

RESEARCH REPORT

WHOLESALE & RETAIL SETA
LEADERSHIP CHAIR: GAUTENG



EVALUATING THE SUCCESS OF WORKPLACE-BASED LEARNERSHIPS DRIVEN BY W&RSETA IN BRIDGING THE SKILLS GAP: A TRACER STUDY

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EVALUATING THE SUCCESS OF WORKPLACE BASED LEARNERSHIPS DRIVEN BY W&RSETA IN BRIDGING THE SKILLS GAP: A TRACER STUDY

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

4IR	Fourth Industrial Revolution
CRM	Customer Relationship Management
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
GP	Gauteng Limpopo
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
KZN	KwaZulu-Natal
LP	Limpopo
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NSDS	National Skills Development Strategy
NW	North-West
SDA	Skills Development Act
SETA's	Sector Education and Training Authorities
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Sciences
SSP	Sector Skills Plan
UJ	University of Johannesburg
VUT	Vaal University of Technology
W&R SETA	Wholesale and Retail Sector Education and Training Authority
WBL	Workplace-Based Learnership

GLOSSARY

Term	Rephrased Definition
Beneficiary	An individual who has completed a work-based learning programme, specifically a learnership.
Employed Learnership (EL)	A learnership offered to individuals already employed. The EL beneficiary must be working for an employer in the Insurance or related services sector, regardless of whether the employer pays a levy. While the EL beneficiary does not receive a stipend, R20,000 is allocated for tuition expenses.
Employer or Host Organisation	The company or organisation where a beneficiary was either formally employed or hosted to complete the work-based learning component of the learnership.
Employment Status	A broad term used to describe the various post-learnership activities of learners from the 2019/23 programme, based on responses from the 2025 survey.
Financial Situation	Represents how respondents perceive their financial well-being after completing the learnership. These perceptions were gathered through open-ended questions, unlike the more objective income data collected through closed-ended questions.
Learnership Programme	A formal work-based learning programme combining theoretical education with practical workplace experience, leading to a recognised qualification. Typically, it spans at least 12 consecutive months and is available to both employed and unemployed individuals.
Participant	A person who took part in a work-based learning programme, in this context, a learnership. This term is synonymous with "Beneficiary."
Population Size	The total count of individuals who participated in the learning programme.

Respondent	A beneficiary who completed the survey.
Training provider:	Refers to an accredited training centre or organisation in partnership with INSETA to provide sector-related training to candidates of a learning programme. The training provider takes care of all the administration related to the beneficiary's qualification.
Unemployed learnership (UL):	Unemployed learnerships are available to unemployed youth. The learner enters a fixed-term employment contract to achieve workplace learning while studying and receives a stipend.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The executive summary details the key results from the tracking and tracing survey on beneficiaries of the 2019/23 intervention period for the learnership programme in the Wholesale and Retail Sector Training Authority (W&R SETA).

Project Background

The University of Johannesburg's Marketing Department was commissioned by the W&R SETA to evaluate skills development programmes aimed at assisting graduates to gain skills and employment in the sector and to pursue entrepreneurial activities. The purpose of this study was to determine whether the programme effectively prepared participants for the workforce and was self-sustaining. This study was conducted primarily through a literature review and data collection from key stakeholders (learners, employers/teachers/mentors). The study findings will assist in shaping future W&R SETA initiatives and improving outcomes while delivering on its mandate.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative techniques using primary and secondary data sources. Data was gathered from learners, employers and training providers, ensuring a well-rounded analysis. The secondary research involved reviewing documents and literature, including published journals and reports, to draw insights from both global and regional experiences and applying them locally. This process systematically evaluated existing research on skills development interventions and their impact on graduate employment and entrepreneurship ability.

Primary research consisted of quantitative data collection through surveys with the learners only. Qualitative insights were gathered via focus groups and in-depth interviews with employers and teachers involved in the W&R SETA programme. The study findings contribute to a broader study assessing the effectiveness of work-based learnerships (WBLs) in closing the skills gap within South Africa's retail sector.

Key Findings

Using a combination of quantitative surveys and qualitative research, the study assessed the impact of WBLs on the programme participants between the 2019 and 2023 financial years. The study results are presented in the relevant sections.

Qualitative Survey

- This phase of the study employed focus group in-depth interviews with key informants involved in the W&R SETA programme.
- This research phase aimed to understand the participants' perceptions and satisfaction patterns with the WBLs.

Quantitative Survey

- A sample size of 800 respondents (both employed and unemployed) was targeted.
- A total of 430 properly completed study questionnaires were collected for analysis purposes.

The breakdown of the responses from the study respondents is included in the report.

Impact of the Programme

- Overall, participants reported improved employment outcomes after completing the programme.
- Many beneficiaries experienced financial benefits from their participation but felt that the programme did not significantly enhance their skills in securing employment or achieving their career goals at the end of the programme.

Recommendations

a. Continuous Monitoring and Evaluation:

- Maintain comprehensive records of beneficiaries to support future research.
- Implement follow-up mechanisms to track the learners' progress after completing the programme.

b. Strengthening W&R SETA Oversight and Support:

- Use key findings to refine programme coordination and identify areas for improvement.

For Employers:

- Assign learners to roles relevant to their field of study to ensure meaningful work experience.
- Adhere to fair labour practices, preventing discrimination such as dismissals due to for example late coming or no show.
- Provide necessary resources, such as ICT equipment, to enhance training effectiveness.

For Learners:

- Observe workplace ethics and follow employer rules to ensure successful work placements.
- Approach learning with curiosity and commitment to enhance practical application.
- Address issues of absenteeism and dropout rates through increased engagement.

For W&R SETA:

- Standardise programme durations to either 12 or 24 months to allow adequate skill development.

- Manage learner expectations by preparing them for entry-level roles and career progression realities.
- Enhance workplace exposure, mentorship and entrepreneurship training opportunities.
- Collaborate with employers to facilitate structured work placements and provide relevant training resources.
- Offer financial support in a form of grants for entrepreneurship investment and arbitrate in the quest to ensure proper working conditions are adhered to the graduates and their employers, for instance, some beneficiary's contracts were terminated before finishing their training programmes.

For Training Providers:

- Ensure curricula align with industry needs, as some surveyed employers found the learners to be lacking essential skills.
- Support learners throughout their work placements to ensure relevant training experiences.
- Regularly update training materials to include high-demand skills such as financial management, project management and IT competencies.

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1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This report details the findings from the tracking and tracing survey on beneficiaries of the 2019/23 Learnership learning programme in the wholesale and retail sector.

1.1 PURPOSE AND OUTCOME OF THE STUDY

The skills and knowledge development landscape is a dynamic and changing field, with a spotlight on aligning training and education in the quest to address socioeconomic and unemployment challenges in the labour market. Identifying inconsistencies between the skills gained through learnerships and those expected by the retail industry stakeholders is also very important. Central to this process is the use and role played by Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs), each responsible for a specific sector or sub-sectors of industry and commerce. These authorities play a crucial role in detecting skills needs, giving guidance and ensuring that sector-specific workforce requirements are successfully met.

The Wholesale and Retail Sector Education and Training Authority (W&R SETA) was established in 2000 under the Skills Development Act (as amended) as one of the six SETAs in South Africa, which seeks to support the Wholesale and Retail sector by advancing skills and growing the sector's contribution to the labour market. The W&R SETA's objective is to make sure that the workforce is well-trained and equipped to meet industry demands and bridge the gap between industry needs and the available workforce skills, thereby supporting the economic growth and development. To successfully achieve its mandate, the W&R SETA primarily facilitates skills development and programmes by disbursing grants for learning programmes, monitoring and supporting education and training initiatives and aligning with the objectives outlined in the National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS), which guides SETAs in their efforts to address the skills shortage in the country and increase employment opportunities.

Evaluating the effectiveness of learnerships by means of a tracer study with the aim of addressing the everchanging needs and requirements of the global retail sector,

has become an important endeavour in a sector that has been infiltrated by the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). Hence, conducting a tracer study to investigate the effects and destination of the beneficiaries of the W&R SETA-funded WBL programmes, internships, bursaries and/or learnerships is of utmost importance.

Accordingly, understanding how well the learnerships align with industry needs, detecting skills gaps and gathering feedback from both the beneficiaries and their employers is of critical importance. Furthermore, this study aims to investigate if the W&R SETAs learnership programmes are successfully addressing industry-specific challenges, and if they effectively enhance productivity, and support career development in the South African economy.

The University of Johannesburg (UJ), with its strategic partner, the Vaal University of Technology (VUT) were commissioned by the W&R SETA Gauteng Chair to undertake a WBL W&R SETA-funded learnership tracer study from the year 2019 to 2023. The intention is to investigate several issues relating to the effectiveness of W&R SETA-funded learnership programmes including learner employability by their demographic background, and access to the labour market with improved opportunities for entrepreneurial prospects in the quest to address the scourge of unemployment.

Furthermore, an examination of the appetite displayed by employers to absorb learners is of utmost importance, while assessing if the W&R SETA learnerships provide learners with necessary skills needed by the labour market and industry, pertinent to the required qualifications and occupational requirements. Furthermore, the study will determine if through these learnership programmes, there are any significant changes or improvements in the learners' socioeconomic standing and their overall perceptions of WBL and its association with the 4IR. In addition, the study will analyse whether the learners have stayed in the employment of the Wholesale and Retail sector with their employers after completing the learnership or whether they are employed elsewhere because of the opportunity provided by the W&R SETA learnership.

The outcome of the tracer study is to determine whether the programme is accomplishing its mission and demonstrate its outcomes. Consistent with this, the

study findings present key insights concerning programme beneficiaries who took part and completed the WBL programmes during the 2019/23 financial year regarding their:

- Employment status (employed, self-employed and unemployed),
- Employment rates,
- Match between qualifications attained and occupations,
- Nature of employment, in terms of employment sector or types of employment (e.g. formal or informal); tenure (part-time or full-time, contract or permanent).

Primarily, the study assists in further developing a sustainable skills development strategy for the W&R SETA. New insights are revealed for the resulting concerns:

- Whether the applied WBL programmes improved the skills and knowledge for the learners;
- Whether the WBL programmes enabled the learners access to the wholesale and retail sector; and
- Whether the WBL programmes facilitated entry to self-employment.

1.2 BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

South Africa's labour market and its worrying high youth unemployment rates have in recent years been placed under a microscope by various attentive stakeholders. Efforts by authorities such as the W&R SETA to contribute towards addressing this quagmire, through its funded learnership programme has been witnessed over several years. A learnership is a structured learning process that links theoretical education with practical hands-on training and knowledge allowing the learners to acquire appropriate skills directly from a workplace environment in a particular field. The learnership process assists the beneficiaries to close the gap between their theoretical knowledge and practical work skills and experience, which is aimed to prepare the learners to be work-ready in their respective fields.

The W&R SETA's mandate is to facilitate efforts towards learner skills development within the Wholesale and Retail sector, offering grants to qualifying or deserving beneficiaries and monitoring their progress as outlined in the NSDS. To determine if the SETA's endeavours meaningfully contribute towards the beneficiaries' socioeconomic conditions and standing in the society is warranted relative to its mandate. In addition, establishing if the learnership programme properly prepares the beneficiaries to be work-ready and/or presents them with entrepreneurial opportunities after engaging in the programme, and if employer willingness to continue absorbing learners for such programmes still exists or not, are key elements that need to be systematically investigated to gain a well-informed perspective of the effectiveness of the programme.

By conducting such a study, the W&R SETA will have a better understanding and clarity on the direction that its strategic approach needs to take going forward, informed by the findings derived from such a study. Accordingly, the stakeholder theory perspective which advances the importance of everyone's buy-in and participation to properly implement learnership funded programmes is supported in this study.

1.3 RESEARCH PROBLEM AND RESEARCH GAP

The study problem emanates from a proposition made by the W&R SETA for independent external researchers to investigate the effectiveness of their learnership funded programmes to the beneficiaries and their employer perceptions and appetite on absorbing learners on a continuous basis. A swift evaluation of the recent W&R SETA reports as well as its Sector Skills Plan (2024-2025) detailing the imperativeness of striving to address the skills shortage and enhanced employment opportunities. Appropriately, this study investigated if the learnership funded programmes effectively address industry-specific challenges and in fact enhances productivity and support career development in the South African economy.

1.4 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objective of the study was to assess the socioeconomic status of the learnership fund beneficiaries, monitor employer appetite to continuously employ learners, and evaluate the effectiveness of the programmes in meeting the employment and/or entrepreneurial prospects of young people in the Wholesale and Retail sector. The study aims to provide data-driven insights that can be used to enhance future programme implementation and strengthen the SETA's responsiveness to labour market developments. The project objectives are presented as follows:

- ✓ To assess the efficiency of the funded learnerships in addressing learner socioeconomic needs and social standing as beneficiaries of the programme.
- ✓ To examine employer appetite to absorb funded learners relative to qualifications and job requirements.
- ✓ To investigate if the learners that participated in the learnerships are satisfied with the skills provided by the learnership employers.
- ✓ To assess the employers' satisfaction with the skills presented by the learners.
- ✓ Establish the destinations of learners after completion of their funded learnership programme.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

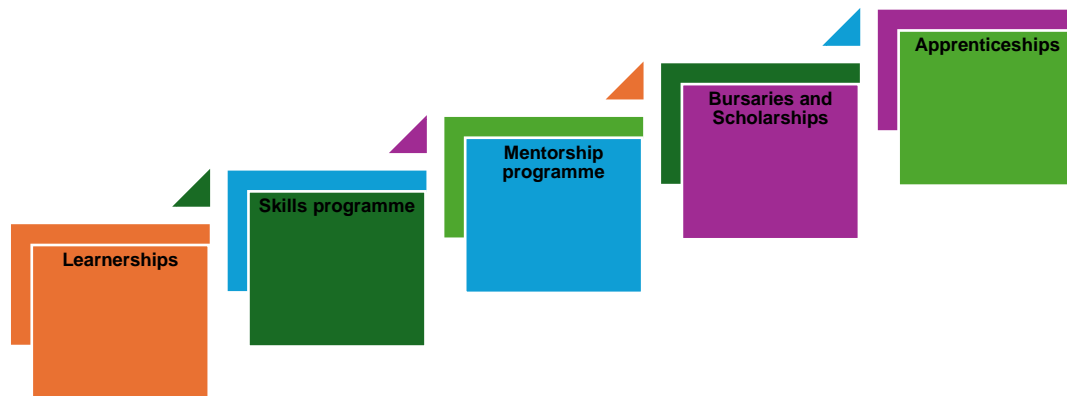
2.1 INTRODUCTION

WBL has emerged as a critical model for addressing the widening skills gap between educational outcomes and industry requirements. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and employers all over the world have increasingly taken responsibility for enhancing graduates' employability, as unemployment rates continue to rise each year (Tight 2023). In a developing country like South Africa, the W&R SETA plays a pivotal role in implementing learnership programmes designed to bridge this gap (Sector Skills Plan 2025). However, improving employability is not the sole objective, many institutions and employers also seek to develop graduates' soft skills and other essential competencies required in the industry. This literature review evaluates the effectiveness of WBL in skills development, with a particular focus on the SETA-driven initiatives. It examines how these programmes prepare learners for employment, align with the demands of the 4IR and promote inclusivity, particularly for individuals with disabilities.

