An Investigation of Skills Programmes as Training Interventions: A Case Study of the Department of Higher Education and Training

By

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Abstract

Low levels of education, poor educational background, and skills shortages, are the main subjects on the social agenda and economic debates today. South Africans lack the qualifications that are required to participate actively in the economy in the form of either employment or self-employment. The literature reviewed revealed that countries are embarking on a number of strategies to develop and train unemployed, low-income and low-skilled people who did not have access to either TVET, university or on-the-job training. As such, the SA government through the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) funds various skills development interventions targeting unemployed adults and youth with different educational levels to prepare them for labour markets or sustainable livelihoods through self-employment and establishment of small businesses. The current study focused only on a portion of the DHET outcomes and its purpose was to examine the effectiveness of skills programmes as training interventions funded by DHET through its entities and partners in the public sector. The findings revealed that skills programmes are beneficial when planned and selected prudently over a period of time, and could improve the educational and skills levels of beneficiaries. However, the skills programmes that are implemented in government interventions have yielded marginal results in improving education levels and providing employable skills.

Keywords: training interventions: DHET; skills programmes

1. Introduction

Many South Africans lack qualifications or have inadequate skills levels to compete in the labour market, whilst some have qualifications that do not match labour requirements. At the same time, education and skills are perceived as cornerstone to address the social needs of the communities and foster economic growth. Through skills programmes and other training interventions, the skills of unemployed youths and adults with low levels of education can be developed to allow them to enter employment, or to enable existing workers to improve their skills levels. The improvement of skills levels contributes to increased productivity and inclusiveness in the economy through formal employment or entrepreneurship (International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2011:1). Multi-skilled people adapt easily to changing needs in the economy and can survive the effects of structural unemployment caused by economic changes related to the unavailability of certain skills required by the economy (Human Resource Development Council [HRDC], 2013:4). In this way, the structural racial inequalities in terms of skills development for disadvantaged and marginalised societies are addressed.   Therefore, the emphasis of any skills intervention is on training and developing skills necessary for job readiness, self-sustainable opportunities and also to increase the skills level in the current job for growth and prosperity, and promotion of life-long learning. Africa has a challenge of an inadequately prepared workforce and to be intensified by the Fourth Industrial Revolution with a possible net loss of over 5 million jobs in the coming years (World Economic Forum [WEF], 2016:2). The current economic conditions in South Africa confirm this statement, since the economy has been unable to create more jobs. Lately, the unemployment rate for individuals with low education levels, who are low skilled or unskilled and with no formal work experience, has increased sharply. At the same time, fast-paced technological, socio-economic and demographic changes are anticipated to transform the labour market immensely (WEF, 2016:2).

Therefore, the education and training system should be geared to produce the skills required by the economy in order to reduce unemployment in South Africa and to a certain extent, assist existing workers to improve their skills levels, so as to increase their productivity and enhance career pathing. The Human Resource Development Strategy (HRDS) 2030 emphasises the significance of education and skills development as the most effective means to end poverty and reduce inequality. In support of the HRDS, the National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS) intends to ensure that the energy and resources of training and education are focused on addressing the skills development challenges facing the country and ensuring that the skills development programmes achieve measurable impacts (DHET, 2011:4). The scope of the study is therefore assessing the impact of training initiatives on its beneficiaries funded by Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) through the National Skills Fund (NSF). The programmes are implemented by various entities and for the purpose of the study, the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) under the   Department of Public Works (DPW) project, was selected as a targeted sample owing to the size and breadth of the project. The EPWP project is implemented on a national scale however, only few sites on EPWP skills training were selected from three provinces, that is, Gauteng, Limpopo and Free State provinces. The areas of focus will be on understanding and gaining perspectives on skills programmes as training interventions from three levels of skills programmes implementation that is, decision making, coordination and implementation as well as beneficiaries receiving the skills programmes training interventions.

Background to the Problem
South Africa has made enormous progress in developing its education and training system, yet inequality, unemployment and poverty remain a challenge. In response to this challenge, the DHET, through the Post-School Education and Training (PSET) system, is continuously striving towards developing human capital through various skills development interventions. The interventions target unemployed adults, youths, graduates and students, to prepare them for the labour markets and enable them to earn sustainable livelihoods through self-employment and the establishment of small businesses or cooperatives (DHET, 2013:8). The DHET implements skills development interventions in partnership with other government departments, and public and private training institutions. Complementary to these institutions, the implementation of skills development goals are coordinated and achieved through the skills levy institutions, such as Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) and the NSF (DHET, 2011:33). The training initiatives have been set up to deal with societal skills challenges that are assumed to be contributing to high unemployment rates due to low level of skills. In support of the training initiatives, the HRDS 2030 is focused on expanding access to quality post-school education and training opportunities. The training initiatives contribute significantly to government strategies such as the NSDS, National Development Plan (NDP), Skills Development Act (SDA) and other government policies on skills development. Barker (2007:214) argued that in spite of the progress made with education in South Africa since the advent of democracy, education levels continue to be generally low. Many South Africans are poorly prepared to undertake further learning when they leave school and cannot access post-school education and training or employment opportunities. In some cases young people leave school prematurely, without skills for life and for work (Tukundane, 2014:132). The poor foundational education has contributed to the low skills level, viewed by employers as inadequate to prepare unemployed individuals for the world of work (HRDC, 2013:4). A large number of workers enter the labour market directly after school with no further education or training, mostly as volunteer workers (Health and Welfare SETA (HWSETA) Sector Skills Plan, 2014:94). Some of these workers acquire skills through government programmes such as the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP). At the same time, the demand for skills to keep up with structural changes in the economy globally continues to increase, affecting both employed and unemployed people with low skills levels (Adams, 2011:2). The White Paper on Post-School Education and Training (WP-PSET) have emphasised that the focus and design of interventions should be aligned to the labour market needs whilst addressing the economic and social needs of learners (DHET, 2013:10). Therefore, the study seek to assess the factors impacting on the effectiveness of skills programmes as training interventions to benefit unemployed, the sustainability

of programmes as a prospect for upward mobility and the extent to which the programmes enhance career path of its beneficiaries.

