



Rhodes University Research Chair Partnership Initiative for

M&E in a SETA Environment

Project 5: Tracer Study Protocol

Contract # 475.4710.644

End Project Report

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BANKSETA



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1. Executive Summary

This close-out report refers to Project 5 of the Rhodes University SETA Research Partnership Initiative. The Initiative addressed Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) in a SETA Environment. Project 5 aimed to develop and test a research protocol for conducting a coordinated SETA-wide tracer study of workplace-based learning (WBL completers). More specifically, the purpose was to:

- Propose and test a methodology to identify how well SETA WBL programmes are linked with the South African labour market and to measure which completers are more (less) likely to find employment and which programmes have the highest (lowest) rates of success;
- Identify the weaknesses in the current monitoring and evaluation approach to identifying the employment outcomes of WBPL programmes;
- Outline the best approach to adopt in order to implement a uniform and sustainable research methodology across the 21 SETAs;
- Share the research findings and methodological lessons with wider audiences.

This Research Partnership Initiative was an opportunity to co-develop a coordinated, implementable research protocol for SETAs to use when tracking the outcomes of WBL programmes. Since SETAs already have research capacity, the focus of this project was on the capacity of SETAs to undertake a coordinated study which can be used to provide data across all SETA WBL programmes.

Project 5 succeeded in deriving a common sample frame for WBL programmes across SETAs; implementing a standardised service provider procurement template; designing and implementing uniform research instruments and sampling protocols; collating and collecting data on WBL outcomes across a number of different SETAs; designing a common reporting template across SETAs; engaging with SETA researchers through presentations to the Collaborative Research Working Group; and completing a synthesis research support which, for the first time, provides cross-SETA research findings on the link between WBL programmes and the labour market.

In addition to engagement with the regular meetings of the Collaborative Research Working Group, some of the methodological lessons from the project were communicated to a wider group of stakeholders at a DHET Research Forum meeting in November 2019. Further dissemination and engagement plans include both the National Skills Conference and contributions to the *SETA Monitor* and the *DHET Research Bulletin*.

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2. Objectives Achieved

Objective	Achieved
Propose and test a methodology to identify how well SETA WBL programmes are linked with the South African labour market	A full research and sampling protocol was provided to all 21 SETAs and then tested with a number of participating SETAs.
Identify the weaknesses in the current monitoring and evaluation approach to identifying the employment outcomes of WBPL programmes	The final project report identifies a number of administrative data weaknesses, in particular, which limit the ability to conduct M&E effectively. Some limitations with the current approach to measuring WBL outcomes are also outlined in the project report.
Outline the best approach to adopt in order to implement a uniform and sustainable research methodology across the 21 SETAs	The final project report provides a number of recommendations for the improvement and alignment of SETA WBL data platforms and recommends a centralised and coordinated approach to capturing and analysing data on WBL outcomes.
Share the research findings and methodological lessons with wider audiences	Initial findings and key methodological lessons have been shared with stakeholders (e.g. the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations) through the regular DHET Research Forum meeting and through the <i>DHET Research Bulletin</i> .

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3. Performance against Plan

Stage of Research	Activities	Outputs/ Deliverables	Planned Timeframe		Performance
			Start	Finish	
1	Data compilation	Final population dataset	24 May 2018	1 September 2018	Delayed until January 2019 due to precautions over the POPI Act and the limited availability of SETMIS.
2	Inception	Master Research Project Plan	10 July 2018	23 July 2018	Master Research Project Plan accepted.
3	Research design	Scoping report	24 May 2018	1 September 2018	Delayed until January 2019 due to the delays in access to the SETMIS database. Report submitted on February 18, 2019 and accepted.
4	Research design	Research tools and report template	24 May 2018	1 September 2018	Delayed until June 10, 2019. Full research design and set of tools only submitted once the population dataset was available and once SETAs had confirmed participation.
5	Analysis & reporting	Synthesis report	1 April 2019	1 June 2019	Requested a three month extension from the initial project end date (March 2020) due to the slow pace of SETA participation and then submitted on 7 May 2020
6	Reporting	Close out report	1 June 2019	1 December 2019	Requested a three month extension and submitted mid- May 2020

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4. Changes and Their Impact

The limited participation by SETAs in the BankSETA/Rhodes WBL tracer study has obviously had a large impact on the quality of the research findings. Nonetheless, the process of initiating a coordinated SETA-wide WBL tracer study has impacted on the way in which tracer study research is conducted in a SETA environment. Even where SETAs did not participate, on formal basis, in the study, the dissemination of a set of standard research instrument and protocols has improved the comparability of individual SETA tracer studies. A number of SETA research teams used the standardised instruments to conduct their own research while a number of other studies have planned to use the BankSETA/Rhodes research instruments in the current financial year.