2.2 THE ROLE OF WBL IN SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

WBL is a widely adopted instrument that equips new graduates with the necessary skills and experience. This instrument has been considered in various countries in; North America (Valencia-Forrester 2020), Europe (Amish 2024), Africa (Dlamini et al. 2022), Asia Pacific (Jackson & Bridgstock 2020) and South America (Cameron et al. 2023). It is essential to also note that WBL is not sector-specific. All industries and sector can implement WBL as it improves graduates' employability. The W&R SETA in South Africa has implemented several WBL initiatives to bridge the skills gap between education and industry requirements. Figure 2.1 illustrates the key WBL initiatives which collectively reduce unemployment, enhance skills development and align workforce capabilities with industry needs (Fourie et al., 2024).

Figure 2.1: Key W&R SETA-driven WBL initiatives



Source: (Fourie 2024)

WBL combines theoretical instruction with hands-on experience, allowing learners to develop industry-relevant skills through mentorships, formal education and direct workplace training (Thapa, 2024). The evolving wholesale and retail sector, influenced by consumer behaviour, economic changes, and technological advancements has heightened the need for continuous skill development (Gosling, 2021). Hence, reskilling has become essential to maintaining a competent workforce that can adapt to industry shifts and emerging job demands.

Table 1: Benefits and challenges of WBL programmes

No.	Benefits	Challenges
Higher Education Institutions		
1	Enhanced graduate employability	Curriculum-Industry misalignment
2	Stronger industry partnerships	Limited industry partnerships
3	Curriculum improvement	Insufficient funding and resources
4	Increased student engagement and retention	Administrative issues
5	Stronger reputation and accreditation	Quality assurance and standardisation
Employers		
6	Access to skilled talent and future employees	Limited capacity to host interns
7	Increased productivity and innovation	Productivity vs training balance
8	Reduced training costs	Skills readiness of students
9	Stronger industry-academic collaboration	Short placement periods

10	Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and compliance benefits	Compliance and legal concerns
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Source: Authors own consolidation

While WBL enhances workforce readiness, reduces unemployment, and strengthens industry-academic partnerships (Mosala 2022), its implementation presents challenges. Poorly structured programmes and unsupportive work environments may hinder learning experiences, reducing programme effectiveness (Jackson 2015). Additionally, HEIs face issues such as curriculum-industry misalignment, insufficient funding and administrative constraints, while employers struggle with balancing productivity and training, hosting capacity and compliance concerns. Understanding these benefits and challenges is crucial for refining WBL programmes to better align with industry needs, enhance learner experiences, and support South Africa's workforce development (Gallagher et al. 2019; Nkosi et al. 2024).

2.3 ADDRESSING SKILLS GAPS THROUGH LEARNERSHIP PROGRAMMES

Persistent skills shortages in South Africa are a huge concern. Thus, addressing this gap by providing structured, work-based training that integrates theoretical knowledge with practical experience is highly important. These programmes, regulated and funded by SETAs under the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), are industry-specific and lead to registered qualifications under the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) (Matha & Jahed 2024). In the wholesale and retail sector, critical shortages in customer service, supply chain management and digital retailing hinder workforce readiness and sectoral growth. Scholars highlight the scarcity of 4IR skills, emphasising the need for upskilling and reskilling to maintain industry competitiveness. As digital skills drive innovation and operational efficiency, wholesalers and retailers must prioritise digital literacy and technological adaptation to thrive in an increasingly digital economy (Alexander 2022; Gonese & Ngepah 2024; Li 2024).

W&R SETA learnerships are tailored to bridge these gaps by equipping learners with both technical and soft skills necessary for the sector. These programmes enhance adaptability to industry shifts and technological advancements but face challenges

such as limited employer participation, inconsistent programme quality and insufficient post-learnership employment opportunities. Reports from W&R SETA (Mncube et al. 2021; Sector Skills Plans report, 2023) highlight successful initiatives that have improved workforce readiness, particularly for disadvantaged groups, including unemployed youth and women. Despite these positive outcomes, challenges such as limited long-term job placements, evolving digital skill requirements and unequal access to training persist.

2.4 LEARNER DEMOGRAPHICS AND MARKET ACCESS

The wholesale and retail sector in South Africa provides accessible employment opportunities for young individuals, particularly women, through learnerships and WBL initiatives. Most learners are between 18 and 35 years old, with many entering the sector with only a matric qualification. While urban areas dominate retail training opportunities, efforts are being made to expand access in rural regions (Mtotywa & Motaung 2024). Market accessibility is influenced by education, location and technological shifts, with digital transformation reshaping job requirements and career prospects. Despite the sector's inclusivity, challenges such as wage disparities, informal employment and limited career progression hinder long-term workforce participation (Chiloane et al. 2023). Furthermore, socioeconomic factors affect WBL outcomes, with learners from low-income backgrounds facing financial and digital access constraints (Hlanganipai & Musara 2016).

Barriers to WBL learners entering the labour market include transportation costs, inadequate industry networks and lack of work experience, disproportionately affecting disadvantaged groups (Bromley et al. 2021; Brenner & Dymond 2023). Strengthening industry partnerships, mentorship and financial aid can improve employment outcomes by bridging these gaps (Habiyaemye et al. 2022). In addition, incorporating entrepreneurial training in WBL programmes equips learners with business planning, financial management and digital marketing skills, fostering self-employment and job creation. As digital transformation reshapes wholesale and retail careers, developing entrepreneurial mindsets enables graduates to innovate, adapt and explore

opportunities in e-commerce, logistics and service-based retailing (Matyana & Thusi 2023).

2.5 LEARNER PERCEPTIONS OF WBL AND ALIGNMENT WITH 4IR

Perceptions of WBL vary among stakeholders, with employers valuing its role in enhancing workforce productivity and reducing recruitment costs, while some express concerns about administrative complexity and funding (Johnson 2022). Learners see WBL as a means to gain practical experience, though limited placements and career progression challenges persist. As the wholesale and retail sector undergoes digital transformation driven by AI, automation and e-commerce, aligning WBL with the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) is crucial. This drastic change requires integrating digital literacy, omni-channel retailing, and data analytics into training to meet evolving industry demands (Chiloane et al. 2023). However, gaps remain between traditional WBL structures, and the digital competencies needed for 4IR, necessitating curriculum updates and stronger industry collaboration. Alexander (2022) recommends that incorporating digital skills training, leveraging technology-driven learning platforms and refining WBL frameworks through SETAs will ensure that learners develop future-ready skills.

To remain competitive, integrating digital skills and emerging technologies W&R SETA must develop competencies in data analytics, e-commerce management, digital marketing and cybersecurity, enabling them to optimise, enhance customer engagement and streamline retail operations (Gonese & Ngepah 2024). Familiarity with point-of-sale systems, Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software and supply chain automation further boosts workplace efficiency. Emerging technologies such as AI-driven chatbots, augmented reality shopping and blockchain transactions are transforming the industry, requiring targeted digital training through collaborations between SETAs, industry stakeholders and educational institutions (Jackson & Bridgstock 2020).

2.6 EMPLOYER RETENTION OF WBL GRADUATES

Employer retention of WBL graduates in South Africa's wholesale and retail sector is crucial for addressing skills shortages and ensuring workforce stability. While these programmes equip learners with practical skills, retention remains challenging due to economic and organisational factors such as low wages, limited career progression, and short-term contracts (Jackson & Bridgstock 2020). Many entry-level wholesale and retail jobs lack long-term growth opportunities, prompting graduates to seek better paying or more stable employment. Additionally, some retailers use WBL primarily to meet skills development quotas rather than integrating graduates into permanent roles (Khatle & Mason 2015). Employers' decisions to retain WBL graduates post-learnership are influenced by performance, adaptability and alignment with organisational needs (Heidig et al. 2018). Graduates demonstrating strong technical competencies, problem-solving abilities and efficiency are more likely to secure permanent positions. Adaptability is equally important in a rapidly evolving wholesale and retail environment shaped by digital transformation, where employers value individuals who can quickly learn new technologies and industry trends (UJ, 2025).

2.7 WBL TOWARDS ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND DISABILITY INCLUSIVITY

WBL not only prepares learners for traditional employment but also promotes entrepreneurship by providing practical skills, industry knowledge and business acumen essential for starting and sustaining ventures (Pittaway & Cope 2007). In sectors like wholesale and retail, hospitality and manufacturing, WBL offers exposure to real-world business operations, financial management and customer service, enabling learners to engage with market trends and operational challenges firsthand (Ahmad et al. 2020). Mentorship from industry professionals further enhances entrepreneurial readiness, yet many WBL programmes still prioritise employment over business ownership, limiting support for aspiring entrepreneurs (Ajani 2024). Additionally, the W&R SETA is also committed to promoting disability inclusivity within WBL programmes by ensuring equal access to skills development opportunities for individuals with disabilities. This includes tailored training initiatives, accessible

learning environments and partnerships with employers to create inclusive workplaces that accommodate diverse needs.

W&R SETA supports disability-inclusive policies by providing funding for assistive technologies, workplace adjustments, and specialised mentorship programmes aimed at empowering learners with disabilities as stipulated in the disability development strategy of 2022-2026.

2.8 SYNOPSIS

In conclusion, the literature highlights the critical role of WBL in bridging the gap between academic training and industry demands, particularly within the evolving landscape of the 4IR. While WBL enhances employability by equipping learners with practical skills, its effectiveness is contingent on alignment with digital transformation, industry collaboration and curriculum innovation. The integration of digital competencies, entrepreneurship training and disability inclusion within WBL frameworks is essential for promoting a resilient and future-ready workforce. However, challenges such as low employer retention, limited career progression and structural barriers to entrepreneurship persist. These issues require strategic interventions, including enhanced employer-education partnerships, policy refinements and targeted investment in skills development. Ultimately, strengthening WBL's adaptability to emerging industry trends will not only improve workforce preparedness but also contribute to economic growth and social transformation in South Africa.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The methodology employed in this study embraced an assignment scope as delineated in the study inception report. This section of the study concisely details the surveying and data analysis activities undertaken for the purposes of the study. The approach allowed successful tracking of the programme beneficiaries who participated in the W&R SETA WBL learning programme between 2019 and 2023 financial years. As determined, the surveying process took between six to nine months to complete.

The responses from the survey were collected, interrogated and analysed for compilation into an integrated assessment report.

The beneficiaries tracked were surveyed:

- ✓ To assess the efficiency of the funded learnerships in addressing learner socioeconomic needs and social standing as beneficiaries of the programme.
- ✓ To examine employer appetite to absorb funded learners relative to qualifications and job requirements.
- ✓ To investigate if the learners that participated in the learnerships are satisfied with the skills provided by the learnership employers.
- ✓ To assess the employers' satisfaction with the skills presented by the learners.
- ✓ Establish the destinations of learners after completion of their funded learnership programme.

The research methodology for this study levelled to outline a systematic approach to examine the effectiveness of workplace-based learnerships driven by W&R SETA in bridging the skills gap within the wholesale and retail sector. The research design, data collection methods, sampling strategies and analytical techniques used to ensure the study's validity and reliability are provided. Additionally, ethical considerations and limitations that influenced the study's findings are also discussed.

3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN AND OVERVIEW

The concept of research design must first be explained to address common misconceptions regarding its application. Research design provides a structured framework for conducting a study, ensuring a systematic approach to data collection, analysis and interpretation. It defines key elements such as the type of data to be collected and the research approach to be followed (Kumar 2024). For this study, a mixed-methods research approach, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, was employed. While the methodology outlines both qualitative and quantitative phases, it is crucial to clarify that this study followed a sequential design (QUAL→QUAN). This approach is well-suited to the study as it facilitates comprehensive analysis by integrating numerical data with in-depth contextual insights, thereby enhancing the validity of the findings (Fouche et al. 2021).

3.2.1 Target population and sampling approach

Probability sampling procedure was followed using a sample frame provided by the W&R SETA. This approach allowed for some degree of confidence to make inferences of the larger population. The target population was abstracted from four most active provinces of South Africa pertaining to the W&R SETA employer-learner placement. The total number of eligible participants, or population size, was approximately 3 800. A sample size of 800 participants was drawn from the population list provided by the W&R SETA using a 95% confidence interval with a 5% margin of error for the Quantitative phase of the study. Simple random sampling was applied using probability sampling method which ensures that the characteristics of the sample size will reflect that of the larger population.

3.3 QUALITATIVE: SAMPLING, DATA COLLECTION AND DATA ANALYSIS

In the first phase of the study, a qualitative research approach was employed, following an interpretivist paradigm to explore participants' views and perceptions after engaging in the learnership programme. Data was collected through online interviews with ten employers, using open-ended questions to gain insights into their

perspectives on the programme's outcomes. The sample was drawn from specific provinces including KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), Gauteng (GP), Limpopo (LP) and North-West (NW). These provinces were selected because the majority of the learnership programmes took place in these provinces. After the informed consent forms were obtained, the focus group in-depth interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using inductive thematic analysis. This process involved familiarisation with the data, generating codes and identifying emerging themes to provide a deep understanding of the participants' experiences.

3.4 QUANTITATIVE: SAMPLING, DATA COLLECTION AND DATA ANALYSIS

In the quantitative phase of the study, an online survey was distributed to the learners who benefited from the programme from the same provinces as with the qualitative study. The survey was used Google Forms shared via email using the W&R SETA database. Data analysis process was performed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 29.0, where frequency analysis provided descriptive statistics, and open-ended responses were checked for completeness before undertaking further mathematical and statistical analysis measures.

The succeeding section presents the results of both qualitative and quantitative phases of the study.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The main deliverables of the study focused on the learners who completed the W&R SETA learnership to assess their background and access to the labour market including possible opportunities for entrepreneurship; to investigate the learners' overall perceptions of WBL and its association with the 4IR; to determine if the learners continued working for the same employer after completion of their W&R SETA learnership, and finally to assess the effectiveness of the W&R SETA-funded learnerships to equip learners with the necessary skills required by employers in the sector. It was therefore essential that the sample selected for the study consisted of learners who had completed the W&R SETA learnership. The researchers selected the learners using simple random sampling method. A total of 430 respondents completed the study questionnaire. This resulted in a 54% response rate.

This section of the report presents the findings drawn from both the focus groups and in-depth interviews with key informant interviewees involved in the W&R SETA programmes, as well as from the survey from the SETA beneficiaries. The goal is to provide qualitative data and analysis for a broader research project that seeks to uncover perceptions and levels of satisfaction with the WBLs driven by the W&R SETA in bridging the skills gap within the industry in South Africa. The first part of the results focuses on qualitative phase of the study with the learners who completed the W&R SETA learnership.

4.2 YOUTH IN WBLs: STAGNATION V/S MOBILITY

4.1.1 Success Stories: Diamonds in the Rough

Insight: From the perspective of trainers, who are often the result of successful WBLs, learnerships contribute to community development by providing opportunities for local youth. WBLs allow employers to identify and develop talent early on. This can lead to internships which can translate into permanent employment or, at the very least, improve a participant's employability.

As one key informant argued: *“These programmes are effective. That will be a lie if they are saying they’re not effective because they benefit a lot of students. Some of them are hired permanently. Some of them in other entities, but they still raise their hand and say this is where I came from”* (KI1).

Some success stories that were shared include:

- Some interns transitioned into permanent positions after completing a WBL if they demonstrated hard work and good customer service skills. (E1) said that learners who are committed or eager to learn can remain employed at the same company).
- Some individuals who began in WBLs advanced to senior positions. For example, a former learner was spotted in the same store – only now he was a manager (G1).
- Another participant, who is now a Talent Development Facilitator for a large entity described the upward mobility in his career after starting off as a learner through the W&R SETA: *“I was a product of these programmes. I got employed. So, what does that say? It sends a message out there that these programmes are indeed effective because these programmes and projects cultivate a clear direction and mould and prepare these rough diamonds for the world. At the time that the market hired me in 2015, I did not have the knowledge that I have now”* (KI1).
- In the UJ WBL pilot programme, 12 participants continued to study further for their diplomas in retail, while eight were retained by the employer.
- Examples were given of employees who are being trained to operate machinery and handle first-line maintenance, which results in certifications.