Aim of the Study

The aim of the study is to investigate the effectiveness of skills programmes as training interventions managed by the DHET. The study explores whether the interventions implemented contributes towards changing the socio-economic needs of beneficiaries.

Research Questions

- What are the factors impacting the effectiveness of skills programmes as training interventions?
- How sustainable are the skills programmes as training interventions?
- To what extent do the skills programmes enhance learners' career path?
- What recommendations can be made to assist the department in managing the skills programmes as training initiative?

Significance of the Study

Education and training are critical to improve the skills levels of individuals in order to address inequity and to meet the needs of the country's economy. Recently, Merten (2016:1) stated that black youth have the lowest level of skills, even when compared with their parents. At the same time, South Africa is still struggling with a societal problem which includes demotivated adults with low or no skills post 1994. All of these challenges signify a need to evaluate the impact of training programmes that have been put in place to address the pressing issues relating to skills deficiencies, which are deemed to contribute to the escalating unemployment rate and never-ending poverty. According to Meyer and Orpen (2007:57), the skills development interventions support national and sectoral growth as well as development and equity priorities. Thus, skills development interventions are seen as a vehicle to promote employability and sustainable livelihoods. As DHET is the custodian of education and skills training, with huge investments being made in skills development programmes, an effective evaluation of its programmes is critical to measure the impact of interventions. Factors impacting the implementation of programmes will be analysed to determine the strengths and weaknesses that could assist to develop mechanisms to improvethe planning and implementation of future skills training interventions (Meyer andOrpen, 2007:82). The findings of this study will provide the DHET management with information that will assist them to determine the value of investing in any skills programmes, to achieve a measurable impact and to intensify programmes that are responsive to the needs of the economy. In that way, the findings of the study are expected to contribute towards the advancement of contextual knowledge on skills programmes as training interventions.

2. Literature Review

Skills programmes are important vehicles to address lower levels of education that are inhibiting individuals from entering formal employment, attaining better jobs, or venturing into business (Erasmus,Loedolff, Mda and Nel, 2010:48). The idea behind such training is to develop from basic skills for job readiness to high-level skills required by specific industries, thus increasing access to meaningful opportunities, and enhancing sustainability and career pathways. The meaning of the word "skills" has evolved over decades, from a traditional view that recognised the division between academic and hard skills to the contemporary definition that involves soft, generic, transferrable and interactional skills integrated with personal attributes, attitudes and behaviours (VallyandMotala, 2014:154). Modern employers highly value a combination of technical, cognitive and non-cognitive skills as a prerequisite for employees to be selected for employment. Adams (2011:2) stated that cognitive skills are the basic mental abilities used by individuals to think, study, and learn; whereas non-cognitive skills concentrate on personality traits and behaviours in which employers use to source diverse competencies. According to Adams (2011:2), skills development programmes are generally multifaceted, which makes it difficult to

measure their effects on beneficiaries. The complexity comes from the broader skills development concept, which involves a larger and more diverse provider community (value chain). Before delving into the complexity of skills programmes, it is important to understand the origin of such programmes in South Africa. Skills programmes were introduced by Chapter 5 of the Skills Development Act (SDA) as occupation-based training comprised of one or more unit standards; credit-bearing courses linked to an NQF-aligned learnership qualification (Erasmus *et al*., 2010:311). A meaningful cluster of unit standards that provide the less fortunate with an opportunity to improve their lives (Meyer,Katz, Nel, Knoke, Schenk and Ludike, 2012:47). The skills programmes interventions are systematic and structured training programmes but differ from other training interventions such as learnerships. Swanepoel,Erasmus, Schenk and Tshilongamulenzhe, (2014: 553) distinguished the skills programmes from a learnership in that they do not culminate in the whole qualification and require no formal contract, but stated that both programmes contain a practical training component. Whereas, the SAQA classified the skills programmes as short learning programmes or short courses containing less than 120 credits, or non-credit bearing courses (Botha,Kiley and Truman, 2007:25). Learners who have undergone training in registered skills programmes can therefore attain a part qualification, and the credits can build up to a full qualification if more training is received within the qualification mainstream. According to Botha *et al*. (2007:25), skills programmes play a significant role in developing human resources, providing meaningful career and learning pathways, which ultimately improve the employability and mobility of employees. Swanepoel*et al*. (2014:553) agreed that the skills programmes should enable learners to attain a recognised qualification on completion of the programme, which will constitute employable skills and provide evidence of the learners' competency in a particular skill as well as enable them to earn income. However, employability is dependent on a number of factors which involves among others, stable economy.   Many researchers have argued that the link between more education and increased employment opportunities is unconvincing however, perceived employment as a result of steady economic growth (VallyandMotala, 2014:27).   In challenging these assumptions, Vally and Motala (2014:181) stated that the skills that people need to sustain livelihoods encompass skills to:

- ensure self-employment, formal employment or forming cooperatives;
- find information required to make decisions about careers, education and the future;
- improve health and well-being;
- promote problem-solving skills
- participate meaningfully in civic and political processes in communities; and
- exercise agency in defending national sovereignty.

Typically, the types of skills required as per the argument of Vally and Motala, have to be embedded in training interventions to have a positive effect. Most importantly, the training programmes are to be assessed regularly to identify interventions that are effective and those which are ineffective.

Contextual Framework
Skills programmes as training interventions
The importance of education and skills training, for young people in particular, is continuously emphasised in various policies, documents and reports worldwide as an enabling factor for individuals to gain access to the labour market or to opportunities of self-employment (Tukundane, 2014:4). The access to formal education from pre-school, primary, secondary, and then tertiary levels cannot be overemphasised to build the generic and technical skills required by individuals to improve their education and skills levels as well as to participate actively in social and economic activities. Adams (2011:2) pointed out that some countries have transformed their basic education provision, whereas several others have moved to improve employment and earnings through education and training. Tukundane (2014:47) claimed that the achievement of universal primary education is made possible through programmes such as UNESCO's Education for All (EFA) and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to which countries have committed. Although, most developing countries are still faced with poor basic foundation skills and lack of access to educational opportunities. According to Erasmus *et al.*

