

Learnerships

introducing questions for unions

One of the innovations contained in the Skills Development Act is the creation of learnerships. This article looks at what learnerships are and what they are intended to achieve as well as some of the issues surrounding them. It also highlights areas that unions and workers may want to discuss.

There are many complex issues involved in the design, development and implementation of learnerships. This article only aims to introduce the most important concepts and issues and does not aim to deal exhaustively with the topic.

Broadly speaking, the Skills Development Act and the Skills Development Levies Act seek to create an environment in which people can acquire skills which the labour market demands. Learnerships are one of the vehicles for encouraging people to develop their skills.

What is a learnership?

A learnership is a specific kind of learning programme which contains a structured learning component and structured work experience and results in a nationally recognised qualification.

Typically, a learner would attend classes at an institution or training centre and then be allocated to a department for a particular kind of work experience. Formal learning would alternate with work experience until the learner has mastered a range of skills.

Christoph Vorwerk explains what learnerships are and highlights areas that unions and workers may want to discuss.

Special learnerships are being designed for entrepreneurs setting up their own businesses. They will receive training and support to increase their chances of success.

Other learnerships could be designed for accelerated development of selected previously disadvantaged persons who are already in employment. Learnerships can be used to implement employment equity issues.

Still other learnerships may be used to help deal with specific social or development issues. For example, some groups have been discussing a learnership in the health sector in which qualified learners in villages or communities will assist and support people living with HIV/AIDS and their families. This learnership could form a stepping-stone to community health worker and eventually to a career path in the medical sector.

Union concerns and focus

- Are the learnerships just vehicles for acquiring technical skills?

- Could we have learnerships for shopstewards.
- Could we have learnerships for workers to close language, maths, science and trade theory gaps?
- Could we have learnerships for micro-entrepreneurs?
- Are the learners acquiring the necessary skills and knowledge to enable them to develop themselves fully in the occupational area and embark on the life-long learning pathway?
- Will new entrants with higher qualifications threaten existing workers' jobs?

What governs the learnership?

The learnership is governed by an agreement between the learner, the employer and the education and training provider. The agreement spells out the rights of the various parties to the agreement. The learner, for example, will have the right to adequate education and training, learning resources and assessment.

The learner also has some obligations, for example, to work for the employer, to comply with workplace policies and procedures and to attend all study periods and theoretical learning sessions.

Similarly, rights and obligations are provided for the education provider, the employer and the Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA) with whom the learnership is registered. These rights and obligations are all spelled out in the draft regulations of 26 January 2000.

A SETA must register the learnership with the Department of Labour.

The learnership leads to a recognised qualification. This qualification must be registered on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). Learners will then be assessed against nationally recognised unit standards. Unit standards reflect the

required skills and knowledge.

Learners are thus both students and workers at the same time. As they are studying and working they are acquiring skills and knowledge which will lead to qualifications.

Union concerns and focus

- The regulations provide some mechanisms for dispute resolution. Will trade unions also need to represent learners?
- Will learnership agreements conflict with current workplace agreements? (Leave or disciplinary procedures, for instance.)
- Do the NQF-registered qualifications adequately reflect workers' interests? Are they just technical qualifications or do they reflect a broader range of skills?

Purpose of learnerships

The learnership provides the learner with the opportunity to achieve a qualification registered on the NQF and related to an occupation. It allows learners to break through barriers that exist in acquiring sufficiently broad experience, for example 'I can't get a job because I have no experience. I can't get experience because I have no job.'

In addition, learnerships must be demanded, responding to needs in the labour market. The qualifications and the skills acquired must result in learners being able to engage in the labour market - that is find and retain work opportunities.

Sector Skills plans are one mechanism for identifying labour market needs. Each SETA will be developing such plans for its sector.

Union concerns and focus

- Do the Sector Skills Plans reflect the interests of not only formal work places but also of developmental, informal and small business?



Learnerships are broader and more dynamic than apprenticeships

- ❑ Are workers' needs adequately addressed in the Sector Skills Plans?
- ❑ Are there learnerships which will help workers develop mobility - to transfer from a sector where there is low growth or contraction to another where there is more growth?

Just apprenticeships?

While traditional apprenticeships could become learnerships, the learnership concept is both broader and more dynamic. Learnerships would go beyond the traditional blue-collar trades and not be restricted to juveniles who are entering the labour market for the first time. The NQF also provides for more levels of qualification between school leaving and the traditional trade.