4.1.2 Mentorship and Connections

Learning: Although this may not be the main goal of WBL, one area of success is in the space of mentorship, connection-building and the development of certain transferable skill sets, whether or not the WBL results in further employment for the WBL participant in question.

Trainers noted that South African youth need mentorship and guidance to help them find their way and they felt that the learnerships help to provide this and help to “keep youth off the streets”. This is especially important for disadvantaged communities. WBLs provide a safe space in which participants can learn and grow and build connections.

Insight: People involved in WBLs are committed to the long-term success of their learners beyond the learnership. This is a supportive community and there is tremendous positivity amongst the trainers who were interviewed.

- G1 shared with pride: *“I have one student I always tell them when the learnership come to an end put me as your reference because I always tell if you perform you can put me as your reference. So, one of the students I got the call to in November where they called her to an interview and then successfully, they took her”*.
- G1 asserted that WBLs could change lives and bring about positive change for the country.
- When G1 saw one of her former students (who had been part of a WBL and how far she had progressed in her career), she wished her the best and congratulated her for achieving what she deserved.

4.1.3 Transformation: Youth and Disability

Insight: Youth in WBL can bridge the generational divide in retail. This can result in new ways of doing things and the ability to take on more physically demanding tasks.

- G1 gave the example: *‘There were these old mamas, our mothers staying on the lines, they were like these things been done this way in for 100 years, I have been here for 20 years doing this this way. So, bringing new employees or new blood on the line, it shows them that even if we approach it this way, we can still achieve the plan.’*
- G1 shared this: *‘Let me say these young people- they are very fast. If the old people need some groceries the youth go there and help our grannies to carry.’*

Also, they don't have that problem – I spend a long time at the working station, and they are managing to work standing.'

Insight: Disability is an important category for the meeting the transformation goals of learnerships. Further research could be done on this category, but an initial analysis of the qualitative data we received suggests that some disabled learners might feel like they are just being placed and 'used' for WBL transformation goals and employer BBBEE points, while not actually being properly valued and supported with reasonable accommodations for longer-term success. This is likely compounded by the exacerbated socioeconomic issues that disabled learners often face.

One trainer felt that a sense of entitlement was present among some disabled learners who took learnerships for granted because they were 'guaranteed' a spot as a transformation requirement.

G1 shared his experience with learners who were differently abled:

"So, when it comes to the disabled learners, yeah, those learners are very problematic. Let me put it that way because what they will always tell you that we are having money, we are here for money, and we always have the advantage to be employed. So, they don't put much effort when it comes to learnership because they will tell you that we came here because we know that you need us here. We don't want this. They need us to be here. So, they always give us problems whereby some they even drop out. I had two disabled lenders those dropped out." He continued, "They know once you write that you are disabled on your CV preference is always given to the disabled people" (G1).

The subjective quote above raises some complex issues that require further analysis. On the one hand, the issue of "stipend seekers" is a concern, and while it is possible that some disabled learners are "stipend seekers", the issue of stipend-seeking is widespread and extends to all categories of learners, whether they are disabled or not.

It is also possible that when one combines the issue of stipend-seeking; the trend of employers abusing the WBL for BBBEE points; and the issue of 'learnership veterans', there might be a group of disabled learners who are encouraged to become

learnership veterans by employers who ensure that they remain on repeat learnerships in order for the employer to receive transformation points.

Importantly, the quote above also points to the issue of disabled learners dropping out of learnerships, which requires further exploration from the perspective of these learners. The primary cause of dropping out, from our analysis, seems to be socioeconomic issues, which can arguably be exacerbated for individuals with disability. For example, transportation may be more onerous and costly for a disabled learner, and medical costs and the cost of general care might be higher.

Combining the finding that there might be higher rate of disabled learners dropping out with the findings from the case study below (a successful disabled employer), one could hypothesise that in some instances, disabled learners are not receiving the accommodations they require for success in WBLs, and this could be compounded by their socioeconomic challenges. This would be an interesting avenue for future research.

Insight: Disabled learners can be successful if they are valued for their unique contributions and if are provided with reasonable accommodations and room for growth by employers. This is well illustrated by the case study below.

4.2 DISABILITY WITH DIGNITY: A CASE STUDY

Participant (KI1) began as a learner in a W&R SETA programme and rose up through the ranks to become a Talent Development Facilitator for a large entity that employs over 500 people. He has a contagious passion for the W&R sector, the value of education, bursaries and learnerships and for the mutual prosperity that is created when employers invest in motivated employees.

This is the account of his journey into the sector: *“You are sitting in front of a perfect example of a beneficiary who has benefited from the SETA programme. I could work anywhere in the market because of my appreciation and my understanding of the entire market. I'm physically challenged by the way. My employer moved me to a department with reasonable accommodation so that I am able to contribute towards the objectives of the organisation”* (KI1).

The participant is well-positioned to foster the educational growth of the entity's employees and the onboarding of new learners and interns, and he is paying it forward. His applications to SETA motivate for inclusion of disabled learners and interns who receive transport assistance from the employer, and there are people with disabilities who occupy various levels in his organisation who are doing very well. As the participant argues, *"We need to join hands when it comes to unemployed youth and disability. It's really something that we as a country are not doing well on, and that we need to be more deliberate with in companies"*.

Implication

This case study illustrates how, given support and dignity, disabled learners and employees can succeed. Beyond that, it is an important reminder that the onus is on the state and employers to recognise and value the contributions that disabled learners and employers make, and to create environments that foster the development, well-being and dignity of disabled people. Further research could be conducted on whether the rates of dropouts are higher for disabled learners (and if so, why?), and the level and types of support that disabled learners in WBL require and receive.

4.2.1 Dropouts and Failures: Matric Results As a Proxy?

Learning: The students who tend to fail their modules or drop out of the WBL tend to be overwhelmed and struggling due to socioeconomic issues (including financial stress and transportation affordability), troubles at home, a lack of interpersonal skills, peer pressure and disciplinary issues. Although trainers and employers offer support, many of these issues are beyond their control.

Insight: Better matric results could be a useful proxy for recruiting participants with a higher likelihood of success in WBL. This might result in fewer dropouts and failures. Note that in the WBL participant category, the range would likely be *very low pass rate* to *'higher' pass rate*, but not necessarily at the standard required for entrance to HEIs.

- One facilitator of a WBL programme observed: *'Those with a very low pass rate in matric that are enrolled on the programme find themselves struggling and overwhelmed'* (KI3).

- Simultaneously, what emerged in this WBL programme, was that the students who did well had rigour, determination, discipline and self-motivation, and this was often reflected in their matric results to begin with, *'because they have the capacity or the knowhow to actually apply themselves academically'* (KI3).
- As (KI3) observed, *'I think what made a few of those that did do well sufficiently prepared honestly was their own rigour and drive. We had motivators in place such as fun days, financial literacy days, competitions and the incentive of getting the bursary at the end. So the motivators were there. I mean it's yours to lose. I think it's a self-determining thing. I think it's career planning and it's a bit of self-motivation. You have to have your own discipline to say I really want this.'*
- The characteristics of successful WBL participants who are self-motivated, disciplined and committed to the programme stand in contrast to the poor attitudes that trainers observed among other learners. Trainers (G1/2/3) noted that learners were often demotivated, judgemental, lazy, anti-social and apathetic towards consequences.

Although the WBLs can assist learners to develop an appropriate work ethic and attitude to prepare learners for the working world, learners entering the WBL are likely to be more successful if they already have adequate social skills and self-motivation.

Implications

- In order to reduce dropout and failure rates, there is room for more discernment about who is recruited for WBL. One potential area to explore for recruitment requirements is higher matric results based on the hypothesis that higher matric results are a proxy for self-motivation, discipline and determination/commitment, and this in turn, tends to result in a higher rate of success in the WBL.
- Given the observation by trainers that so many learners coming into WBLs are demotivated, judgemental, lazy, anti-social and apathetic towards consequences, there is room to explore how (and indeed, whether) recruiters

are screening candidates for a positive attitude and the interpersonal skills required to succeed in a collaborative and customer-facing industry.

- If the data is available, it would be useful to run a cross-sectional analysis on WBL participants and their matric results, based on whether they completed and passed their WBL programme, and how high or low their matric pass rate was.

4.2.2 Learnership Veterans and the Recruitment Bubble

4.2.2.1 Learnership veterans

Insight: Learnerships can result in stagnation for youth, who end up unemployed after going on back-to-back learnerships until they are 35 and no longer qualify. This was made clear in key informant interviews during which “serial learnership attendees” or “learnership veterans” were criticised for abusing the learnership programmes.

- As observed by (KI3), *“Something I picked up once the project had commenced is that our employer was already familiar with some of these learners. So, they've worked with them before in learnerships. They basically have a crop of learners on a project and move them from this one to the next, which is wrong”*.
- Another key informant shared a critical view on learnerships and the trend of learnership veterans: *“Those learnerships are a joke because the youth jump from one learnership to the next and they never get employed properly because until they're 35, they're just riding this train of I get 4 000 a month and I'm in this learnership. They sit and yawn. They don't take it seriously. They don't actually develop their careers from it. They just hop from the one learnership to the next, and one day they turn 35 and go, "s***, I'm not a youth anymore. What am I going to do now?" Youth programmes and learnerships are grossly abused”* (KI2).

4.2.2.2 Recruitment bubble

Insight: After probing our interviewees on how it is that the same candidates are recruited repeatedly, we concluded that there is a “recruitment bubble” that enables

learnership veterans to get back-to-back positions in learnerships. It forms in the following way:

The same recruitment companies might be used in the sector, and they send the learnership advertisement to the same batch of people whom they have on their books. Simultaneously, and most crucially, employers get involved in recruitment and encourage people they are already familiar with to apply to the advertisement and then prioritise those people during the selection process in which they are also involved.

This process is supported by the quote from (KI3) below:

“If it’s a recruitment company that’s within the learnership space and within the sector, they might contribute to this. But the employer always wants to get involved in the recruitment as well, which makes sense if this person is going to be housed by them. And that is leeway for them to choose those that they know, or to communicate to students that they already have on their books to apply for learnership X. It goes both ways.”

Implications

To reduce the occurrence of learnership veterans, the recruitment process needs to be rethought. Further research should be conducted in this area, but our initial analysis supports the following recommendations:

- Recruiters should be required to keep a record of previous applications and required to actively seek out new applicants who have not been on previous learnerships.
- Independent recruiters, or recruiters who have not been used on repeat by the SETA or in the education and training space, could be used in some instances.
- The advertisements could be advertised on new platforms or spaces to reach new candidates.
- The role of employers in the decision-making process for recruitment should be interrogated and could be reduced when instances of learnership veterans are uncovered.

- Employers should be made aware that for government-funded SETA learnerships, participants who have not been on learnerships before should be given priority. If employers form a good relationship with a WBL recipient, they should be encouraged to absorb them into internships or employment, rather than sending them to apply for more learnerships.
- Even with the recommendations above in place, it is difficult to track which applicants have/have not been on learnerships before because they may not always divulge this information. We are unsure whether a tracking system for SETA learnerships is in place. If not, this system should be developed. If it is in place, it should be shared with stakeholders responsible for recruiting and facilitating the learnerships, with the intention of reducing the trend of learnership veterans.

4.2.3 Stipend Seekers

Learning: Research participants argued that many learnership recipients are driven by money, rather than by a genuine interest in retail. This compromises their motive for studying retail, which tends to reduce the impact of training and can make them demotivated learners down the line. Simultaneously, however, trainers also argued that the stipend is not sufficient and that the low stipend is linked to the dropout rate (e.g. transport issues, high cost of living). There was also concern that some employers do not pay for overtime, absorb some of the stipends themselves, and are using the learnerships as cheap labour.

Insight: On the one hand, stipend seekers join WBLs for the stipend, regardless of their level of interest or commitment to the learnership/sector. On the other hand, when combined with the socioeconomic challenges faced by learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, the low stipend may discourage learners who end up dropping out or may draw them away if other opportunities arise.

- Participant G1 pointed out that students realise their mistake: *“When they go to the other side of mining the money is not on the same level”*.
- Another participant E1 said that the stipend is what motivates students to apply for the learnership.

- *“The grant not quite enough – back up stipends for learners or they drop out” (G1).*

Insight: Research participants suggested incentivising skills development, emphasising the value of skills acquisition over monetary stipends, and linking skills to career advancement.

- There were examples provided of individuals who obtained managerial positions or pursued further education in fields such as logistics because of learnerships.
- One way of providing incentives for WBL participants, the participants suggested, is through further funding and grants in partnership with universities and colleges. A good example of what this could look like is the UJ WBL pilot programme, where successful WBL participants could choose to study further to get their diploma.

4.3 UNBOXING RETAIL

4.3.1 Retail is the Last Choice

Insight: Participants often choose to pursue learnerships in the wholesale and retail sector because their first choice/s were not possible (e.g. they did not have the grades or resources to study other lines of work).

- *“Because we live in a country where opportunities are so far and few, you take what you get. But I think given the opportunity to choose something else, many [learnership participants] would. I have one who's still with us now who said she wants to do nursing even after passing the programme” (K11).*
- *“People have retail as a backup. They don't choose it. Which means it's a matter of necessity rather than a matter of a passion, a choice. When they do not find employment elsewhere, this is where they come to say I will go work as a cashier at Spar” (K11).*

- This finding extends beyond WBL to diplomas and degrees in retail, where recruiting candidates who are genuinely interested and committed to the retail sector can be a challenge. Participant K12 described this as:

“The problem, firstly, is the fact that very few people who enrol for the retail diploma had it as a first choice. They took it because it was the only degree that was available. And the second thing is, in my opinion, we live in a very conspicuous society in South Africa and students want the prestige of the degree, but they don't want to put in the work. So, there's a mismatch in students understanding that you need to put in the elbow grease.”

4.3.2 Negative Perceptions of Retail

Learning: Youth feel pressurised by friends, family, neighbours and respected members of their community to work in particular industries or to pursue certain professional positions. It is easy for learners to feel that they are not good enough or like they are getting left behind when they enter the retail space.

Insight: Retail is associated with menial, inferior and low-paying jobs with little room for growth. These negative perceptions, which are influenced by societal views and peer pressure, can affect learners' perceptions of the industry and of themselves.

- *“We will never be doctors, all of us. Some of them will need to go to nursing. Other people they will be there at the retailer. So just imagine you wake up in the morning, you come to Marula Spar and there you are a cashier or a merchandiser. Then sometimes when they see their friends, they come on lunch, they're working there at the bank” (G1).*
- *“They don't take it seriously because of most of the time they remember our parents in the olden days they were working at the shops. So, they were getting peanuts. So, they say you can't buy a Pajero when you are working there at the Spar, something like that. So where is the fast money?” (G1).*
- *“I just encourage our learners that don't be ashamed of what you are doing as a retailer and in a store. I'm also one of that product. And they say, Oh, wow.*

And they say, I think maybe you just started to be the admin. I said, No, We start as an internship” (G1).

- Participant G1 was very disappointed with how one teacher was dismissive towards their former student: *“The teacher just gives her some bad attitude like you just pass your matric and then you just come to Spar to pack”.*

4.3.3 Starting from the Bottom: Elbow Grease and (I’m) Mobility

Insight: Retail has huge career potential, but you need both knowledge from education, and practical skills from working in the space. Learners at both WBL and higher education levels must start from the bottom and work their way up. For many students, this level of “elbow grease” is unexpected and unappealing. Participant KI2 relayed her experience with informing students about the necessity to start at the bottom:

“They’re normally shocked when you tell them you’re going to start at the bottom. It is very sobering. It’s really to get the students aware that yes you have your degree and the knowledge, but you don’t have the skills. You will be packing shelves because you need to understand the whole system. It has huge career potential. You just need to start at the bottom and suck it up.”

