their way upwards over a period of years. Employers view lifelong learning as a necessity for progression.

Additional skills identified as desirable are knowledge of ICT programs that are specific to the Hospitality industry, as well as of standard computer packages such as MS Office. Students are also required to have a general basic understanding of business processes and principles such as budgeting and management systems.

Employers place great value on attitudinal skills, as can be seen from the following comments:

- 'Give me someone with the right attitude – the rest I can teach.'
- 'Attitude is critical in this industry.'
- 'We employ personalities, the skill can be trained.'
- 'A skill can be taught, attitude cannot.'

A number of hotels noted that students, particularly those from TVET colleges, appear to lack job-seeking skills. For example, students' CVs are often of poor quality; students present themselves inappropriately; and students are unable to demonstrate their knowledge of or passion for the industry during interviews. Regarding career guidance, some students appear to be misinformed about the nature of work in the Hospitality industry, which involves long hours and shift work.

Hotels stressed the need for students to see job placement as an expanded job interview, as illustrated in the following comment:

> If students stay and work for six months, they are more employable as the hotel gets a better sense of them by working with them.

According to some hoteliers, some students appear not to take practical placements seriously, and this has a serious impact on the hotel and its staff. Nonchalant attitudes on the part of the students, it was said, create a negative impression of the college and jeopardise future placement prospects. A respondent cited examples of student absentee-ism and latecoming, which resulted in two people having to do the job of three. She feels that students need a sense of responsibility towards and ownership of their training to the extent that they adjust their lifestyles according to the priorities of the job.

Numerous references were made to the need for students to behave professionally in the workplace, including adhering to a dress code and behaving appropriately in front of guests. One employer noted that increasingly hotel guests look for a positive experience

at a hotel over and above 'mod cons and facilities'. Mobile phone etiquette was also cited by hotel employers as a critical behaviour to be addressed in training.

Hotel employers noted that students entering the industry need to be flexible in terms of time frames as well as towards job rotation. Students have to be prepared to start at entry level and maintain a positive attitude while experiencing all aspects of this industry. Concerns were raised that some students feel that certain jobs are 'beneath them' and do not have a strong customer service ethic.

The ability to take initiative and to follow through on instructions are seen as key attributes of 'working independently' by a number of hotel spokespersons, who said that these qualities would increase a candidate's employability and the chances of promotion. In addition, new entrants should be 'people-centred, motivated, and have a vibrant personality'.

Ultimately respondents stressed that what they are looking for in a recruit is the 'right attitude'; the rest, they said, they could teach.

Placement prospects

Respondents in the Hospitality industry noted that the availability of placements is dependent on the market cycle and that timing is important since the industry is seasonal – winter being a 'slow' season and summer the peak season during which demand increases. While unable to commit to providing a fixed number of placements, respondents said graduates have to prove their worth, and selections would be made according to set criteria. Suitable candidates would have to follow in-house internship programmes.

When asked what would enhance the work readiness of college students, respondents stated students should have the right attitude and understand the rigours of Hospitality work. Many graduates expect to start in a management position, whereas they should understand that promotion is on the basis of hard work, innovation, and demonstrated willingness, and that in the hotel industry it takes about 10 years to reap the rewards of promotion.

Employers in the Wholesale and Retail sector

The Wholesale and Retail industry is a wide-ranging domain which comprises a vast range of work contexts, from fashion and grocery stores to call centres, pharmacies, bookshops and so on. Accordingly, qualifications for employment in the Wholesale and Retail sector span a number of skills areas and are classified according to the Organising Framework for Occupations (OFO) codes, for example, NQF Level 2 (Grade 10) qualifications for meat cutters, NQF Level 3 qualifications for bakers, and postgraduate qualifications for trainee managers. Large Wholesale and Retail employers generally require entry-level employees to have a matriculation certificate or an equivalent qualification. Unit standards based qualifications provided in a learnership model are widely used within this sector.

A leading retail employer noted, similarly to the Engineering sector respondent cited previously, that most jobs in this sector require a minimum of a Grade 12 certificate with a 50% pass in the company's English proficiency test. Many employers in this sector

offer their own-in-house training programmes, one of which progresses to a Master of Business Administration (MBA) programme. While retail qualifications are not widely offered at public TVET colleges, universities of technology offer programmes resulting in high employment rates for their graduates. An industry trainer noted that TVET college students with a Business Administration qualification struggle in the Wholesale and Retail sector as this qualification does not offer any specific retail focus. Additionally, employers require new entrants to have ICT skills and be proficient in the use of computers.