(2015:2), training enables individuals to acquire knowledge, skills and abilities to carry out specific tasks or jobs in a vocational setting. As such, training is presumed to provide skills to enable individuals to access opportunities that will sustain their livelihoods, whether by means of formal or self-employment, as well assisting those who are currently in employment to improve their skills levels. However, some workers are unable to keep jobs, or are employed in low-productivity and low-quality jobs, whilst unemployed people are challenged with finding jobs (Almeida Behrman and Robalino,2012:133). The challenges of finding and keeping jobs are presumed to emanate from the lack of skills or their low skills levels skills for individuals that are outside the formal education system. Governments worldwide are investing in education and support interventions to fill skills gaps, mainly for illiterate and poorly educated youths (Africa Progress Report, 2012, cited in Tukundane, 2014: 48). However, the effort should not be limited to youth development interventions only, but be aimed at societies at large to provide skills that will promote sustainable livelihoods and increase opportunities for employment or self-employment for all eligible ages, thus decreasing dependency on the state. South Africa has made some progress towards a transformative economy to accelerate job creation and skills development for people with low levels of education or who are unskilled; although the country is continuously characterised by high unemployment resulting from stifled economic growth. Tukundane (2014:48) found that a lack of skills increases an individual's vulnerability to poverty and social immobility, threatening the development objectives of a country. Given that, education and support interventions play a significant role in reducing vulnerability and social exclusion. In an effort to address skills development issues, several countries are refining their strategies to produce better results, building on their diverse experiences to articulate a framework for a skills development system that will be effective across a wide range of economic and social circumstances (ILO, 2011:15). Additionally, countries invest in training strategies related to active labour market programmes (ALMPs) targeting the unskilled and low skilled to reduce unemployment and increase workers' employability (Almeida *et al*., 2012:133). The intention of ALMPs is to shift the focus of resources from being a form of passive income support for the unemployed, to active measures that will enhance access to jobs whilst developing job-related skills that are informed by labour market needs (Erasmus *et al*., 2010:266). According Kraak and Press (2008:556), South Africa has put in place short-term to medium-term strategies to address skills shortages through education and training. Tshilongamulenzhe,Coetzee andMasenge, (2013:1) stated that the focus of skills development strategies is on vocational learning programmes such as learnerships, apprenticeships, skills programmes and any other learning programmes that include structured workplace components to combat skills shortages. There are also government and non-governmental training programmes that serve to extend interventions targeting and promoting access to skills development, although these programmes seem to have their own challenges (Adams, 2011:2). These challenges include the duration, quality and level of skills offered to the learners (Adams, 2011:3). Almeida *et al*. (2012:11) stated that various countries have developed training programmes for unemployed, low-income and low-skilled workers who do not have access to TVET or on-the-job training (OJT). Adams (2011:2) agreed that skills programmes interventions are seen as alternative routes to assist low-skilled and unskilled people through programmes such as apprenticeships and enterprise-based training. Therefore, skills development has become an essential component of the social and economic agendas of governments across the globe to pursue job creation and increased productivity (Almeida*et al*., 2012:11).The purpose of skills programmes includes providing hands-on-experience; increasing employability and self-employment;providing occupation-based and focused training; closing skills gaps, advancing career aspirations and addressing the principles of portability, as well as redressing equity in the workplace (Swanepoel*et al*., 2014:554). The practical component is critical and should ensure that the learners are exposed to a relevant training experience. As such, it is important that the content of the programmes is designed to meet the needs of economic sectors in which work-based learning paths are available, for the sake of relevance and sustainability (Swanepoel*et al*., 2014:556).

Factors Impacting the Effectiveness of Skills Programmes

The development of the labour force is a high priority in South Africa's labour dispensation (Erasmus *et al.*, 2010:46). Statistical reports, economists, the media and public bodies comment on the pervasive and escalating unemployment rate each quarter, parallel with a shortage of the relevant skills to meet the needs of the economy. On the other hand, a number of skilled individuals with years of experience and high levels of training, for example in the clothing and textile industry in South Africa, have been vulnerable to unemployment (VallyandMotala, 2014:26). The challenge of persistent unemployment and racial inequalities emanates from post-apartheid structural economic and political conditions. Groener (2014:21) is of the view that skills development as a strategy to redress unemployment and other inequalities needs further thinking. According to Groener, skills development has contributed very little to address the structural racial inequalities related to increased employment opportunities for Black low-skilled and unemployed adults and youth. Despite limited and mixed success, government remains committed to raising the skills profile of the labour market through short, medium and longer term education and training solutions aimed at mitigating structural imbalances in the labour market (Botha *et al.* 2007:5; Erasmus *et al.*, 2015:46). South Africans have low education levels or are unskilled,making it difficult for the formal education system to provide for everybody (Erasmus *et al.*, 2015:46). The system is overloaded due to the number of people that lackreasonable levels of education or basic skills for human development and personal development (DHET, 2013:2). Government alone cannot win the battle of skills development and universal global changes, and needs the industry to fight the problem of low skills levels and promote sustainable livelihoods. Botha *et al.* (2007:6) have indicated that there are strategies targeting skills development that have been developed and implemented in partnership with the private sector, non-government organisations (NGOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs). EPWP is one of the strategies that provides skills training in its four sectors such as social sector, non-state sector, environment and culture and infrastructure projects which are implemented in both public and private partnerships. The government strategies further target the employment of designated groups and acceleration of employment equity to address inequalities in the education and equity profile of the South African workforce (Botha *et al.*, 2007:7). The skills programmes and other training interventions bring these strategies to life by affording impoverished societies an opportunity to attain meaningful skills. Notable challenges are posedby the transition from schooltowork, self-employment to waged employment and waged employment to unemployment (VallyandMotala, 2014:104). According to Erasmus *et al.* (2010:46), education and training have been identified as the most important factors to influence economic growth, create political stability and social success. The government has therefore decided to facilitate the placement of new entrants in the labour market through various interventions such as learnerships, apprenticeships, bursaries and new venture creation initiatives (Botha *et al.*, 2007:5). In addition to these interventions, career guidance and counselling are provided to school leavers to assist them to pursue further studies (Botha *et al.*, 2007:5). A number of factors can however hinder the effectiveness of any such training interventions, such as the macro environment – social and economic factors and technological changes.