Insight: Despite the success stories in section 1, career mobility can be limited for WBL participants. They may start at the bottom and stay at the bottom, because it is harder to get a promotion in a competitive industry if you only have a matric.

- By comparison, retail students with NQF Level 5 and higher (diplomas and degrees) will also start at the bottom packing shelves, but their upward career mobility will be faster because of their education.
- Furthermore, according to participant KI2, those with higher qualifications who work hard will move up quickly because they are taught critical thinking and how to take initiative at university level.

4.3.4 Exposure Is the Bridge to Opportunity

Insight: Training in retail gives learners exposure to different areas of work which helps them discover interests and career paths they may not have previously considered.

- *“You can see okay here there is something called procurement. I never heard about procurement – even myself – I only knew about it when I was doing an internship in the company. Then you start asking “what are these people doing?” and you start learning what you never knew” (G1).*
- *“I always tell people that going to a career expo is not for everyone. Some of us we just want to see ourselves working but then getting into the workplace that’s where you can develop interest just like me, I saw the opportunity I grabbed it and now I went to college” (G1).*
- Participant KI2: *“One thing that I have experienced is that in the beginning, especially in the first and second year, students are like ‘what is this?’, but when it starts clicking, they actually become passionate about it. They realise wow this is a huge industry where you start at the bottom, but you can go into the logistics part, or you can go into the marketing, or you can work yourself up into head office.”*

4.3.5 Early Orientation: Filtering and Setting Expectations

Insight: Early orientation can be used as a valuable tool for setting expectations around the WBL and the nature of work in the retail sector (including the elbow grease), and then filtering out learners who are not committed to the programme, using orientation attendance as a proxy. This could result in a batch of WBL candidates that are more suitable and committed to the learnership, and more likely to succeed. The extent to which trainers use orientation in this way is unknown but given the number of fly-by-night trainers (see section 4.6.6), it is unlikely that there is a thorough and widely adopted orientation procedure being utilised.

- Participant KI3 described the way in which the UJ pilot WBL programme used early orientation as a filter: *“During orientation is where we kind of filter out*

who's still going to be there and who's not going to be there. You get people who are very eager for the first two days, and they stop attending orientation. So, we make orientation compulsory and then if learners don't attend, then we know this is a problem child and we need to replace them. It's always best to replace them early because we can't have people joining the academic year in the middle.”

Implication

Early orientation should be used strategically by WBL educators in order to filter out uncommitted learners, and in order to set expectations about the learnership and the retail sector. For orientation to be used in this way, it needs to be done early to leave enough time before the start of the coursework to replace learners who leave voluntarily or do not meet attendance requirements.

4.3.6 Retail Needs a Makeover

Insight. Retail has a lot to offer but it is not flexible. Although negative associations prevail among the youth, the wholesale and retail sector is a vast and dynamic space that is multi-faceted and has many opportunities for upward career mobility. It is also a space for forward-thinking innovation and growth. However, the sector needs to keep up with latest trends and current stakeholder requirements.

4.3.6.1 Embracing innovation

- Some examples of innovation that were given include: advances in apps for delivery services, including Checkers Sixty60 innovation which was an adaptive response to the COVID lockdown that has pushed the industry forward, experimentation with drones for delivery during COVID, and the role that the W&R SETA conference plays in *‘putting together a pool of people with brains to inspire transformation, innovation to welcome also the changes that are happening’* (KI1). Participant KI1 continued, *“Change is the only constant. I mean AI is there. So, we don't have to shun it away. We have to understand what AI can contribute.”*

4.3.6.2 Cohesive vision

- There is positive traction and improvement in the sector in terms of skills, managerial improvements, IT and logistics and value chain efficiencies. These improvements are not happening in a silo. They are intentional and often sectoral responses, in which skills development through the SETA plays a central role.
- *“You even see truck drivers on the road, carrying big loads of Checkers fresh produce and when they smile at you, you can see that this person is really part of a bigger vision. We are heading in a positive direction. However, there is still lots and lots of work to do. That’s why the SETA has targets to train people by 2030. For example, they want to train more than 30 000 artisans by 2030 to bridge the gap between the scarce and critical skills of artisanship. These programmes of ILDP (International Leadership Development Programme) are sector-specific. I mean where in your life have you heard about a programme called Retail Management Development Programme? This is intentional. It’s a response to the future that we are going towards as a sector. I think the industry is improving significantly” (KI1).*

4.3.6.3 The need to centre employees

- Along with emphasis on the positive and innovative trajectory for retail, youth need to see room for growth in the sector and perceive retail as space where employee contributions are valued. As a sector with a large portion of customer-facing service, retail is uniquely positioned to shift perceptions about the sector among the youth.
- *“If you take care of the employees, you will reap the rewards. If you take care of me as my boss, I will go talk there and say that in my company, this is what’s happening. For example, they give us bursaries. Then people would associate the retail job market with premium standards and say, ‘Hey, I think I want to work for this kind of company’. We need to take care of the people who are generating this revenue. We are making money, but are we taking care of them?” (KI1).*

4.3.6.4 Retail needs a rebrand targeted at the youth

Insight. In order to attract top candidates (at all levels) to study retail, and to attract top employees, the wholesale and retail sector needs a fresh rebrand. This would help to shift the negative perceptions held about the industry.

- *“We don’t sell the full landscape of retail and people just don’t know how massive it is and the opportunities that lie there. So, our focus is to how make it attractive, how can we let people know that retail isn’t just what you see in the store. It has a whole value chain around it” (K13).*
- *“There’s a slogan they say – ‘either you disrupt, or you become disrupted’. There are innovations that need to inspire confidence in the industry, especially for young people. Retail is vast. There are a lot of role players that are contributing significantly. Us as a stakeholders have a major role to play to market it and to make it more fashionable and appealing out there, so that other people that can come with even better solutions for the industry” (K11).*

Implication

A thorough brand analysis of the W&R sector could be done, interrogating youth perceptions around education and employment in the sector, and the sector as a whole. Alongside this, the needs and values of youth could be explored to feed into a fresh rebranding strategy. Visual storytelling using success stories and innovation in the sector could play a powerful role if it is coupled with targeted and novel ways of disseminating this information.

4.4 INDUSTRY, TRAINING AND SKILLS

4.4.1 Industry Misuse and Abuse of WBL

Insight. The W&R SETA’s intended outcome for WBLs is skills development and opportunities for youth. There are some employers who are invested in empowering learners and helping WBL participants gain skills and access the job market, as illustrated by the success stories.

However, many employers are misusing WBL programmes for BBBEE points, tax deductions and cheap free labour paid for by the SETA, without putting in effort to

genuinely empower the WBL participants. This raises the question of what value employers are really getting out the WBLs.

- Participant KI2: *“The learnership should be managed better because they should be gearing people to be absorbed into the organisation which is often not the case. Nobody cares about developing the youth and being there for these youngsters. They just want BBBEE points and tax deductions. That's why they take on learnerships. It's cheap free labour because it's about margin and profit.”*
- As KI3 outlined, although there are some employers that are interested in empowering learners and helping them access the job market, there are also many employers that are happy just to extract the free labour without investing too heavily in the success of the programme:

“The end goal is to get employees for them that'll do work at an affordable rate, and in most cases it's free labour because it's funded by the SETA. I think it's difficult to find an employer with that drive and passion to say I'm empowering rather than utilising free or cheap labour. But they also have success stories where someone came in as a learner, did exceptionally well and moved up the ranks. So we can't say that there isn't value for them there. I think there is value. I think in terms of whether there's a passion for it is another conversation.”

Insight. Weak reporting from some employers is a major issue that makes it difficult for project funders and facilitators to keep track of the progress, stipends and terminations of WBL participants. There was also an instance where weak reporting about the timing of a learner's abscondment covered up the retention of stipends by an employer.

Implication

Relying on the benevolence of employers to invest in the success of the WBL programme may be unrealistic due of the profit-driven nature of companies (with some notable exceptions). Employers need to see the *human resource value* of the WBL beyond its value as cheap/free labour, transformation points and tax deductions. In order for this to happen, the quality of WBL candidates and training needs to improve.

4.4.2 Fly-by-Night Trainers

Insight. Fly-by-night trainers are a problem for the quality of the WBL which needs to be addressed.

- *“There are thousands of fly-by-night learnership training companies that tender for SETA contracts that do learnership training. The market is flooded with them. A lot of them are a freaking joke” (KI2).*
- *“I’ve worked for a Skills Development Provider (SDP) and there are properly run SDPs out there, but there are also a lot of fly-by-nights. [For the fly-by-nights] the learning material isn’t up to scratch and the assessors, moderators and facilitators aren’t that great” (KI3).*
- For this project, there was a very low response rate from the category of ‘educators’, who are the learnership trainers which is of concern.

4.4.3 Improving Learnership Training

Insight. Universities could make an important contribution to improving the quality of learnership training, and the status attached to WBL, which may serve to attract higher quality candidates, provided the recruitment process is thorough.

- KI2 argues, *“If anything, the SETAs should get universities to do the academic component of these learnerships. They don’t because this operates normally at NQF Level 2 or 3, but if they want to actually have more prestigious learnerships, it would be nice to have something at an NQF Level 5 where you can have a university as a training provider.”*
- Universities can also be involved in NQF Level 2 or 3 through the use of short learning programmes (SLPs) or continuous education programmes. As KI3 explained, *“You can then create them as your bridging courses, so that if someone didn’t get a high enough matric result for higher education degrees, they apply for those courses and if successful, they can be articulated into the mainstream programmes.”*

- The UJ WBL pilot programme used an SLP at NQF Level 3 for the WBL, and then students who passed could continue with an NQF Level 5 diploma. Although the pass rate for the programme was low, fixing some of the recruitment issues discussed previously would likely yield better results. Importantly, a low pass rate is not necessarily a negative finding, as it is an indicator that the standard required to pass is high.
- *“I think going through a university adds a lot of value in terms of access to tutors, lecturers, lecture rooms, learning material and online platforms that work well compared to some other SDPs. Some of them do have online platforms, some of them don't. It's just well-structured in universities and you hold a certificate from UJ. The same certificate at another SDP doesn't hold the same weight or prestige as one that comes from UJ or Wits” (K13).*

Implications

- Along with ensuring that only credible SDPs are used by the SETA, collaboration with universities could improve the quality of learnership training through the use of bridging courses. Successful WBL learners could then be accepted into a diploma for further upskilling.
- The status attached to a university certificate may also help to attract higher quality candidates, provided the recruitment process is improved.

4.4.4 Closing the ‘Soft Skills’ Gap

Insight: At the level of WBLs, the work in retail is often collaborative or customer-facing. Soft skills such as communication, conflict-resolution, problem-solving, time management, enthusiasm and other interpersonal skills are necessary in the retail space. Soft skills emerged as the most crucial set of skills for success in the WBL programme, but also the most lacking among learners.

- K13 reflected that WBL participants *“lack that [interpersonal skill] a lot. So when they get into the workspace, it's very hard for them to understand their roles, and to navigate and understand people, and then obviously conflict arises”*.

- Skills such as patience, customer service, and teamwork and collaboration were emphasised; *“They need to be patient and then they need to have a smile. I know the customer is always right. Remember that. And then they need to have a teamwork”* (G1).
- Context should be taken into account when teaching soft skills. For example, G1 mentioned that in the locations, there are customers from different provinces and so learners need to be able to communicate the basics in different languages.

Insight. Research participants primarily mentioned soft skills as a crucial area of skill development in the WBL. Provided soft skills training is done by a reputable trainer, it can effectively help learners build these transferable skills set. Ideally this would be done alongside better screening for interpersonal skills at recruitment phase.

- One skills facilitator explained the effort that went into teaching soft skills and was proud of the successful outcome: *“We taught them interpersonal skills as part of a 6-week programme which included how it is in the workplace, how to manage conflict... basically training them and getting them ready for when they get into the workplace. We had workbooks for them with activities that needed to be completed by them. I think that was very, very important based on how effective it was”* (K13).

Insight. There is often an assumption that skills gaps in the wholesale and retail sector relate to the 4IR. However, at the level of the learnerships (entry-level retail jobs), it is actually the human touch – the ‘soft skills’ – that seems to present the most significant skills gap.

- Indeed, some of these low entry-level jobs linked to learnerships are more likely to be negatively affected or even replaced by automation and AI learning in the future.
- Skills gaps/innovations relating to the 4IR may be more topical at the level of higher degrees, which are linked to management, innovation and critical thinking skills.

Implication

High quality and intensive training for soft skills is necessary for the success of WBL candidates and will help to bridge the skills gap. This training should be accompanied by screening for interpersonal skills at recruitment phase.

4.5 IN SUMMARY

There are many success stories from W&R SETA WBL participants who have gained skills, employment, internships, connections and further educational opportunities through the programme. The programme also has the potential to contribute to certain transformation objectives, including youth empowerment and opportunities for people with disabilities. However, the findings also indicate that WBL is grossly misused by various stakeholders. Many employers misuse them for BBBEE points, tax deductions and cheap/free labour, without properly investing in the success of the WBL programmes. Fly-by-night trainers get paid by the SETA for poor quality training. Lastly, many WBL participants are 'stipend seekers' who are not committed to the retail sector but need the money, or 'learnership veterans' who take on repeat learnerships until they no longer qualify at the age of 35. Despite the bleak picture of the misuse of WBL, these learnerships could play an important role not only in empowering and providing opportunities for WBL participants, but also by adding value in the retail sector more broadly.

Based on the findings, the main recommendation for improving WBL for all stakeholders involved, is to up-the-value of the WBL. This could be done by attracting more suitable and committed candidates through improvements in recruitment and the strategic utilisation of early orientation; improving the quality of trainers and of training; and making retail a more attractive space for learners in general. This can be done in the following ways:

- **Rethinking recruitment**, including recruitment criteria (level of matric results and the interpersonal skill-level of candidates); and 'popping' the recruitment bubble that enables learnership veterans to repeatedly take on back-to-back learnerships.

- **Improving the quality of trainers and training.** Only credible SDPs should be used for learnerships, and there is room for universities to play a bigger role in learnerships through the use of SLPs or continuous education programmes that act as bridging courses. Given that the largest skills gap at the WBL-level seems to be soft skills, this area should be prioritised for high quality and intensive training.
- **Strategically using early orientation** during training to filter out and replace uncommitted candidates and to set realistic expectations on the requirements for the WBL and the opportunities in the retail sector.
- **Rebranding retail.** Unfortunately, the retail sector has negative associations, and this makes it difficult to attract top candidates at all levels to both study and work in retail. This has a knock-on effect on the entire industry. Retail needs to be sold as the vast and dynamic industry that it is, with huge potential for upward career mobility.

This posits that improving the quality of WBL candidates and their training through these strategies would increase the *human resource value* of the WBL for employers and help to bridge the skills gap that exists at the WBL-level. This would incentivise employers to invest in the success of the programme, beyond its basic monetary and political value as transformation points, tax deductions and cheap/free labour source. These strategies are also likely to decrease the dropout and failure rate of the WBL and would address the ongoing issue of learnership veterans. Finally, the recommendation to rebrand retail for students would attract better quality candidates at all levels of training, including higher degrees, which would benefit all stakeholders in the wholesale and retail sector.