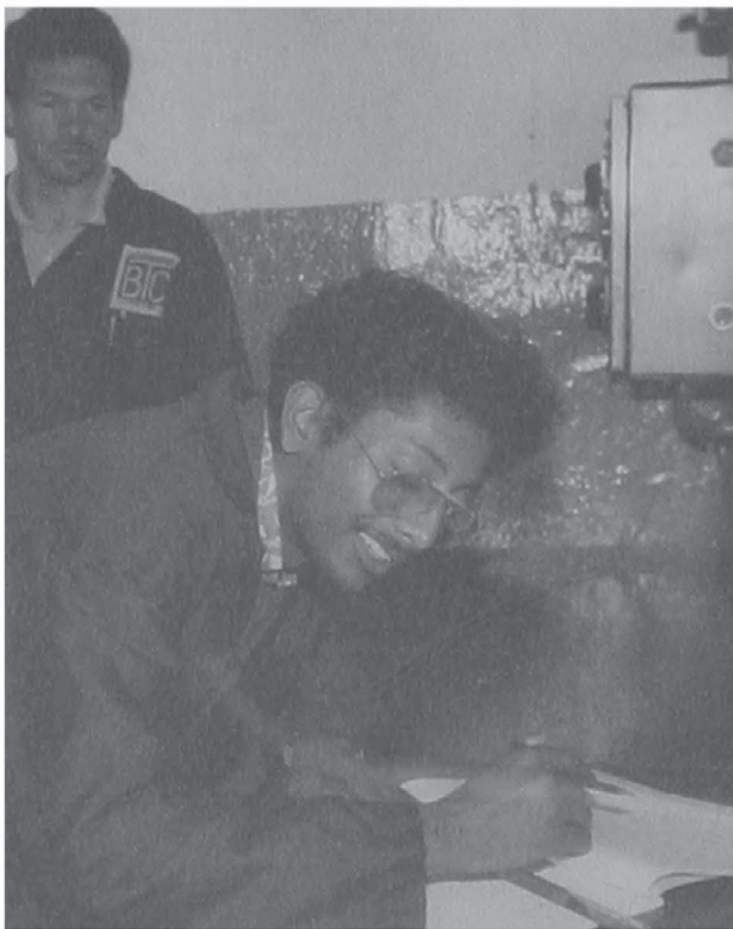
A learnership could result in a qualification which is a stepping-stone to a trade, for example a person qualified to repair domestic electrical appliances

versus an electrician

Learnerships could also be used at higher levels on the NQF. Many national diplomas offered by technikons in the past have required experiential learning. These qualifications could be adapted to become learnerships. Similarly, the internships of qualifying medical doctors or similar experiential learning for other professionals could be redesigned as learnerships.

Some of the people who could benefit from learnership programmes include

- ❑ current workers or employees who need to change or broaden their occupation because their skills are no longer needed
- ❑ current workers whose skills are being developed in terms of the Employment Equity Act
- ❑ new entrants to the labour market,
- ❑ retrenched workers,
- ❑ unemployed workers,



Learners are students and workers at the same time.

- people in communities or rural areas who are acquiring skills as the result of development projects,
- emerging entrepreneurs, for example informal traders.

Because of the scope of the SETAs, no area of the labour market is ignored. Could there be learnerships for:

- shopstewards and union officials,
- politicians, traditional leaders and community representatives,
- educators and skills development facilitators;
- public service personnel;
- traditional healers;
- entertainers?

Union concerns and focus

- What skills do unions need to develop?
- What skills do workers in the informal sector need to develop?
- Is the research for skills development

needs adequately addressing the sector?

Who designs learnerships?

Registering learnerships will have to be a collaborative effort. Depending on the type of learnership, there may be a range of role-players and stakeholders involved. These could include:

- education and training providers;
- employers or workplaces;
- unions,
- development agencies;
- community organisations;
- statutory professional bodies,
- trade associations,
- associations representing special interest groups (for example hawkers),
- non-governmental organisations;
- national, provincial or local government departments;
- donor or funding agencies.

Union concerns and focus

- Are there learnerships tools in transforming the workplace and society?
- Do they provide opportunities for redressing past and present inequities, for example lack of access to schooling or resources?
- Will the entry of qualified learners distort the current labour market? Could employers use learners as a form of cheap labour?
- Will the learnerships privilege new entrants and disadvantage existing, unqualified workers or people in the subsistence activities?

Impact on the workplace

Introducing learners into the workplace will create new dynamics in the workplace. Whether the learner comes from the existing workforce or is a new

entrant, there will be new activities and relationships. Some of these dynamics are

- learners, especially in the early stages, will not be fully responsible or accountable for their output;
- learners will need support;
- existing workers may need to acquire skills to support learners.

Learners in the workplace will place an additional burden on the current workforce and on management. It may require compromises in the work process and possibly even in the achievement of production targets, even if only for a short period

Union concerns and focus

- The discipline of learners and the handling of their grievances may require additional mechanisms. Will workplace agreements need to be revised?
- Are the communication systems for informing current employees adequate to prepare them for learners arriving in the workplace?
- Is the company/institution developing and recognising learner support skills among its existing staff?

Unions' influence

Where will unions be able to influence learnerships? At the national level unions will be able to exert influence within the structures of the National Skills Authority and the South African Qualifications Authority.

At governance level unions will be able to exert influence with the SETAs, at both national and regional level. This includes.

- determining labour market demands;
- influencing the construction and design of appropriate learning programmes;
- determining incentives for particular occupational qualifications.

At design and development level, unions can influence the content, the

learning processes and the learning programmes. The challenge for unions will be to ensure that both employers and providers adjust their current approach and practices with regard to occupational training and education.

At implementation level, union members and shopstewards will be interfacing with the workplace facilitators, the providers and the learners. All of these interfaces offer opportunities to influence and evaluate the learnership system. The real value of learnerships will be in the quality of learning at workplace level. This is where 'theory' is converted into practice or practice informs understanding.

Union concerns and focus

- Do unions have the capacity to engage at all these levels and in the day-to-day design and development of learnership programmes?
- Do union representatives have a clear idea of the systemic and strategic issues related to the skills development practice, the labour market and the learnership system?

Conclusion

New systems such as learnerships can be both a threat and an opportunity. Our first response is often negative. By identifying opportunities, we can often use the new system as a lever to achieving our strategic objectives. By considering learnerships as an opportunity, unions could use them to address not only changes in the workplace but also such issues as:

- union capacity needs at all levels, and
- new market opportunities for unions in sectors such as small business or reconstruction and development. ★

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