A sound understanding of English is seen as an important competence for this industry, while practical experience is a key factor affecting employability. Being in the services sector, employers in this industry also place strong emphasis on attitudinal skills. Desirable attributes mentioned include, inter alia, 'professionalism', 'good communications', 'interaction with customers', 'solutions focused', 'time management', 'conflict management', and 'problem solving skills'. Self-discipline and self-management are also viewed as important personal qualities.

At least two companies mentioned that prospective employees should show evidence of casual work experience in the retail sector, and suggested that retailers could cooperate with colleges by offering students company specific training during vacations. A fashion retailer suggested that simulated exercises – for example 'mock' presentations and interactions to demonstrate how employees should conduct themselves – are useful in job preparation for the sector.

Placement prospects

Wholesale and Retail companies indicated that they are willing to place students, but want to be actively involved in the selection process. One respondent noted that at the time of the interview the company had about 20 vacancies and usually employed five to 10 new entrants per year as trainee managers. Respondents from larger retail companies indicated that a store which employs four managers would employ between 50 and 100 staff members, and that each new store opened creates around 100 jobs.

Large retailers who operate call centres are able to offer a relatively large number of positions per year, although graduates might not have envisaged working in a call centre.

It was recommended that companies should be part of the selection process to avoid potential problems arising, and that partnerships in this process are critical. A large fashion retailer said that they employ mostly the local university of technology students because these students had undergone a cooperative learning programme and are therefore 'work ready'. The respondent suggested that colleges adopt a similar programme and mentioned examples of work readiness programmes in other contexts for comparative purposes.

Conclusions from the data

The data collected provides critical insights into the perceptions and requirements of employers in three areas of industry as to what constitutes employability in their respective sectors.

Generally, respondents acknowledged that students are being taught the technical skills in their college courses and largely possess sufficient basic knowledge and skills

together with some practical training. Employers feel that some form of 'work preparation' is essential to cover the 'softer' skills not overtly taught and/or practised, and that graduates, in spite of their technical training, have to be 'schooled' in knowledge and understanding of the workplace. Employers do expect, however, a host of 'attitudinal' and other generic skills to be in place.

Skills and attributes

An analysis of the data produced an extensive list of skills and attributes required by employers, and the frequency with which each skill or attribute was mentioned was tallied in order to discern trends and themes. The list is presented below.

- Basic theoretical and practical knowledge;
- Communication skills;
- Computer skills;
- Customer service skills;
- Ability to take initiative;
- An 'ethic' of hard work;
- Self-management skills;
- Willingness to learn;
- Being presentable or well groomed;
- Telephone (mobile phone) etiquette;
- A positive attitude;
- Professionalism;
- Interviewing skills;
- Punctuality;
- Resilience to cope with long hours;
- Respectfulness;
- Teamwork skills;
- Truthfulness/ethics;
- Accountability/taking responsibility; and
- Discipline.

N6 college curricula and cross-cutting/attitudinal skills

The N6 courses in the Engineering (N6 Engineering Studies), Wholesale and Retail (N6 Business Management, N6 Financial Management, N6 Human Resource Management, and N6 Management Assistant), and Hospitality (N6 Hospitality and Catering Services) industries were examined and discussed by the working group to probe whether the skills and attributes identified by employers as 'necessary' skills are being covered in the college programmes.

Although elements of the necessary skills described by respondents were found to exist across the N4–N6 courses in the NATED syllabus, and lecturers are addressing those skills in various ways, the N6 courses do not specifically focus on those skills, nor are the skills covered in any systematic way during students' preparation for the workplace. College personnel said that while some skills might be addressed at levels

below N6, students tend to pay little attention to learning these skills. Core subjects[24] focus on the technical skills required in a particular field. In sum, college experts reported that across colleges the skills identified by employers are dealt with in diverse ways and with varying degrees of emphasis.

College staff in the working group (a smaller group of college staff actually working with the students) agreed with the sentiments expressed by employers – that cross-cutting skills might be better dealt with in a focused, targeted, work-preparation programme that should be delivered just prior to N6 students leaving the colleges to seek practical placements for the completion of their qualifications. This practice would prepare students for the workplace and encourage them to see the preparation programme as relevant and timely.