4.6 QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

4.6.1 Demographic and General Information of Learners

The purpose of this discussion is to understand the learners' background and assess the learnerships' inclusivity regarding transformational imperatives such as geography, race, age, gender and disability.

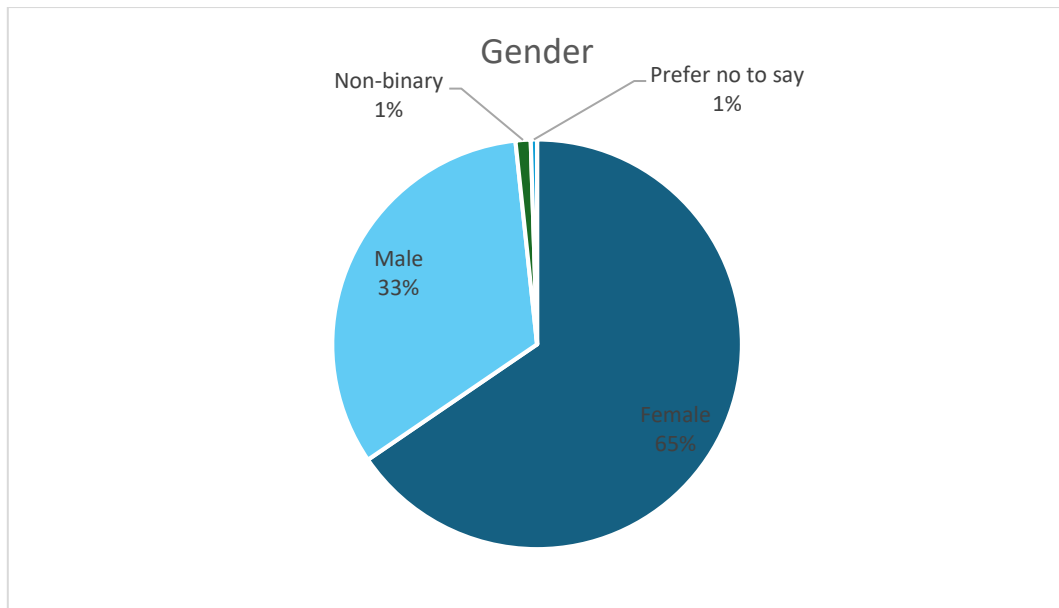


Figure 4.1: Gender of learners

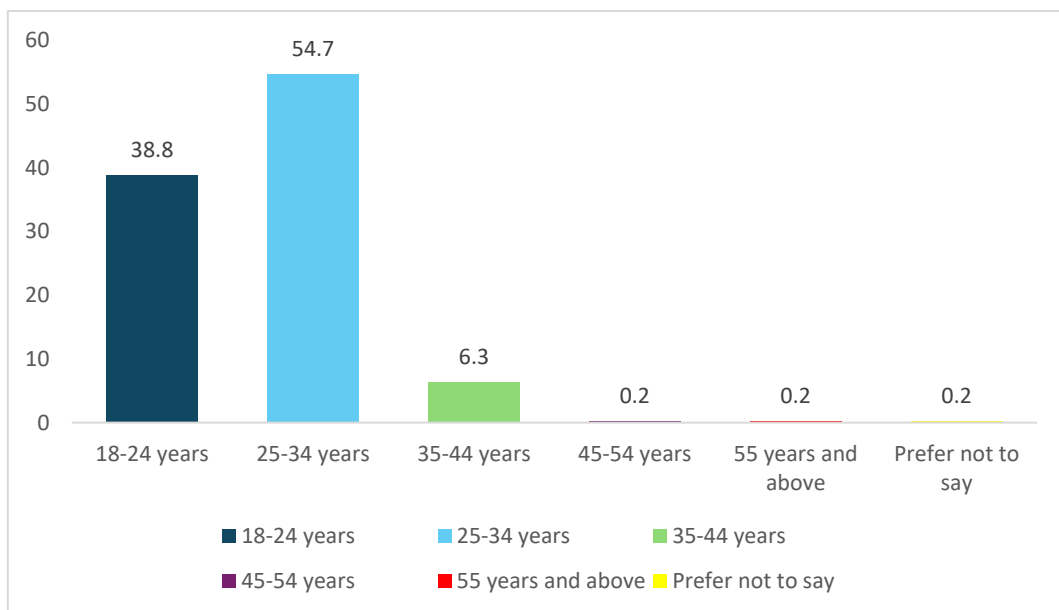


Figure 4.2: Age of learners

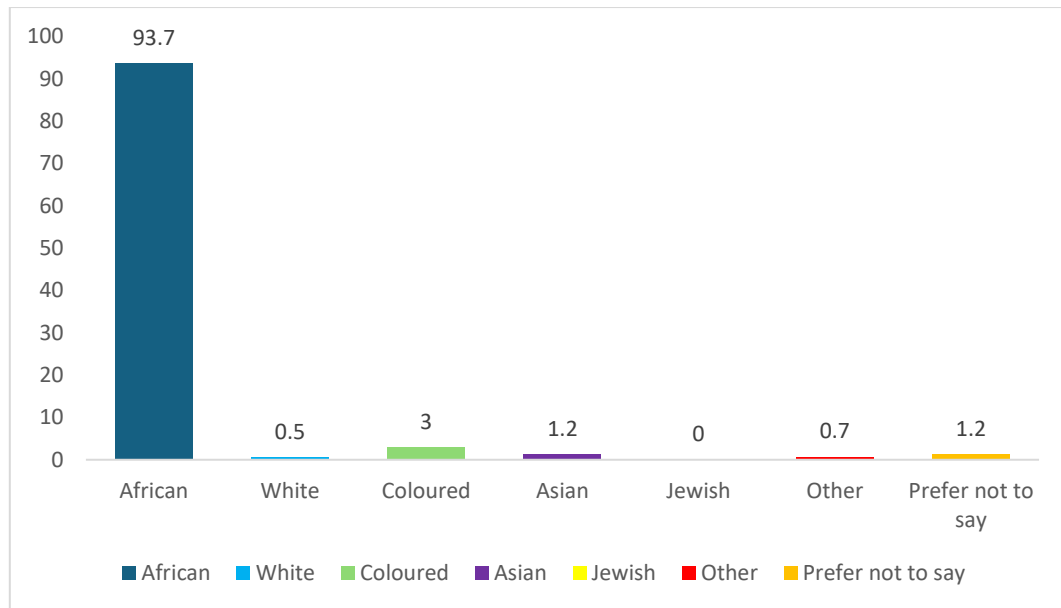


Figure 4.3: Ethnicity of learners

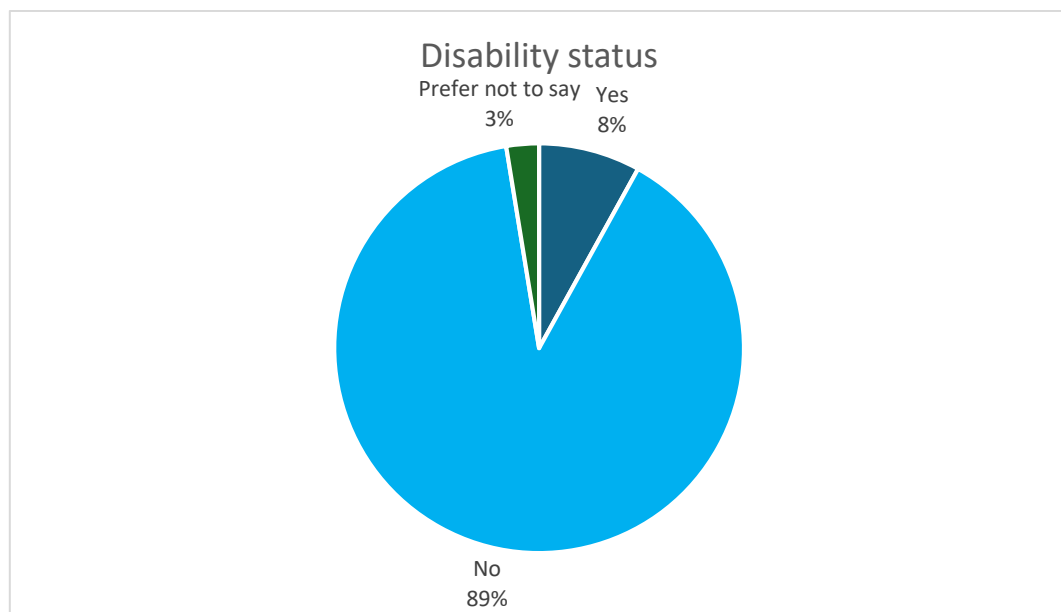


Figure 4.4: Disability status of learners

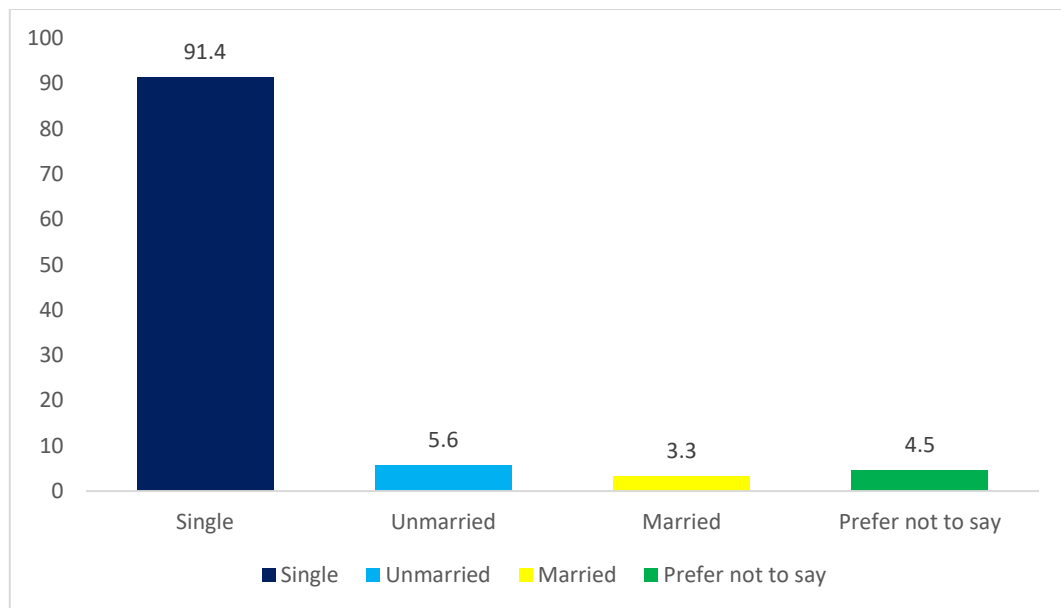


Figure 4.5: Marital status of learners

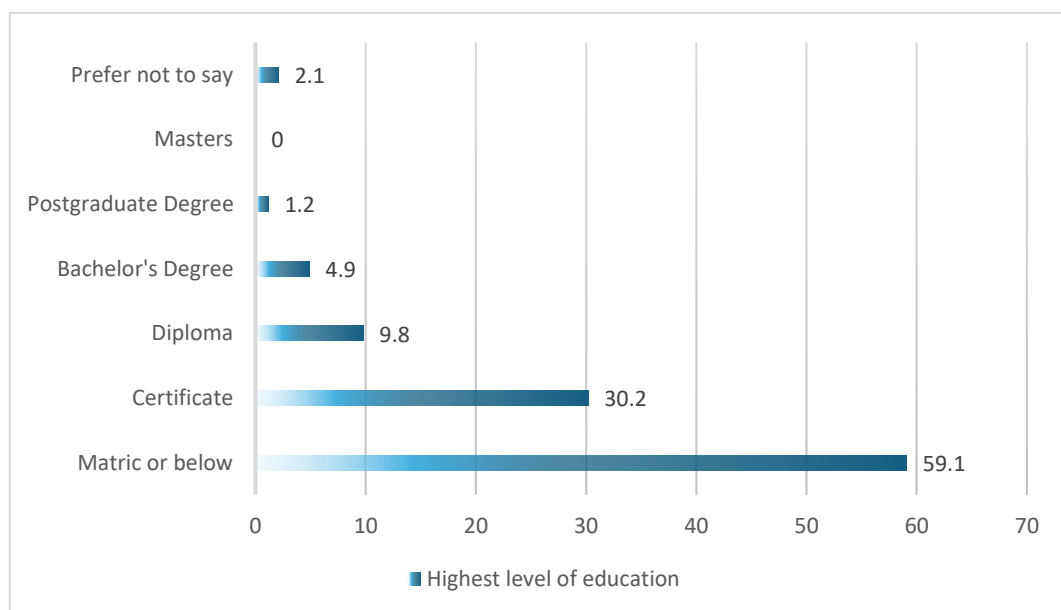


Figure 4.6: Highest level of education of learners

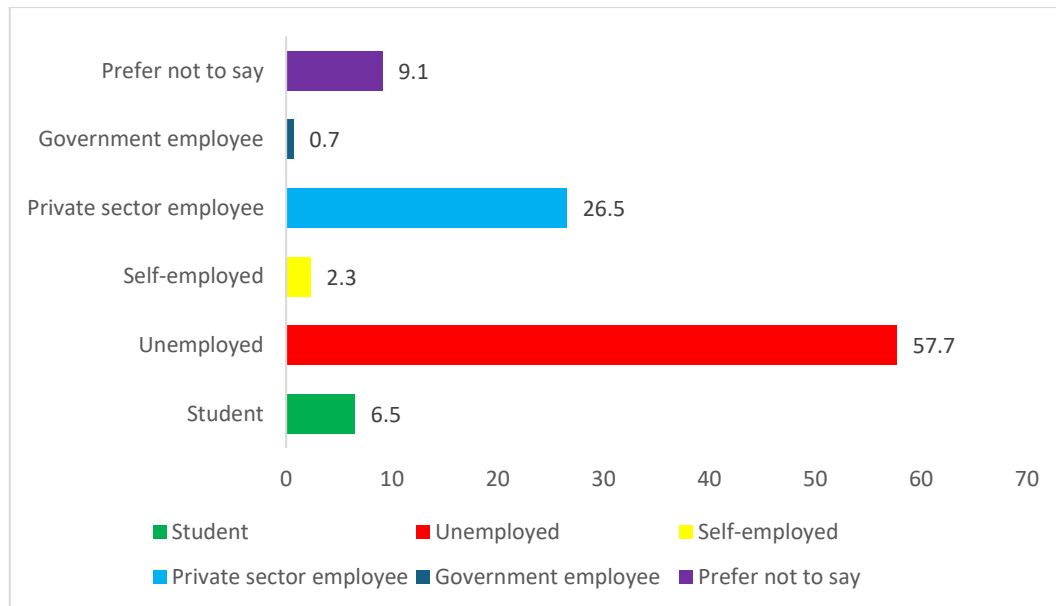


Figure 4.7: Occupation of learners

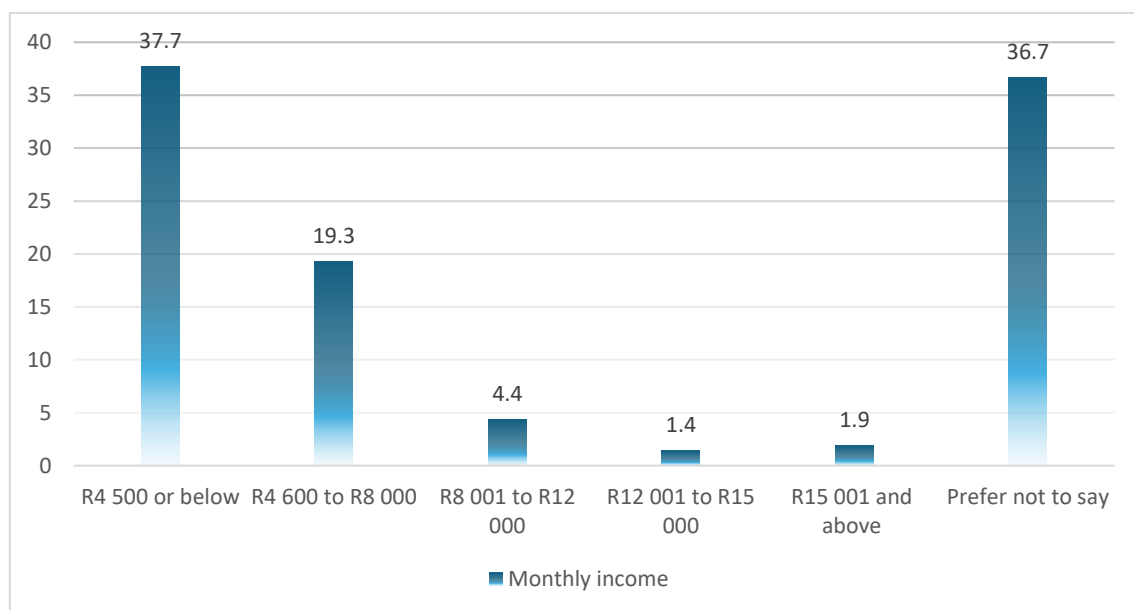


Figure 4.8: Monthly income of learners

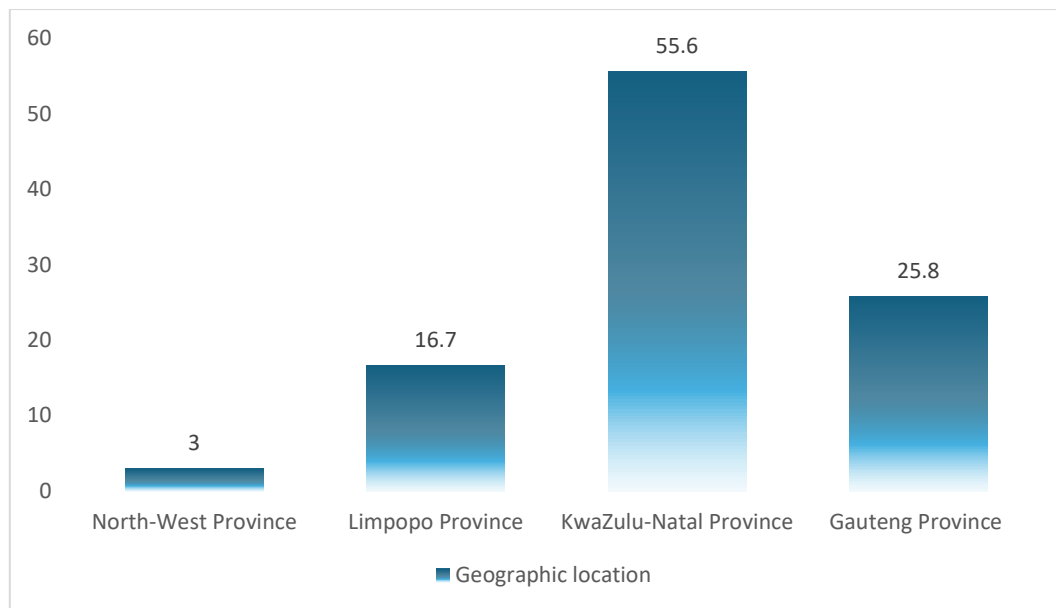


Figure 4.9: Geographic location of learners

4.6.2 Learner's Demographic and General Information

About 65.8% of the learners who completed the questionnaire were females and 33% males, with the majority of them being between 25 to 34 years of age (54.7%), followed by 18 to 24 years of age (38.8%). This is interesting to note and that the W&R SETA should consider including learners from older age groups in their learnerships to encourage and facilitate lifelong learning. The majority of the participants were African (93.7%) with no disability status (90.2%). 