Macro environment factors

Societies exist in environments that are characterised by macro forces. The forces are there to shape opportunities whilst presenting threats to how society lives. Therefore, the impact of social, economic and technological forces exerted by environments on societies with regard to skills development interventions has to be analysed. The constant changes in technology increase the importance of relevant skills for both new entrants and existing employees. Vally and Motala (2014:27) argued that the new substitutive technologies deplete the relevance of previously trained human capital, and skills training may not resolve the resultant unemployment under current structural conditions. Erasmus *et al.* (2010:46) stated that environmental scanning is required to analyse the extent of the impact of macro forces so as to segment the society according to population profile, educational levels and unemployment class to ensure that the interventions address the economic and social needs of the society. This is to ensure that the training interventions are fit for purpose and suitable for target audience. The study will now explore the impact of skills programmes offered by EPWP in relation to population profile, educational levels of beneficiaries and employment status.

Population profile

South Africa's population has been constantly growing and from 2001 has increased by approximately 7 million to 51, 77 million in 2011 (Erasmus *et al*., 2015:47). Young people form the biggest part of the population. Erasmus *et al*. (2015:47) pointed out that nearly one-third (29.6%) of the total population is younger than 15 years,while 28.9% are 15 to 34 years old. These numbers are likely to increase immensely each year, putting more pressure on the economic and social needs of societies.

Education levels

Education is regarded as a human right and important to provide basic competencies that will enable people to improve their lives. According to Swanepoel*et al*. (2014:505) young South Africans leave the schooling system with a woefully inadequate, second-rate education, ill-equipped to be employed. Access to education and training therefore has to be increased to eliminate the low levels of education that are currently preventing individuals to be employed in the formal sector (Erasmus *et al*. 2010:264). Most unemployed people have very low levels of education, a problem affecting both young and adult people who lack language, literacy and numeracy skills as a foundation for additional training (DHET, 2011:20). Therefore, skills training interventions should be designed to target both young and adult people who are finding it difficult to access job opportunities (Wilson, 2013:6).

Unemployment

South Africa is experiencing high unemployment rates whilst its population is growing tremendously. According to Erasmus *et al*. (2015:50), the increase in unemployment is related to low economic growth and declining labour intensive processes resulting from the emergence of technological drivensystems. Other researchers, however,regardinadequate education as the cause of high unemployment (VallyandMotala, 2014:vii). Brewer (2013:4) indicated that a skilled workforce goes hand in hand with economic growth. This assertion places education and training at the forefront of strategies to address unemployment. However, Vally and Motala (2014:1) questioned the link between education and economic growth, that is, whether education and training automatically lead to employment. Erasmus *et al*. (2010:264) supported the opinion that education and training alone do not create wealth or work, but that the latter rather depend on the country's economic system. Barker (2007:185) concurred that even though economic growth is a determinant of expanding employment, higher growth does not invariably and automatically translate into increased employment.There may be hindrances such as low levels of skills, unskilled people or skills mismatches in the society.

3.   Research Methodology

The research design is generally a plan or a strategy on how the research question will be answered (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2016:726). According to Yin (2011:75), the research design is a 'logical' blueprint that incorporates the research questions, the data to be collected, and the strategies for analysing data, so that the study's findings will address the intended research questions. Creswell (2014:3) stated that the research design entails plans and procedures that integrate philosophical assumptions from a broader level to procedures of inquiry and specific research methods for data collection, analysis and interpretation. Research has two main approaches, namely qualitative and quantitative methods. The methods are not distinct yet vary according to their characteristics, strategies in terms of data collection, analysis and interpretation (Creswell, 2012:19). Thus the methods are viewed as two sides of continuum. A third approach called mixed methods has emerged residing in the middle of the continuum and combining the two well-known approaches elements (Creswell, 2014:3). The reason for selecting the qualitative method is to understand the views and perceptions of participants of the effectiveness of skills programmes as training interventions managed by the DHET. Saunders *et al*. (2016:174) indicated that the research design follows a purpose that is determined by research objectives and the type of questions

the researcher seeks to answer. The purpose of research can thus be described through some common research forms such as causal-comparative research, correlational research, explanatory, descriptive and exploratory research. The choice of research design is determined by the nature of the project approach, which can be either a qualitative or quantitative approach. This study adopted a combination of an exploratory and descriptive approach. The approach was chosen as it best fulfils the aim of exploring what is currently happening and seeking new insights into the phenomena through the 'What' and 'How' questions (Saunders *et al*., 2009:322). Although exploratory and descriptive blends in practice, they differ to some extent in such that the descriptive tend to provide specific details of a situation or setting focusing more on the "why" and "how" questions (De Vos,Strydom, Fouche andDelport, 2011:96). Whilst the exploratory was conducted to gain deeper insights to understand the skills programme as training interventions, the descriptive approach examined the effectiveness of skills programmes interventions on its beneficiaries. In that way, individual's own words describing the impact of skills programmes and their effectiveness as training interventions, thus the phenomena and their meanings were examined intensely and deeply to develop a 'thick description (De Vos*et al.* 2011:96). The research design for this study has an evaluative objective to assess the extent to which the skills programmes are effective as training interventions. According to De Vos*et al*. (2011:98) evaluative research determines whether a social intervention has produced the intended outcomes. Its objectives include programme evaluation, social indicators research, impact assessment or empowerment evaluation (De Vos*et al*., 2011:98). According to Creswell (2014:14) phenomenological research describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomena as described by participants through interviews. The rationale for selecting this approach was to gain understanding of skills programmes as training interventions from the participants as they are believed to have lived experiences and social reality of the phenomena. In doing so, the researcher was able to dig deeper and explored assumptions that could have been possibly taken for granted by the social world regarding the implementation of skills programmes interventions (Acumen Insights, 2009:2). However, Bhattacherjee (2012:109) asserted that phenomenology is concerned with human judgements, perceptions and actions to describe the social reality subjectively which therefore requires that the researcher avoids making prior assumptions, personal biases and empathize with the participant's situation

Research Strategies

A research strategy incorporates a plan of how a researcher will go about answering the research questions, and linking the philosophy and choice of method to collect and analyse data (Saunders *et al*. 2016:177). The current study used semi-structured research interviews from non-standardised category– one to one (face-to-faceinterviews) and one to many (focus groups) to collect data. These types were selected based on their ability to collect rich qualitative information that relates to facts (biographical background), people's beliefs and perspectives, feelings, opinions and motives as well as experience and knowledge (Griffee, 2012:162; LeedyandOrmrod, 2015:281). Furthermore, the face-to-face and focus group data collection methods were selected to cover a range of perspectives, for instance, certain things may emerge from focus groups because of the group's dynamics, which would not come out in a one-to-one interview (De Vos*et al*., 2011:341).