A work readiness programme for college graduates

The data on what companies require of new entrants were matched with the current N6 curricula to ascertain whether the college programmes equip students with the skills, knowledge and attributes required by the companies. In addition, the project team examined the composition of programmes with a similar emphasis offered by other service providers, as well as 'soft skills' courses offered at the colleges.

The analysis revealed learning 'gaps' in the college curricula, and this information was used as a basis for designing a work readiness programme together with a comprehensive set of supporting materials. The list of required skills and attributes identified by the employers in each of the three sectors was categorised in terms of five thematic areas: Professionalism; Communication; Understanding the Workplace; Values and Ethics; and Application of College Learning to the Workplace. These were incorporated into the 'curriculum enhancement' programme. College graduates need training in:

- Being professional;
- Communication skills;
- Understanding the workplace;
- Values and ethics; and
- Application of college learning to the workplace.

As employers across the three sectors identified similar types of skills, it was agreed that a generic set of materials would be developed and would be contextualised for specific situations. The materials developed for the programme are interactive and activity-based. Reference and working group members were consulted throughout the curriculum development process. Input and feedback from learners was considered during the materials development process, and industry role-players were also invited to comment. Their responses were built into subsequent iterations of the materials. In addition, college facilitators were briefed and given the opportunity to provide feedback on the basis of which further adjustments to the programme were made.

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24 Core subjects are the four subjects specific to the particular NATED programme and relevant to the occupational area.

The programme was delivered to N6 students at three large colleges during the subsequent recess period.

Programme delivery and work placements

The final curriculum enhancement programme is a short course comprising five modules (based on the five thematic areas identified) to be taken by students just prior to being assigned to workplaces as interns and includes two structured (i.e. planned) visits to industry for purposes of student reflection.

To secure internships, employers are encouraged to participate in the college selection procedures. Students are required to sign learning agreements with their colleges and are monitored for the duration of their work placements by college personnel who conduct workplace visits. A stumbling block that emerged was the issue of the payment of stipends to the interns. Employers had not budgeted for these payments and did not necessarily have funds to cover them. SETA representatives encouraged employers to access PIVOTAL[25] grants, but in view of possible administrative delays, it was decided to make project funds available to enable students to take up their internships. This financial support proved invaluable in enabling the project to roll out according to plan.

Outcomes

A major outcome of the project was the interaction that took place between employers and colleges, assisted by SETAs, and the demonstrated understanding and appreciation of the roles played by each of the parties. At the time of writing, at least 60 N6 students had been in work placements for about six months with various employers. The students were being monitored and mentored by college personnel. Follow-up data gathered from both students and employers indicate that:

- Employers appreciate the fact their expressed needs were taken seriously by the colleges. Colleges demonstrated this by incorporating the skills perceived to be lacking into a focused work readiness programme that students could undertake prior to placement.
- Employers, when asked about their experience of the students placed, reported that they were pleasantly surprised by the awareness displayed by students with regard to, inter alia, time on task, punctuality, and a generally positive attitude.
- Students valued the targeted work readiness skills they were exposed to, and mentioned particularly the role-plays during the programme that gave them advance insight into what they might expect on the job. They also valued introductory visits to the companies which meant that students did not arrive 'cold' on their first day of placement.

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25 The PIVOTAL grant refers to the 80% of SETA discretionary funds that should be directed at PIVOTAL (Professional, Vocational, Technical and Academic Learning) programmes.

While these are relatively early findings, the indications are positive and reassuring and accord well with the literature on employability skills and good training practices. More comprehensive feedback towards the end of the project will be gathered for a final research report that will contribute substantively to our empirical knowledge base on institution-to-work transitions of TVET college graduates.

Conclusion

This chapter has brought together three research initiatives conducted for purposes of understanding and facilitating college-to-work transitions of TVET college graduates. First, the study undertaken by McGrath *et al* (2010) laid an important basis for theorising aspects of employability, especially as cited in the model by McQuaid and Lindsay (2005). Next, the focus on artisan training set out valuable 'good practices' in comparative contexts in respect of the conditions needed for successful training for and in the workplace (on and off the job) that are instructive for pre-employment training as well. Third, the curriculum enhancement of current college training programmes initiated by a donor funded project which focused on facilitating work placements for TVET college graduates was detailed. The applied research project enabled the voices of local employers to be heard, pointing to perceived gaps in college training and suggesting the need for curricula that take account of specific workplace requirements.

Acknowledgement

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