91.4% of the participants were single with the highest level of education matric and below (59.1%), followed by a certificate (30.2%). The participants' employment status was that 57.7% were unemployed and 26.5% were employed by the private sector with a monthly income of R4 500 or below (37.7%), followed by R4 600 to R8 000 (19.3%). The majority of the participants resided in the Kwa-Zulu Natal province (56.6%) followed by Gauteng (25.8%).

4.6.3 Learners' Employment Background and Access to Labour Market

The purpose of this section is to present the learners' employment background and their access to the labour market and opportunities for entrepreneurship.

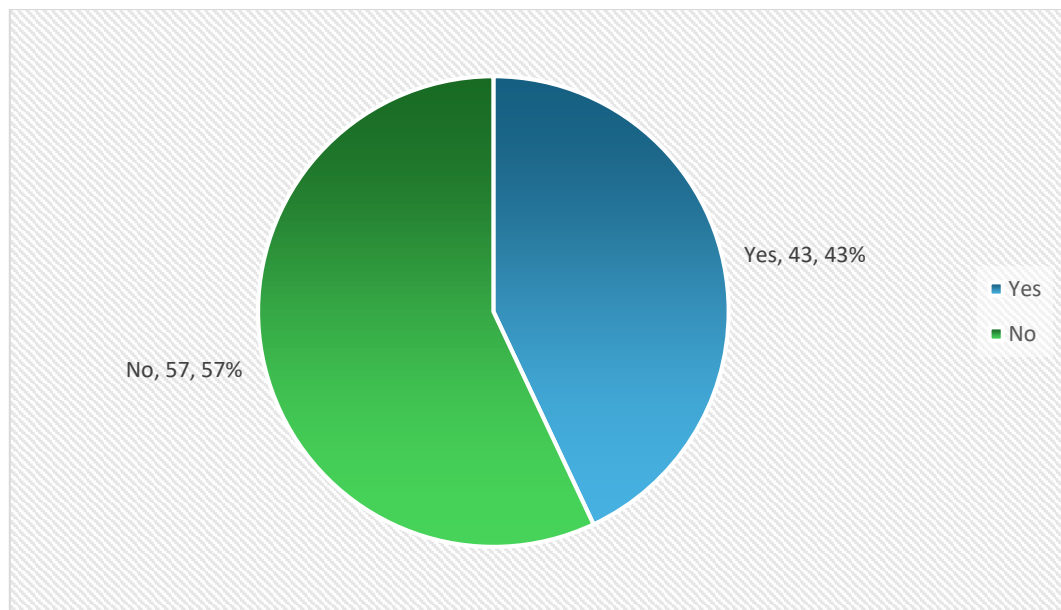


Figure 4.10: Employment status before learnership

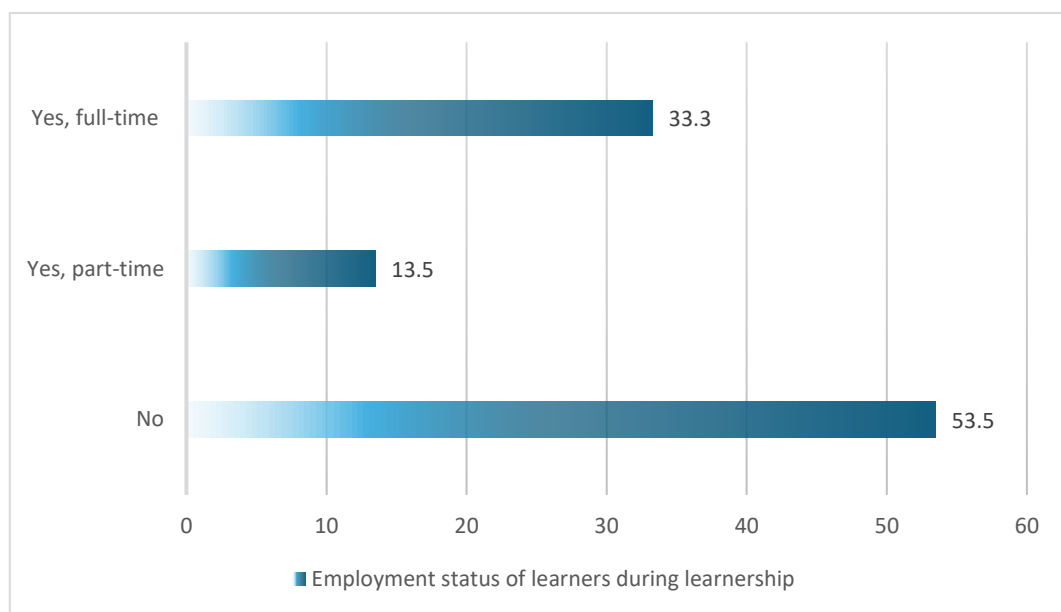


Figure 4.11: Employment status of learners during learnership

With regards to the employment status of participant before undertaking the learnership, 57.9% were not employed. Furthermore, 53.5% of participants were still not employed during the learnership, with 33.3% employed on a full-time basis. The findings indicates that there was a slight improvement in the employment status of the participants from before the learnership.

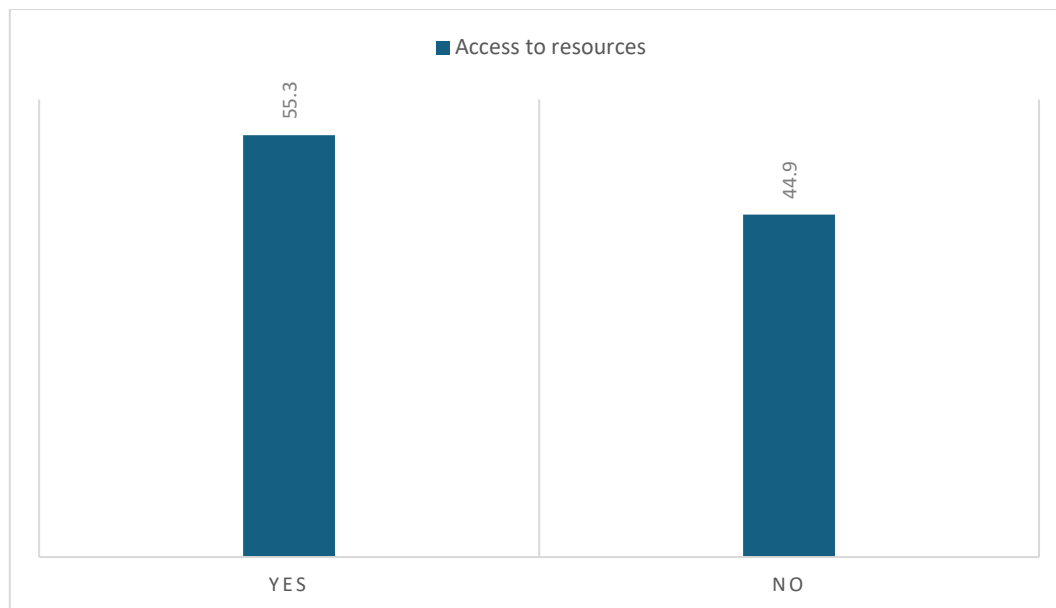


Figure 4.12: Access to resources to enter labour market and entrepreneurial opportunities

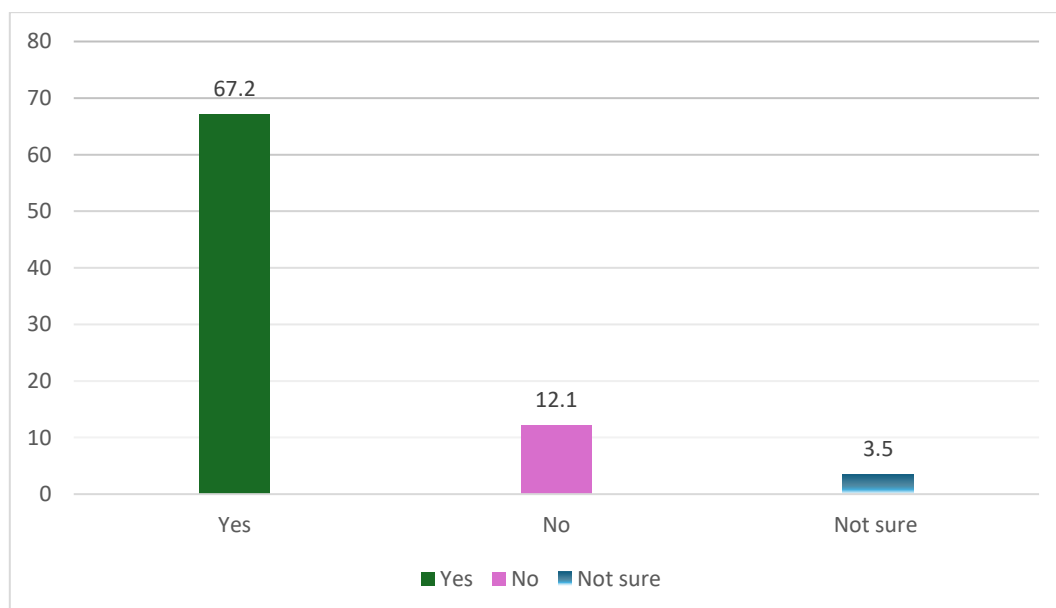


Figure 4.13: Consideration to start own business

The majority of the respondents indicated that they did not have access to resources to assist them to enter the labour market or explore entrepreneurial opportunities (55.3%), with 67.2% of the participant indicating that they considered starting their own business as presented in Figure 4.13.