Target Population

The target population for the study were employees of the DHET and beneficiaries receiving skills training through EPWP programmes. Bhattacherjee (2012:65) defined a population as all people or unit of analysis from which a sample can be drawn to conduct a study. The current staff complement at the DHET is 38 031 employees in 28 942 filled positions. However, the sample for this research study was taken from the employees based at the head office of the DHET, specifically located at the NSF, project implementers and beneficiaries of skills programmes funded by DHET through the NSF. The targeted participants and sites were chosen based on the rich information they possess to respond to the research problem and questions in the study (Creswell, 2012:2016)

Sampling

According to Bhattacherjee (2012:65), the sampling process follows three stages that include identifying the population, the sampling frame and sample size. The EPWP project was selected amongst a multitude of NSF projects owing to the size and breadth of the programme and because it covers a number of skills programmes. The sample size is 25 participants at three levels of the implementation of the skills programmes, that is:

- Six decision makers from the DHET within the NSF and the implementing agent at DPW within EPWP.
- Three participants on implementation level targeting project managers responsible for managing skills interventions within the EPWP programme.
- Sixteen beneficiaries of skills programmes interventions.

The sample size was sufficient to create stability among the views expressed in the study (De Vos *et al*. (2011:358). The sampling approach used in the current study was non-probability purposive sampling in which those employees of the DHET placed at the National Skills Fund, and who had information on skills programmes projects, were selected. In addition, the participants in skills training programmes and the implementers of the training programmes funded by the NSF across nine provinces were identified and selected. The researcher sampled participants with diverse characteristics as determined by their role in the implementation of skills programmes managed by the DHET. As such, the researcher used her own judgement to select participants through maximal variation to categorise their interests and obtain different viewpoints from various players involved in the implementation of skills programmes, from a level of management (funder and implementing agents) to beneficiaries (Creswell, 2012:207; Saunders *et al*., 2016:301).

Pilot Study
Saunders e*t al.* (2016:723) defined a pilot study as a "small-scale study questionnaire, interview checklist or observation schedule to minimise the likelihood of respondents having problems in answering questions and data recording problems as well as to allow assessment of the questions' validity and the reliability of the data that will be collected". The purpose of the pilot study was to pre-test the research instrument that would be used to collect data for the entire study. Yin (2011:37) asserted that pilot studies help to test and refine one or more aspects of a final study, including the study's design, fieldwork procedures, data collection instruments or analysis.

Data Collection
According to Yin (2011:129), data forms the basis of a research study. Yin further indicated that in qualitative research data is collected by means of field-based activities such as interviewing, observing, collecting, examining and feeling activities. Approval to conduct the study was sought from the DHET and the DPW in order to have access to participants that were identified as the sample population.

Data Analysis
Qualitative analysis is concerned with transforming data into findings by reducing the volume of the raw data collected through transcribed interviews, sifting significance from trivia, identifying patterns and constructing a framework for reporting such findings and to make sense of the data (De Vos*et al*., 2011:397). Qualitative analysis has been criticised by many writers for the large amount of data collected and lack of accepted rules for analysis (Bryman, 2012:565). De Vos*et al*. (2011:398) agreed that qualitative analysis is messy, ambiguous and time consuming,but the activities enhance creativity and with time a fascinating process evolves. Saunders *et al*. (2016:568) stated that the secret is to understand the interaction between data collection and analysis, and to explore these activities with great care.

Validity and Reliability
Validity and reliability are key concepts to measure the adequacy and accuracy of the research instrument used in a study (Bhattacherjee, 2012:55). According to Leedy and Ormrod (2015:114), the instrument

used to measure validity and reliability influence the chosen method of research and the probability of obtaining statistical significance in data analysis, thereby making it possible to draw meaningful conclusions from the data.

Credibility

Credibility is a measure to verify trustworthiness of the research data collected. De Vos*et al.* (2011:421) stated that credibility is akin to internal validity to assess whether the inquiry was conducted and presented in acceptable manner and that research standards were followed. The main feature is to check how congruent the findings are from fieldwork with reality of social world. Qualitative researchers can use various strategies to increase credibility of the study. (Creswell, 2014:201-203; De Vos*et al.*, 2011:419-420; LeedyandOrmrod, 2015: 278–279; Yin, 2011:78).

Transferability: Many authors agreed that transferability in qualitative research is concerned with generalisability of findings to other settings however has been criticised and perceived by researchers as problematic (Bhattacherjee, 2012:111; De Vos*et al.,* 2011:420). The idea of transferability is in preference of external validity in positivists' research in which a researcher provides rich detailed descriptions of research context, deep structures assumptions and processes followed to assess the applicability of findings to another settings (Bhattacherjee, 2012:111).

Dependability / reliability: Dependability in positivists world assume that the study techniques are replicable and if were repeated by another researcher in the same context will yield similar results (Bhattacherjee, 2012:110).

Conformability: Conformability in the study involves how objective are the findings, for example, the results of the experiences and ideas should be of the informants and not preferences of the researcher (De Vos et al., 2011:421). The researcher ensured that the interpretation of findings in the study is based on informants' responses, the transcription of interviews was captured verbatim, audio recorded the interviews sessions and triangulation of sources and methods was applied to reduce the effect of researcher's bias.

