

Are learnerships effective?

Is there a mismatch between learnerships and employers' expectations? Do trainees emerge ready for the world of work? These are some of the questions **Asanda Benya** and **Ntombi Mavuso** investigated in the Information, Communication and Technology sector.



While there is a huge growth in the global economy, most people's lives have not improved. Instead the gap between the have and have nots has widened. According to the Department of Labour's review paper (2004), 185.9 million people were unemployed globally between 2001 and 2003. The report also shows that the youth, Africans and women were the groups most affected by unemployment.

South African statistics are not much different from global statistics. According to the South African Census conducted in 2001, the unemployment rate was 41.6% while according to Stats South Africa's *Labour Force Survey's* narrow definition it stood at 25.5%. CASE's Youth Survey in 2000 showed that South Africa has a large youth population and youth unemployment is a major developmental challenge. Of the 8 million unemployed in South Africa, 5.5 million of them are youth.

The government realised that it could not rely on the private sector to create jobs and so put skills intervention strategies in place to

combat unemployment. As part of skills development, it introduced learnerships.

Learnerships are a structured learning experience of a specific length. The learnerships we investigated ran for a year to a year and a half. They lead to a qualification and targeted different groups such as employed learners in order to extend or upgrade their range of skills; unemployed learners in order to build skills and provide workplace experience; and pre-employed learners to bridge the gap between institutional learning and workplace experience and so improve employability.

There are several stakeholders involved in the implementation of learnerships. These are Sector Education and Training Authorities (Setas), private companies, learning institutions, learners and the Department of Labour, which plays a pivotal role in the implementation and funding of learnerships.

Through questionnaires and interviews we examined the Isetta Seta, which focuses on the Information, Communication and

Technology (ICT) sector. We spoke to companies and administered comprehensive questionnaires to graduates and learners. A good percentage were young Africans between the ages of 18 and 25, mostly females and from previously disadvantaged backgrounds.

People agreed that the benefits of the programme were that they would become employable and stand a better chance at employment than someone who had not gone through a learnership. We also uncovered that all learners get a standard monthly allowance ranging from R1 000 to R2 000, while graduates receive R3 500.

Learners had differences on the relevance of classes they attended. The coordinators believe that there is a link between what the learners are taught at university and their practical work. Learners on the other hand argue that they do not see a strong link between the two.

At the workplace learners rotated to different sections in order to get a full picture of how the sector worked and to acquire different skills. Some learners did basic tasks such as



photocopying, faxing and packing store rooms. They felt there was a lack of depth in the training provided, so that they would not be competent when they went into the working world. This led to low levels of dedication and drive from learners as their skills were not nurtured. This training did not truly address skills development.

Another challenge that was experienced in the workplace was that some learners felt abused by full-time staff, others experienced racial discrimination and some felt that they were treated differently from the permanent staff. Their coordinators however said that these cases were very rare.

Coordinators also experienced problems with learners that they did not anticipate such as pregnancy, HIV/AIDS and lack of commitment. To illustrate learners' lack of commitment, coordinators pointed to some learners quitting once they found full-time employment and that some only joined for financial gain. Since all learners interviewed were from previously disadvantaged backgrounds, they tended to become breadwinners once they started the programme and the stipend became household income. This resulted in them viewing learnerships as a way of making money rather than as a way of acquiring skills needed for the labour market.

People should not be recruited on the basis of need. They should be recruited because they sincerely

want to be developed in that sector. At present learners seize whatever learnerships are provided in order to get money. It is no longer about skills development but about poverty alleviation. Service providers need to distinguish between real interest in the field as opposed to an immediate need for a job.

Companies are training more people than can be absorbed into the labour market. There is a low employment rate amongst learners who complete their learnerships. Skills providers and companies tend to focus on the number of students in the programme without investigating what the possibilities are of finding employment.

According to statistics supplied by the Isset Seta, by 2006 more than 7 036 learners had been trained through the Seta while 2 531 learnerships were in progress. Of those who completed their training, only 1 155 (25.6%) had been employed. Coordinators believe that the absorption rate is not very good because companies are still very sceptical about hiring learners with only one year of experience.

The Isset Seta has managed to help many learners with call centre placements. However, the problem with call centre placements is that the skills required do not match the skills acquired during a learnership. Also call centre jobs are very demanding and stressful and as a result learners do not last in these jobs.

Most learners went to township schools which negatively impacted on the quality of their training. This is a problem when dealing with high level sectors such as ICT. Learners need to have prior knowledge of IT in order to ensure success and hence a greater chance of employment.

Learnerships are a stepping stone towards unemployment alleviation. They should, however, be viewed as a short-term measure to combating unemployment. The government and Setas need to work together with private companies in order to establish what skills are in demand and which are no longer useful. By so doing they will deal with the problem of a mismatch of skills.

Learners also need to be assessed for whether they have a genuine interest in the area being trained. If companies train people who are looking for a stipend and a way to keep busy, the issue of unemployment will not be dealt with effectively and will waste government money. Companies should avoid training learners where there is an excess of skilled people, and find new avenues to develop and improve. LB

Asanda Benya is a masters student in the Sociology of Work Programme (SWOP) and Ntombi Mavuso is a sociology graduate from the University of the Witwatersrand.