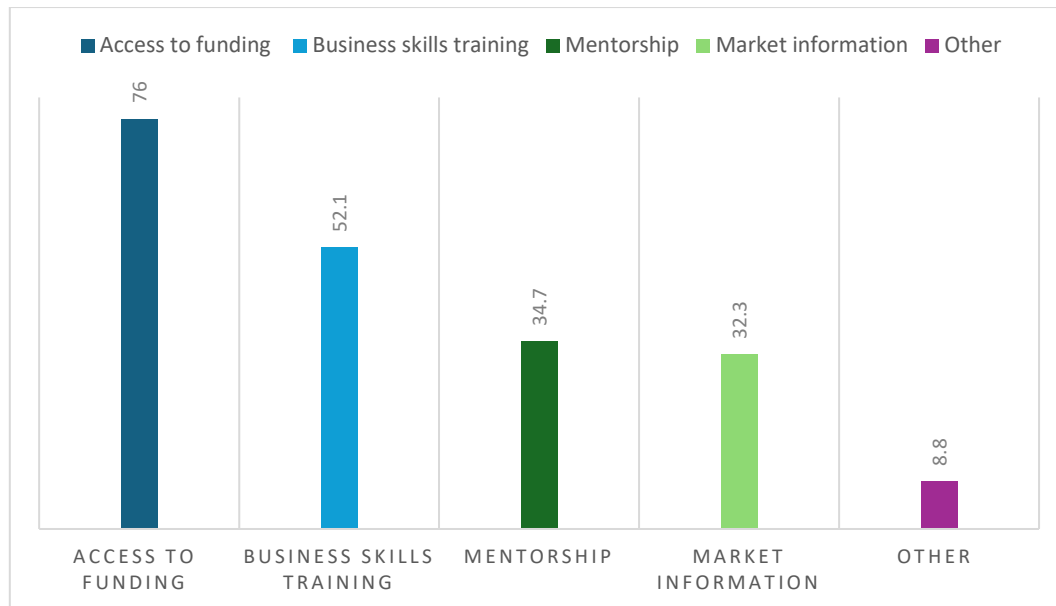


Figure 4.14: Type of support needed to start own business

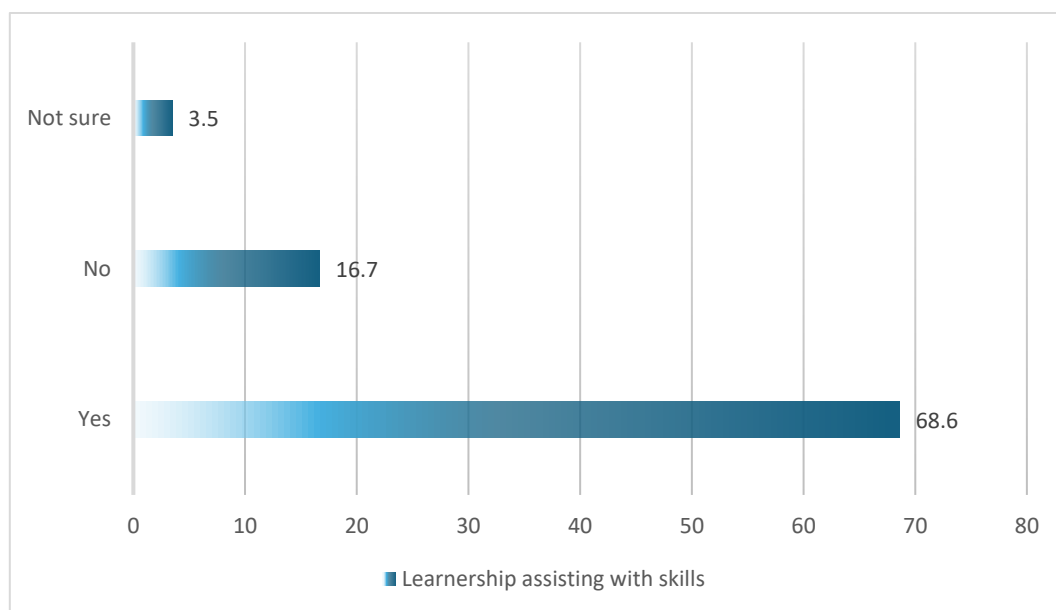


Figure 4.15: Learnership equipping with skills needed to start own business

There are a variety of support needed to assist with the starting of a business. The findings indicated that access to funding (76%) was the highest type of support needed, followed by business skills training (52.1%) and the need for mentorship (34.7%). The majority of the respondents positively indicated (68.6%) that the W&R SETA learnership assisted with the skills needed to start their own business. This

finding highlights the fact that the W&R SETA learnership does provide the skills needed by the community to pursue entrepreneurial opportunities.

4.6.4 Learner's Perceptions of Work-based Learning and 4IR

The purpose of this discussion is to report on learners' perceptions of the WBL component and its association with 4IR.

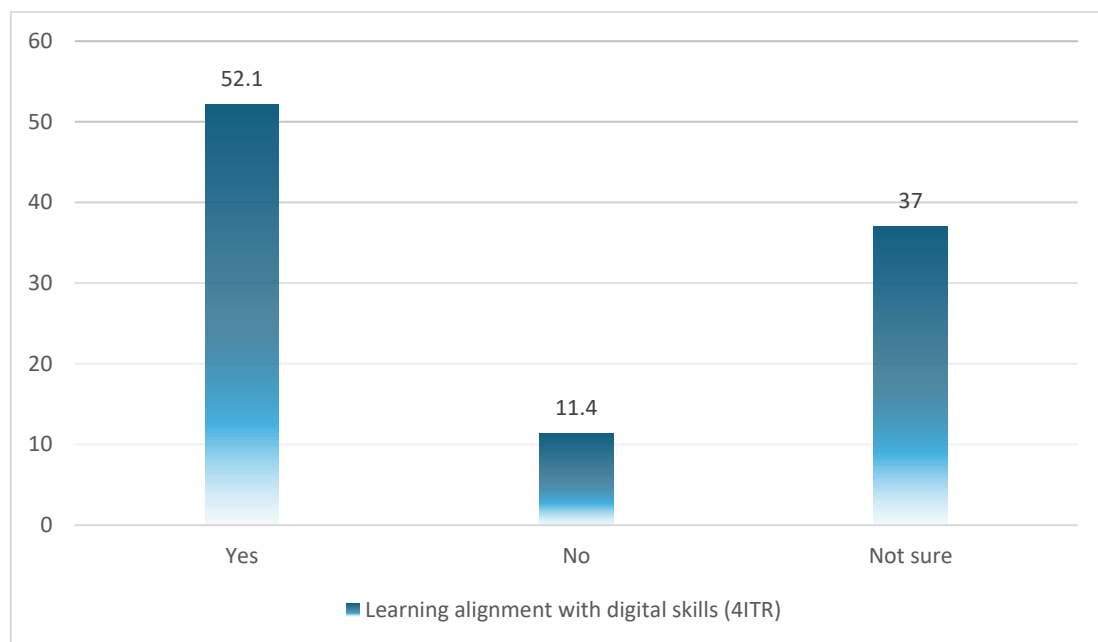


Figure 4.16: WBL component's alignment with digital skills and technologies related to 4IR

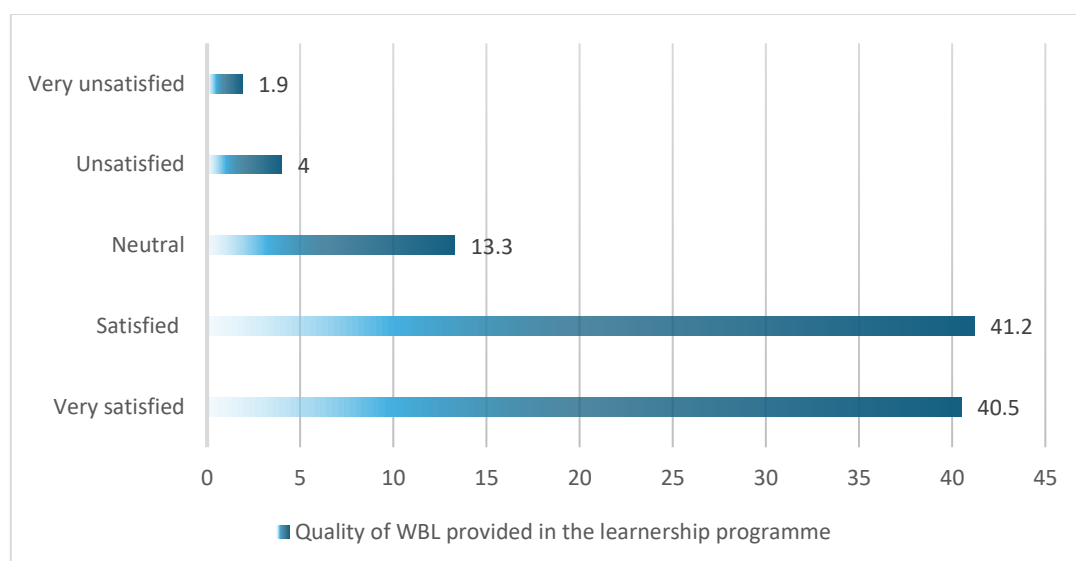


Figure 4.17: Quality of WBL provided in the learnership programme

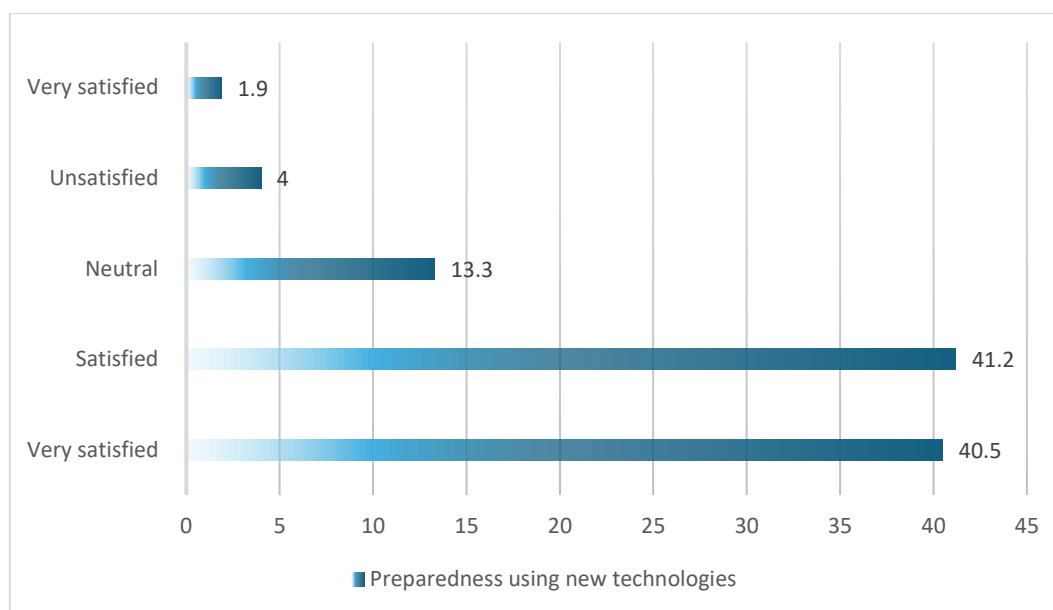


Figure 4.18: Prepared using new technologies introduced in the learnership programme

With regards to learners' perceptions of the WBL component of the learnership, the findings indicated that 52.1% of the respondents felt that the WBL component provides the necessary digital skills and technologies required by the fourth industrial revolution. Furthermore, 43.5% were very satisfied with the quality of the WBL component, followed by 34.9% that were satisfied. The findings also suggests that 41.2% were satisfied that the WBL component of the learnership programme prepared them to use digital skills and technologies introduced in the learnership, with 40.5% being very satisfied.

4.6.5 Learner's Employment Post-Learnership Programme

In this section, we report on the learner's continuation of employment with the same employer after the learnership programme.

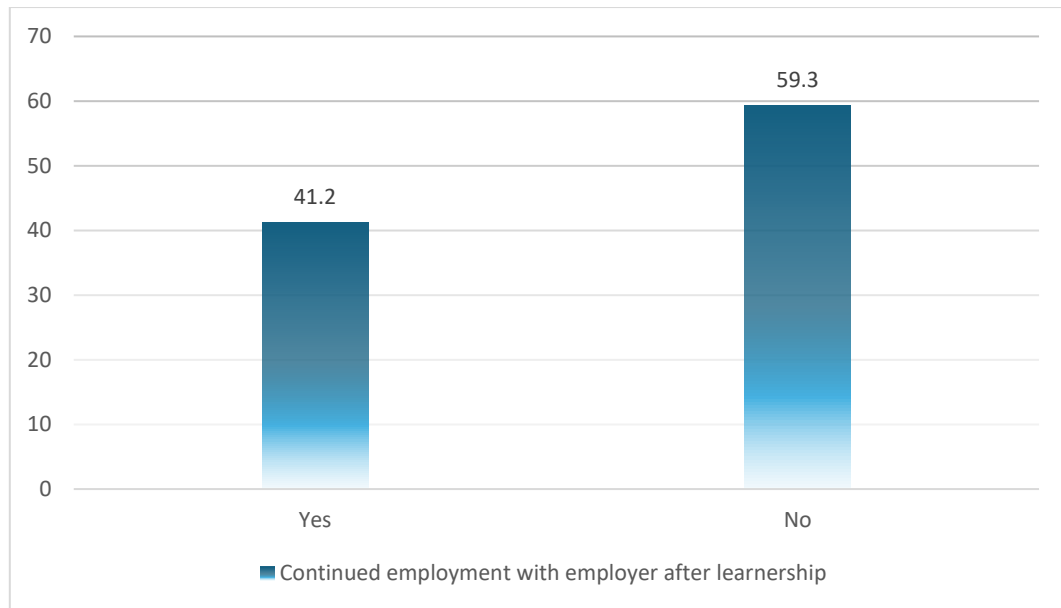


Figure 4.19: Continued employment with same employer after completion of learnership

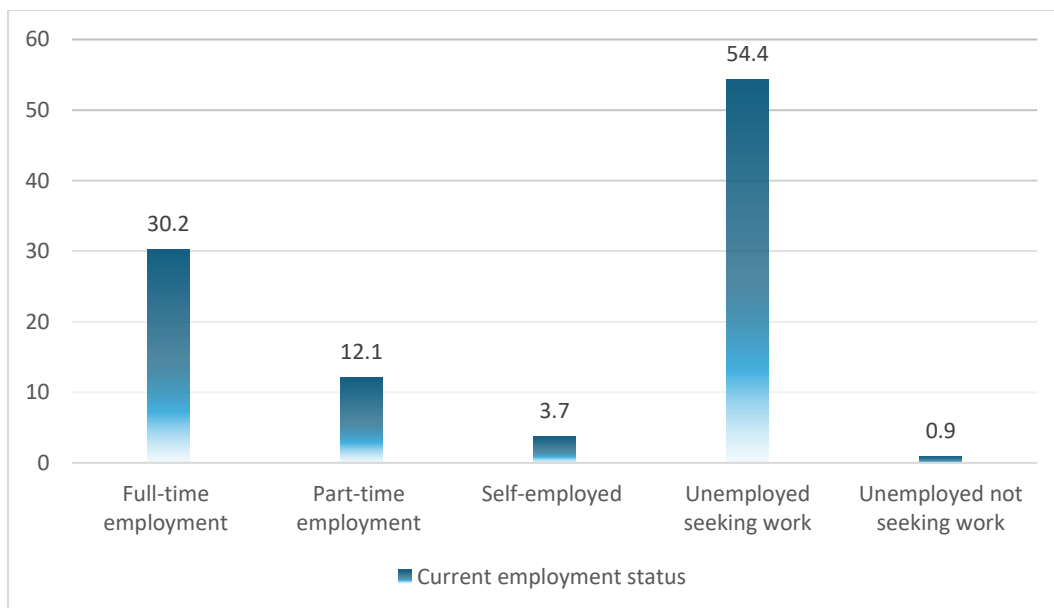


Figure 4.20: Current employment status

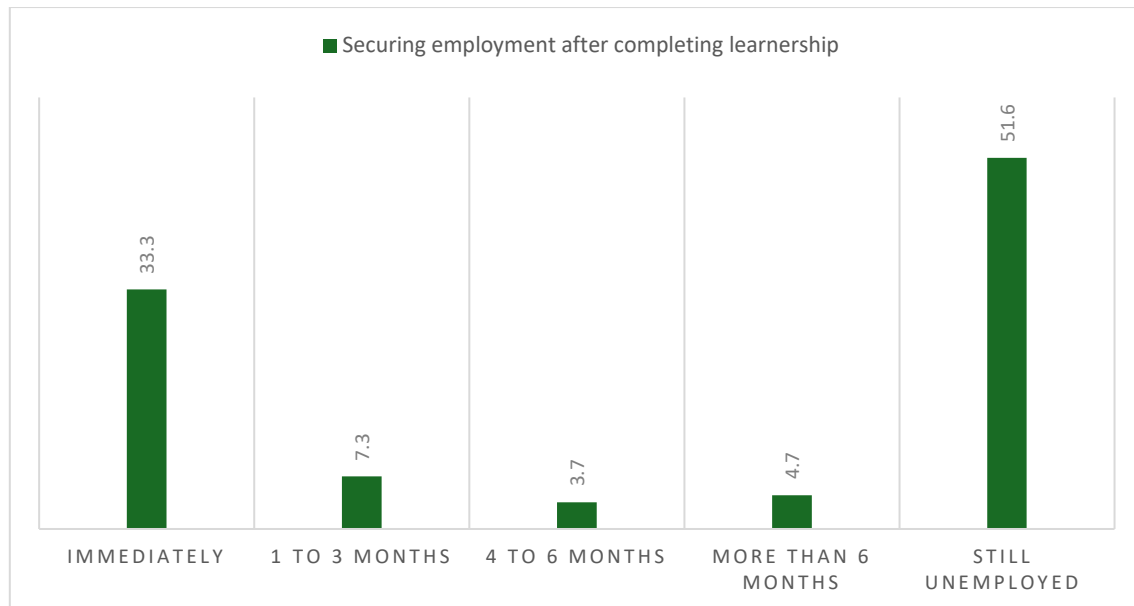


Figure 4.21: Ability to secure employment after completion of learnership

With regard to the continuation of employment with the same employer after the completion of the learnership 59.3% of the respondents were still employed by the same employer. Of these, 30.2% were in full-time employment and 12.1% were in part-time employment. However, 54.4% of the respondents were unemployed, still seeking employment. This indicated that the majority of the respondents were not employed after completion of the learnership programme. This phenomenon could also be attributed to the struggling South African economy, with high unemployment rates across all industries.