Similarly, since this was the first attempt to coordinate a 'national' SETA tracer study, there has been an important impact on the way in which administrative WBL datasets are being captured and managed by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). The main data management platform- the Sector Education and Training Management Information System (SETMIS) has improved since the inception of the project and DHET data managers now work closely with researchers in the capture and extraction of SETA data. At the SETA level, the importance of capturing WBL participant data in a more uniform and comprehensive way was a lesson that was shared across SETA research teams. On the whole, there is now something of a 'community of practice' among SETA researchers, DHET data managers, and other public sector researchers around the design and implementation of SETA WBL tracer studies.

As with other projects under the Rhodes Research Chair, the use of the CRWG meetings for capacity building and information sharing purposes was successful. These meetings were generally well attended (up to 60 participants per event; see registers) and allowed for a collaborative approach to designing and discussing the tracer study protocols, instruments and systems. Without the CRWG meetings, SETA level buy-in for a coordinated cross-SETA study would likely have been very limited. To a lesser extent, the regular DHET Research Forum meetings were also an opportunity to improve buy-in for the project and to communicate the objectives of the project to a wider audience (to both DHET and external stakeholders and partners).

In terms of the research itself, the use of a common reporting template (distributed to all SETAs) was, perhaps, the most widely used research tool from the project. To the extent that SETA's continue to use the template, it will improve the comparability of the metrics used in individual SETA WBL tracer studies. The use of a standardised set of questionnaires also appears to be widespread. The expected impact, therefore, is that, irrespective of the overall design of future SETA studies, a greater number of SETAs will be capturing information and reporting on it in similar ways as a result of this project.

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5. Quality Statistics

Of the five deliverables, none have been returned, and we have not received any negative feedback on either reports or materials produced or on workshops or presentations delivered. Moreover, the feedback from SETA colleagues through the CRWG and from DHET colleagues through the DHET Research Forum has been overwhelmingly positive. More detailed methodological feedback from SETA service providers has also been positive and constructive.

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6. Review of Expected Benefits

SETA researchers who participated in the study are now in a better position to plan for and execute tracer studies in a standardised design. They have a better understanding of international best practice in research design including: sampling, instrument design, selection bias, and the analysis of tracer study data.

Should SETA stakeholders make the decision to institutionalise WBL tracer studies and continue to improve the standardisation of the research design (e.g. through the CRWG) they should be able to implement future studies both within and across their respective SETAs.

A further benefit could be greater collaboration between researchers from different SETAs in pursuit of joint research objectives. There have already been reports of interaction, often for the first time, between researchers from different SETAs and the broader research community in South Africa.

The benefits of regular standardised WBL tracer studies would be substantial. Such an approach has the potential to, *inter alia* ...

- improve SETA monitoring and reporting;
- improve comparability of reporting on WBL outcomes across SETAs and WBL streams;
- strengthen data quality and data management;
- improve the quality, relevance and strategic use of SETA research on WBL employment outcomes;
- improve the impact of SETAs on skills development and the labour market more generally;
- improve relationships between role players (including SETAs, PSET institutions, employers and DHET);
- and inform evidence-based policy making and practices in the PSET system.

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7. Post Project Review Plan

1. Logistics
2. Resources
3. Measurement Methods
4. Timing of measurements
5. Other Considerations

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8. Conclusion

The first attempt at a coordinated and standardized WBL tracer study across the SETA environment experienced mixed results. On the one hand, participation in the study (by SETAs) was lower than anticipated (as documented in the project final report) and the quality of the data collected was variable. On the other hand, however, the design and testing of research protocols and instruments has demonstrated the potential for standardised tracer studies to capture meaningful labour market intelligence in the future. Participating SETAs regularly attended meetings, many contributed actively to the research design and at least two SETAs followed the research protocols diligently.

Nonetheless, the coordination and standardization of WBL tracer studies in a SETA environment does face systemic challenges. In particular, the lack of a ‘project champion’ means that the risk of low participation in the future is substantial. Even with regular discussions on the tracer study at the CRWG and DHET research forum meetings, it was difficult to ensure buy-in from SETA stakeholders and researchers. The lack of project champion also meant that accountability to a central structure was limited. Because SETA staff report to multiple entities and, at times, have conflicting mandates, it seemed as though they were caught between the strategic trajectory crafted for their respective SSPs, and the requirements of their SLAs with DHET. This is something which has been flagged across the Rhodes/BankSETA chair project. In short, for such studies to be successfully coordinated and standardised in the future, governance and accountability need to be formulated at the outset.