Limitations of the Study

The current study is confined to assessing the effectiveness of skills programmes as training interventions within a wide spectrum of skills development. In nine provinces that implement the NSF funded programmes, only three sites were selected for the sample population. Therefore, the findings cannot represent all nine provinces that implement skills programmes for the EPWP project. The data collection method applied was qualitative research, which lessens the generalisability of findings. Due to the narrow segment required in terms of the number of participants in qualitative studies, only 25 respondents were interviewed.   Furthermore, the findings reported will not cover all the skills programmes funded through the NSF, but only a few that are managed through the EPWP project. The EPWP initiative has four sectors responsible for the implementation of a project, namely, the social sector, non-state sector, environment and culture sector and infrastructure sector. Only three programmes from three sectors could be accessed. This is due to the periodic implementation of the project and at the time of data collection, the selected programmes were active.

Elimination of Bias

The researcher is regarded as an instrument in qualitative studies and bias is therefore inevitable, requiring a test of the validity and reliability of such instrument. According to Griffee (2012:166), the researcher will bring a set of beliefs and assumptions into the study. Therefore, the researcher in qualitative research should understand what meaning the participants attach toan issue – a crucial requirement to eliminate the bias in the meaning that the researcher brings into the study (Creswell, 2014:186).

Ethical Considerations

Saunders *et al*. (2016:239) defined ethics as standards of behaviour that guide the researcher throughout a study. Bhattacherjee (2012:137) is of the view that such standards conform to the conduct of a profession or a group defined at disciplinary level through the code of conduct. Research involves collecting data from people about people (Creswell, 2014:92). Given that, this study has considered the ethical implications of carrying out an investigation on fellow human beings (LeedyandOrmrod, 2015:120). Ethical issues are significant and should be considered at various stages of the research process that is, prior to conducting the study, when beginning to analyse and report data, and when sharing and storing data (Creswell, 2014:93). This researcher adhered to ethical guidelines and ensured that the following aspects were taken into consideration:

Ensuring participants gave informed consent: The researcher informed the participants that participation would be absolutely voluntary and at their discretion. To provide a clear understanding and be transparent, the purpose of the study, the research process and how results would be used was explained explicitly to all participants to eliminate any element of covert observation (Bryman, 2012:138). The participants were afforded an option to withdraw from participating at any given point without any negative consequences for them (Bhattacherjee, 2012:137). The consent forms were signed willingly and all participants were consenting adults.

Ensuring no harm came to participants: The researcher was cautious not to collect data that would cause harm to participants in any form. Bryman (2012:135) stated that harm could be physical, or constitute harm to a participant's development, loss of self-esteem or induce subjects to perform reprehensible acts which could lead to embarrassment.

Ensuring confidentiality and anonymity: The study obtained data through face-to-face interviews, a design that makes anonymity impossible (Bhattacherjee, 2012:138). However, Bryman (2012:142) suggested that the use of pseudonyms in transcripts, safekeeping of tape transcripts and notes as well as altering some details such as location and the area where participants live,can help to maintain anonymity and respect the privacy of participants. Therefore, the participants were assured that the data collected would remain confidential and that the final report would not contain details that could identify respondents.

Ensuring that permission was obtained: The researcher obtained approval to conduct a study at the DHET as well as from the partner implementing the skills programmes, the DPW. The request for permission stated that the findings of the study would be shared with relevant parties. As part of the request for approval to conduct the research, an ethical clearance certificate was obtained from the Management College of Southern Africa (MANCOSA).

4. Results

The biographical information of participants at the level of beneficiaries revealed that most beneficiaries have between grades nine and twelve as the highest education level, whilst others in the sample are in the level above matric. The participants at decision-making and implementation level indicated that the educational level is not necessarily adequate for admission to skills programmes, however, there are certain programmes that have stringent criteria for beneficiaries to qualify for enrolment. One participant mentioned that they have a skills audit database to capture the educational level of each beneficiary in the programme. Beneficiaries attested to their low levels of education, however indicated that the facilitator is very supportive and helps them to keep up with the level of learning. The participants presented mixed opinions on the relevance of skills programmes interventions offered. The skills developed were argued to be project relevant at the community level, while at the same time envisioning the development to be beyond EPWP participation. The reality is EPWP has vast projects of which some are specific to the implementation of the programme (informed by the EPWP skills priority course list), which might have

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an adverse effect on a broader skills applicability and absorption by the economy at large. Another aspect of quality that the participants pointed out relates to the credibility of trainers to provide training with an understanding of beneficiaries' different levels of education, and to ensure that the training provided is quality assured by the relevant bodies. Linked to that, is the outcomes of the training provided. Participants in the focus group discussions confirmed that the training received is in line with the projects they are recruited to work for. Participants appreciated the opportunity, valued the training and perceived it as a stepping stone, but emphasised the need for further training in order to be at an advantage and competitive, which in turn could contribute to the sustainability of skills programmes interventions. The participants highlighted a number of things that have a positive impact on the individuals participating in skills programmes, with employment taking centre stage followed by attainment of further education and training in order to better the lives of the members of their communities. Participants presented mixed views with regard to career progression in skills programmes. Whilst some participants noted a progressive link to training programmes that could lead to a full qualification with buffering career options, two participants felt that skills programmes bring no or weak career progression. Most of the participants indicated that the skills programmes contribute to increased access to jobs and opportunities such as learnerships and artisan programmes, and can be aligned to formal degree courses and full qualifications, whereas others noted that it depended on the occupation. The beneficiaries also cited a range of benefits of participating in the skills programmes. These include knowledge and skills attained, behavioural change, increased opportunities, receiving stipends, and becoming eager to learn more. The participants noted a lot of improvement in how they handle clients since being involved in the skills programme training. Even their behaviour was noted to have changed due to participating in the programme. Participants perceived the training to be opening doors to employment and other opportunities. An understanding of credits and accumulation of credits became apparent in all three groups. The participants outlined several issues pertaining to the capacity to manage skills programmes. What mostly came out was the issue around the outsourcing training services to third parties (the training providers) in terms of their credibility, training delivery and support mechanisms provided in the overall implementation process. Another critical issue that participants pointed out was the value chain, which could benefit the entire skills development system. Another critical element that has been experienced in delivery relates to support, funding availability and funding challenges.

5. Discussion and Interpretation

The data analysed revealed a few worrying issues on the effectiveness of skills programmes as training interventions to address the low levels of education and unemployment due to skills shortages for public works programmes. Firstly, the skills programmes were declared to be complex due to a number of stakeholders that get involved in the implementation which expands the value chain and make it difficult to measure its effects on beneficiaries (Adams, 2011:3). The importance of value chain links to ensure a seamless fit between theory and world of work cannot be overemphasised (participant 002). As part of the value chain the implementation of the RPL mechanism was highlighted as the means to assist the people who are employed in low level jobs, unemployed with low level of education to acquire full qualification so that they can compete in the job market (participant 001). Secondly, the discussion on the types and content of interventions revealed mixed perspectives on the outcomes of skills programmes training in the public works projects. Whereas some participants emphasised that trainings are tailored for specific projects, some participants were of the opinion that the training is structured in a way that prepares beneficiaries for labour market and beyond EPWP programme. However, the duration and quality of short term training offered to beneficiaries remain a concern (Adams, 2011:3). Participants from focus groups discussions declared their concern with the duration of training and indicated that currently training period lasts for 33 days maximum (BLFGD 012). Furthermore, the training programmes have not yielded positive results in terms of permanent placements. Thus, affecting sustainability of skills programmes as training interventions. Another concerning issue is the role played by community in influencing the choice of programmes to be implemented. The participant's perceptions only pointed to the recognition of community needs without indicating how communities contribute to the needs

identification. Thirdly, the discussions revealed that the skills programmes interventions have multi-career paths however, there's no career guidance provided to beneficiaries prior to joining the programme. The shifts in labour force demographics necessitate that individuals are prepared for both formal employment and opportunities of establishing own small businesses or cooperatives (DHET, 2013:9). According to Swanepoel*et al*. (2016, 2014:492), individuals are independent of organisation or environment and should be directed towards opportunities that will nurture creativity and talents. Lastly, the EPWP approach appeared to have gaps in terms of training interventions that could sustain the livelihoods. The beneficiaries demonstrated eagerness to learn and pleaded for more opportunities to continue with training to attain full qualifications. This is an issue of planning around the projects to provide training interventions over lengthier period to offer a full qualification to the beneficiaries and can be addressed through policy intervention. Other concerning factors highlighted relates to monitoring and evaluation. The issue of weak monitoring system is a concern in implementation of programmes. Almeida *et al.* (2012:59) stated that strong monitoring and evaluation system enable for the collection of accurate data that ultimately feed to the design of programme implementation and enhance decision making. The funding factor was also raised as an issue of concern in the implementation of skills programmes in relation to securing more funds for the programme. Furthermore, participants asserted that there's no available costing model for the interventions. However, skills interventions have been criticised widely on managing the available funds effectively resulted to poor performance (REAL, 2015:9).

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

It should be noted that the results of the study are not generalisable and the information was only elicited to enhance an understanding of the effectiveness of skills programmes funded and managed by the DHET for the betterment of their implementation. The themes from the management problem were refined to cover four areas for which interview questions were structured:

- Participants' demographics (biographical information)
- Impact of skills programmes interventions on society and individual careers
- Sustainability of skills programmes training offered
- Career ambitions and future aspiration
- Capacity to manage skills programmes

However, a sixth area emerged during the interview which sought to assess the benefits of participating in skills programmes. The theme entailed looking at the situational improvement of beneficiaries as a result of participating in the skills programmes. All the themes were aligned to the codes that were created to analyse and interpret data. The findings are based on the views of participants on decision-making and implementation levels, and beneficiaries of the skills programmes. The findings are presented according to the level and the role of participants in the implementation of skills programmes. Hence, the demographics of participants were included to provide the characteristics of the sample to ensure its credibility. The biographical information about participants on decision-making and implementation levels confirmed the role played by these participants in terms of skills training and experience, which provided valuable information to understand the phenomena at that level. The beneficiaries' gender is equal at 50% males and females respectively. The findings related to age group revealed that the highest percentage (50%) of young people between the ages of 20 to 29 are undergoing the skills programmes. The education level analysis also presented the highest percentage (56.25%) of people with grade nine to twelve as their highest level of education. From the analysis of age and level of education, it is evident that young people are mostly affected by low levels of education, which supports the findings from the literature. Further findings from the study are summarised according to themes, as follows.

Theme A: Impact of skills programmes interventions on society and individual careers: The findings revealed that training is taking place with the beneficiaries recruited according to the EPWP programme policy. The participants at decision-making level and implementation level confirmed the

contribution made by skills programmes in changing the beneficiaries' lives, but noted the rigidity of the criteria to qualify for certain programmes. The stringent requirements disadvantage beneficiaries with the lowest level of education. The RPL mechanism which could have assisted beneficiaries to have a credible qualification is not implemented or even part of the training approaches. The beneficiaries asserted that they are employed in various EPWP projects from different communities. The findings further confirmed that beneficiaries are receiving skills training according to the needs of the projects for which they have been recruited. The beneficiaries indicated that they have developed more knowledge, skills and abilities. Most importantly, the beneficiaries indicated that they would transfer the skills to other people who maybe in the same projects as they are, their communities and even their own families. They were also excited that they would receive certificates at the successful completion of their training. However, they stated that the certificates did not guarantee placement after training, and that they needed more training,eventually leading to a full qualification. It was also evident from their responses that not all beneficiaries recruited for the projects had access to training, hence the beneficiaries participating in the study indicated they were keen to transfer the skills they have acquired in skills programmes training when they go back to their respective projects.

Theme B: Sustainability of skills programmes training offered: The participants presented mixed perspectives on the relevance of the skills programmes training offered. Some pointed out that the training is informed by a project's needs, whereas others indicated that the training is meant for broader skills applicability. Most of the EPWP projects are area specific and skills learned in that particular area might be irrelevant to the other areas. This may have an adverse effect on the sustainability of skills programmes as training interventions and broader skills applicability. The beneficiaries perceived the training as relevant and only emphasised the need for further education and assistance to establish their own companies. The beneficiaries dreamt of acquiring skills that will contribute to changing their lives as individuals and the situation of their communities, which could assist government to design future programmes with a view to helping vulnerable and needy societies. The energy, confidence, strong ambitions and dreams demonstrated by beneficiaries supported the literature findings indicating that young people should be given an opportunity to develop skills needed to realise their full potential (Africa Progress Report,2012:15). The current study also revealed that the beneficiaries are already building on the idea of starting their own companies in collaboration with fellow beneficiaries. Therefore, skills programmes interventions should be designed in such a way that they nurture talents, creativity and innovativeness, adding value to the training programmes to make them sustainable.