In conclusion, while SETAs do have both research capacity and experience with tracer study design, and while this project did go some way towards demonstrating the benefits of a standardised research approach, a number of systemic and governance structures are likely to be required in order to ensure buy-in and improve project accountability going forward. The Collaborative Research Working Group Meetings will likely continue to play an important role in this regard although a dedicated ‘project home’ will almost certainly be required. The BANKSETA’s ongoing leadership, which has been particularly strong in the early stages of the project, will also be very necessary to take this forward.

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A. Appendix A: Lessons Learnt Report

Evaluation of Management and Quality Processes

Management and Quality Processes that went well	Management and Quality Processes that went badly	Management and Quality Processes that were lacking
Payment of invoices was timeous.	Inability to pay for Draft M&E Overall Framework (pending DHET and NSA input) led to an early cash flow problem	Limited feedback on reports and other deliverables (research instruments and sample frames)
Support for accessing resources went well, e.g. data was ultimately provided to the chair (albeit with some delays).	Meeting agreed deadlines was problematic throughout the project.	Limited engagement with research findings or sample designs.
Engagement with (some) nominated SETA research leads was regular.	Quality control from the SETA side was extremely limited.	
Engagement between DHET and SETA research teams was regular.	Following suggested research protocols was inconsistent.	

Description of abnormal events causing deviations

Abnormal events that caused deviation
The events during the course of the project were not unnatural, although they did cause some deviations, as explained. Overall, the project timelines were adjusted 3-4 times due to a lack of participation and communication. Such delays inevitably compromised the coordinated approach to the tracer study design.

Assessment of the performance of technical Tools and Methods used

Tools and Methods Used In the Project			
Methods	Tools	Performance	Performance
Desk top research: Literature	Literature was sourced from the university subscriptions, own publications, online resources.	All key sources were obtained.	
Research protocols	These were designed collaboratively through the Collaborative Research Working Group and with DHET	Participation by SETAs was fairly limited.	Ultimately consensus was reached and the research instruments were designed in line with national and international best practice.



Online data collection platform	A centralized online data collection platform was implemented successfully.	Most SETAs and their service providers were able to capture data effectively.	Some SETAs added in their own questions or didn't complete the interviews.
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Analysis of Project Issues and their results

Project Processes that went well	Project Processes that went badly	Project Processes that were lacking
The design of research instrument and collective agreement on scope and purpose of the project.	Participation was low and the quality of the fieldwork was highly variable.	The project lacked accountability for timelines, research milestones, data quality and overall coordination.

Measurement on how much effort was required to create products

	Estimated Effort	Actual Effort
Product 1		
Product 2		

Notes on the quality reviews carried out during the project

Effective and Ineffective Quality Reviews
Progress reports were requested and submitted.



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B. Appendix B: Follow – On Recommendations

See tables below.

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Request for change

The following request for change were considered to have merit but were not implemented during the project

ID	Date	Name/Description (Include RFC number if available)	Action Required	Responsible Person/Role	Target Date

Risks

The following risks were identified during the project and may affect the product in its operational life

ID	Date	Name/Description (include Risk Log ref if available)	Action Required	Responsible person/role	Target Date
1	May 2020	SETAs may not extend the WBL methodology	BANKSETA to endeavor to convene the relevant role players and identify a potential 'study champion'	BANKSETA CEO	Ongoing
2	June 2020	The SETA context may change in such a way that WBL outcomes are no longer a priority	Regular view of objectives	Unsure	Ongoing

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Handover and or training

The author must state whether the fault is of high, medium, or little priority.

ID	Date	Name/Description (include particular Product ref if available)	Action Required	Responsible person/role	Target Date

Other Activities Required

The following were also identified as being required to take the product to the next stage of its life

ID	Date	Name/Description	Action Required	Responsible person/role	Target Date
1	June-December 2020	Review the tracer study protocols and outcomes of the BankSETA study	DHET, NSA Board and SETAs to reflect on lessons learned	NSA or BankSETA CEO	Unsure
2	June-December 2020	Identify whether a standardized WBL study is in line with SETA objectives	SETAs to decide whether they want to undertake the online training	BankSETA CEO or CRWG chair	Unsure
3	June-December 2020	If yes, then identify a study champion, accountability structures and agree on a platform to coordinate across SETAs	Structures and roles need to be identified and formulated carefully	NSA or BankSETA CEO/DHET manager/CRWG chair	Unsure
4	June-December 2020	Review and refine all study protocols and ensure MISs are up to date and standardised	Identify key changes that are required and convene a process to agree on accepted protocols. Agree on a protocol for updating SETMIS regularly and uniformly.	DHET data manager/CRWG chair/NSA CEO	Unsure
5	January 2021	Implement a WBL tracer study across all SETAs	Coordinate and standardize all SETA WBL tracer study research activities in 2021.	SETA management and M&E staff	Unsure

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Date: (This is the date on which these recommendations are effective)

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