Theme C: Benefits of participating in skills programmes interventions: The key finding in this area concerns the situational improvement. Participants across the board declared that the skills programmes contributed to changing the lives of their beneficiaries in many ways. The beneficiaries' attitude towards employment and job opportunities is so mature that they are keen to have more opportunities and have no problem working in their communities. Their aspiration to progress with further training came out at the top of the list, as well as their confidence in the knowledge, skills and abilities that they as beneficiaries have obtained at the level of training received. However, the participants reiterated the issue of placement and that the training had not stimulated adequate employment opportunities. Other participants felt that no proper career guidance is provided to beneficiaries, which means they are not given any chance to make informed decisions about their careers.

Theme D: Capacity to manage skills programmes interventions: In the examination of the current capacity to manage skills programmes planning, coordination, monitoring and evaluation of implementation were highlighted as the most critical elements to meet the desired outcomes. The finding supports previous literature which identified a weak policy direction, inappropriate governance and institutional arrangement reducing accountability and imperfect information resultant to weak monitoring system, lack of continuous evaluation and poor quality of information produced (Almeida*et al*., 2012:59). The quality element resurfaced as the cornerstone of effective implementation of training interventions. Currently, the training component is outsourced to various training providers. Some are excellent at their

jobs whilst others are less effective. In some instances, there are a limited number of accredited training providers with multi-programmes. As a result, the contracted training provider subcontracts training activities to other parties to meet requirements. This increases the value chain and makes monitoring and evaluation of a programme difficult. With the stretched value chain, the linkage between theoretical work and the workplace component is affected. Another challenge cited was the systemic improvements and delivery mechanisms such as quality councils, policy makers, learning institutions and workplaces. In terms of qualifications, the RPL mechanism is not fully functional to assist the learners who have completed multiskilling programmes within a qualification. Although the EPWP programmes have not trained learners to a level where the accumulated credits could make a full qualification, there is a discrepancy in the EPWP approach in terms of structuring the training towards achieving a full qualification. This casts doubt on the decisions when selecting the skills programmes or courses to be offered. The participants declared that the skills programmes offered are informed by the priority list courses signed off by public bodies. However, it became evident from the responses that there is a lack of research and the skills programmes offered as training interventions are not aligned to market needs. Another issue raised is the availability of infrastructure and technology to support skills programmes. On the other hand, the cry from the decision-making and implementation level participants was the unavailability of funding to cater for more training needs, while the training costs are exorbitant. The findings revealed a gap in the timing of applications for training. In one group, beneficiaries indicated that after training they would not be going back to projects hence the request for further training. Their workplace exposure might be compromised and they will not be able to build in the required element of qualification. Monitoring has to be strengthened in this area to ensure that training principles are applied uniformly across all projects.

7. Recommendations

The beneficiaries who meet university or TVET entrance requirements may be channelled and encouraged to study at those institutions. Seek bursaries where appropriate. This may address the variation in population demographics on the issue of educational levels.

1. Recognise the informal development of skills by means of a qualification. This could be done through the implementation of RPL. Many people with low levels of education and skills have acquired work experience, but have no certificate to prove their knowledge. Others have been working in various EPWP projects and could benefit from the RPL mechanism.

2. There should be more research and skills audits conducted in the programme. The DPW and its affiliates should play a visible role in researching the types of interventions and not only rely on sectors to provide that information. The community structures and beneficiaries should play an active role in identifying the skills needs. DPW should also look at emerging skills programmes like green skill economy through the environmental sector.

3. Career guidance and dissemination of career information is critical to skills programmes to enable beneficiaries to make informed decisions about their careers. The DPW training component needs to have expertise in this area, or alternatively, forge partnerships with institutions that provide professional career guidance like DBE, DHET, institutions of learning, etcetera to link their beneficiaries prior to undertaking any training intervention.

4. Monitoring and evaluation should be developed and strengthened. This should include developing an MIS system that will assist continuous improvement in the management of skills programmes interventions implemented by government institutions such as EPWP.

5. The policy has to be reviewed to allow for more sustainable periods of training, and training activities should not be reduced to a project's needs only in programmes like EPWP. The EPWP programme policy goals are not clear about the significance of training design and implementation. A rigorous evaluation is required to assess the impact of policy interventions against objectives and provide evidence on the value of the training investment.

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6. Establish partnerships and strengthen relationships with Community Colleges. These relationships will facilitate the analysis of EPWP training interventions, which could be offered by community colleges. Another alternative is that the DPW could expand the scope of its training unit to instigate in-house training for EPWP generic programmes, and only outsource technical training.

7. Improve programme interventions by introducing additional training, for example in entrepreneurship to assist and encourage the beneficiaries interested in starting their own businesses with proper knowledge and skills. The training should be embedded in the programme and can be used as a graduation strategy. In addition to the exit strategy, EPWP could use the beneficiaries who have completed all training requirements and have been found competent as facilitators of the programme. There was so much interest declared by beneficiaries to transfer the knowledge and skills they acquired.

8. Recommendations for Future Research

It is concluded that the study provided an in-depth understanding of and insight into the effectiveness of skills programmes as training interventions to benefit unemployed learners. There were certain areas that could not be explored and more research is required:

1. To assess the impact of skills programmes interventions in changing the socio-economic circumstances of beneficiaries after graduating from EPWP training programmes, that is, in terms of employability or ability to start own businesses

2. To assess employment or business performance levels of beneficiaries who have graduated from EPWP training to evaluate credibility and quality of training offered

3. To apply quantitative or mixed methods to measure the outcomes of each intervention per sector. The EPWP programme is implemented nationally and benefits a huge number of community members.

4. To conduct a comparative study between EPWP programmes and other rural development programmes such as the National Rural Youth Service implemented by the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform. A constant comparative method is recommended to enhance theory building.

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