Those who were able to secure employment after completing the learnership, 33.3% secured employment immediately after completion of the learnership, followed by 7.3% between 1 to 3 months and 4.7% more than 6 months. The findings reflect that unemployment is still prevalent among learners who have completed the W&R SETA learnership.

4.6.6 Effectiveness of Skills Acquired

The purpose of this section is to evaluate how effectively the learnership has equipped learners with the skills needed by employers.

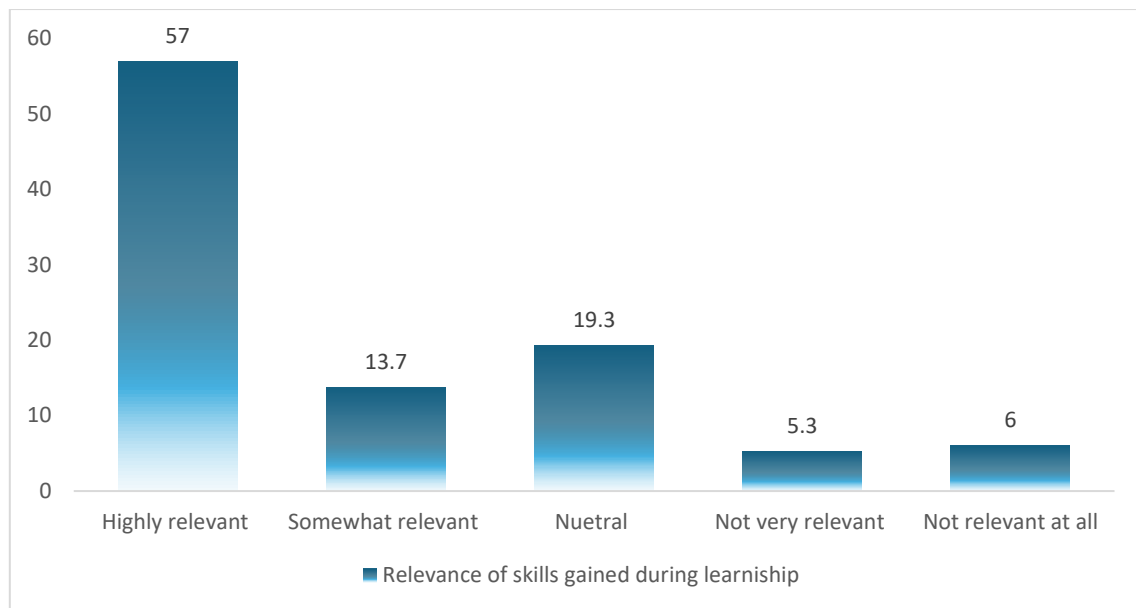


Figure 4.22: Relevance of skills gained through learnership to your current job

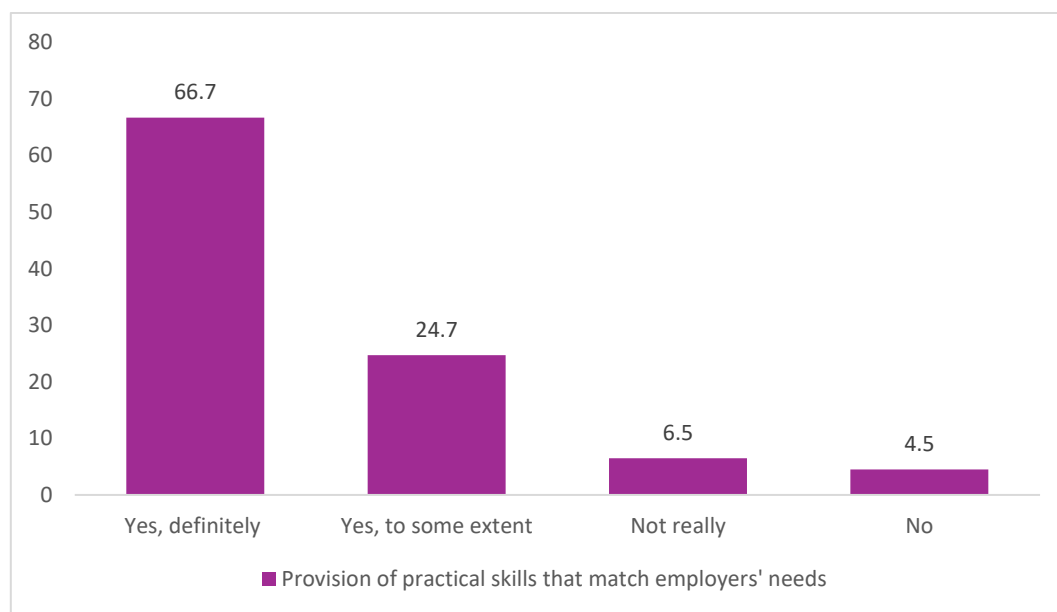


Figure 4.23: Provision of practical skills that match employers' needs

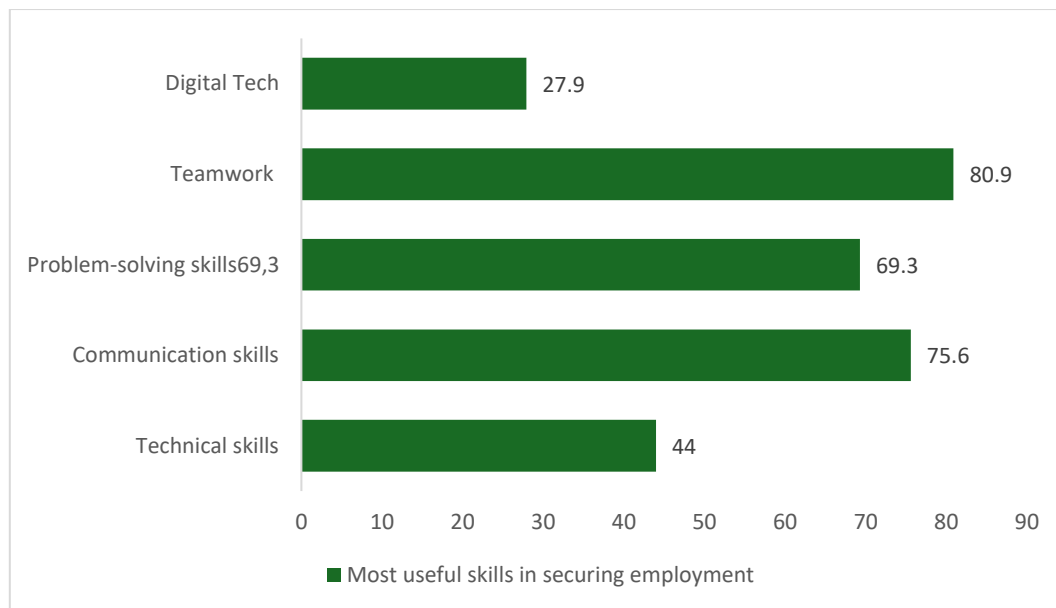


Figure 4.24: Most useful skills in securing employment

The findings indicate that 57% of the respondents were of the view that the skills gained through the learnership were highly relevant, followed by 19.3% as neutral. 66.7% felt that the learnership practical skills matched the needs of employers' needs in the industry whereas 24.7% indicated that the learnership provided practical skills that employers needed to some extent. The top three most useful skills the respondents felt assisted them to secure employment were first, teamwork (80.9%), second, communication skills (75.6%), and last, problem-solving skills (69.3%). This suggests that the W&R SETA learnership has effectively equipped learners with the skills required by employers.

4.6.7 Employment and Skills Relationship

The purpose of this section is to report on the link between the learners and W&R SETA learnership and their securing full-time employment after the programme.

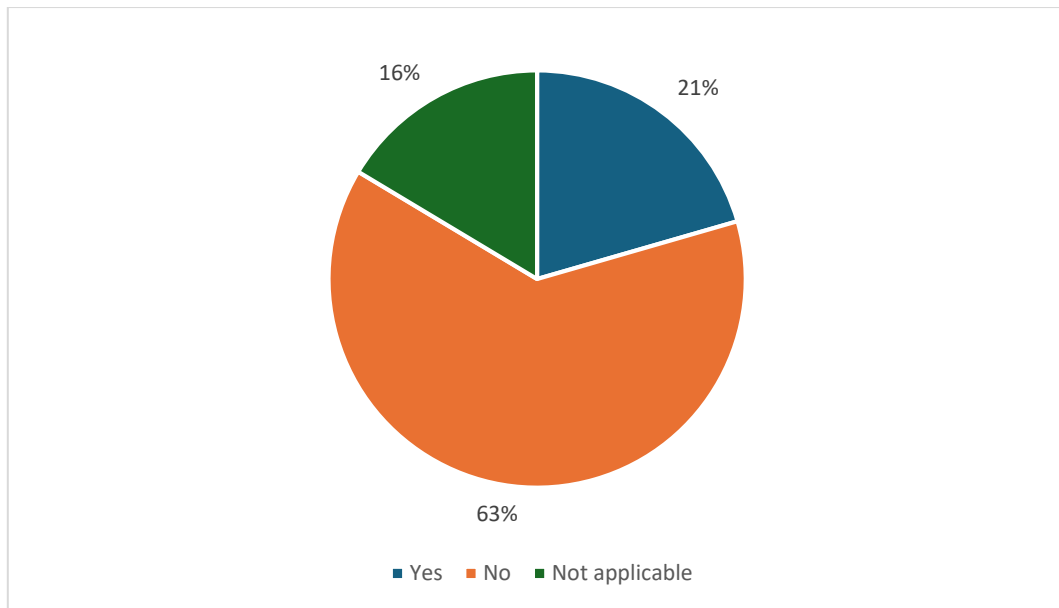


Figure 4.25: Employment offer based on skills acquired during learnership

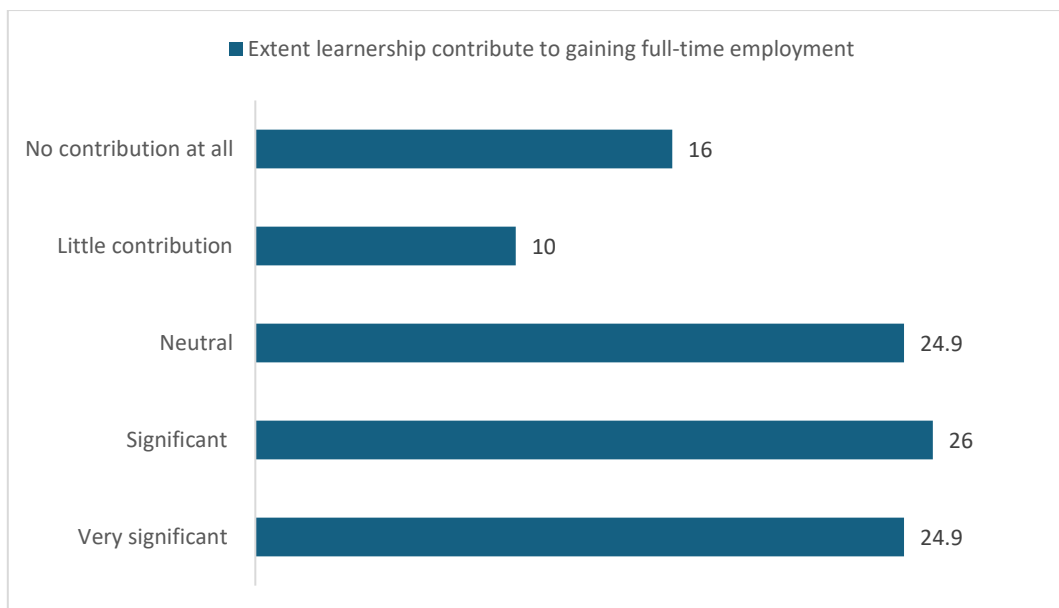


Figure 4.26: Learnership contribution to gaining full-time employment

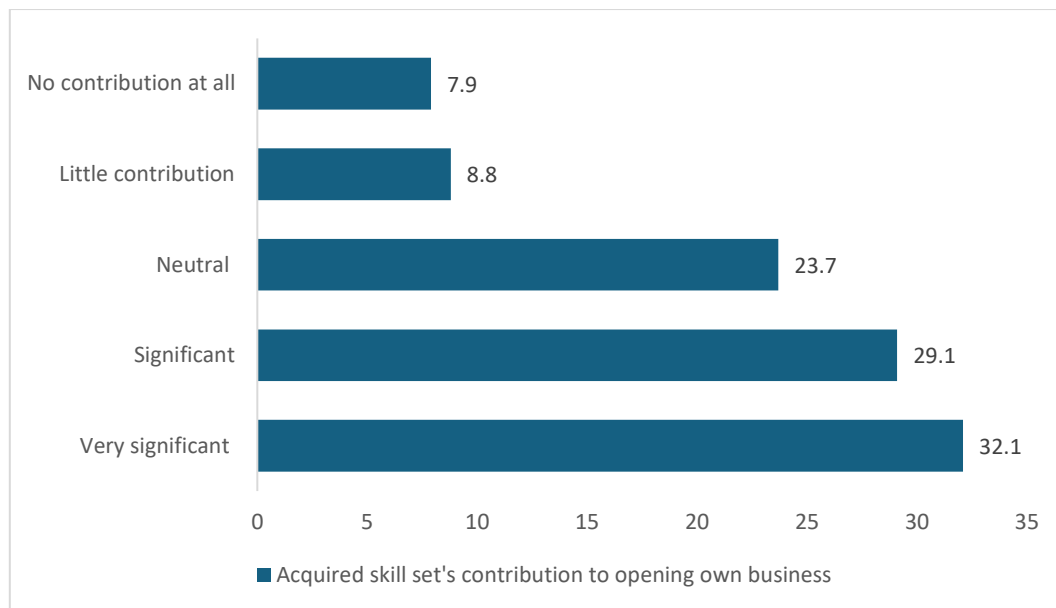


Figure 4.27: Extent to which the acquired skills set contribute to starting a business

With regard to the extent to which an employment offer can be linked to the skills acquired during the learnership, 64.2% of the respondents answered yes (Figure 4.25). 26% were of the opinion that the contribution of the learnership to them gaining full-time employment was very significant, followed by 24.9% stating that the learnership significantly contributed to their full-time employment. This indicates that over 50.9% of the full-time employed respondents felt strongly that the learnership contributed to their acquiring full-time employment as in Figure 4.26. Finally, 32.1% and 29.1% of respondents felt that the acquired skills gained through the learnership contributed to their considering opening a business very significantly and significantly, respectively.

4.6.8 Transformation and Inclusivity

The purpose of this section was to assess if the W&R SETA learnership addresses transformational imperatives like geography, race, age, gender and disability.

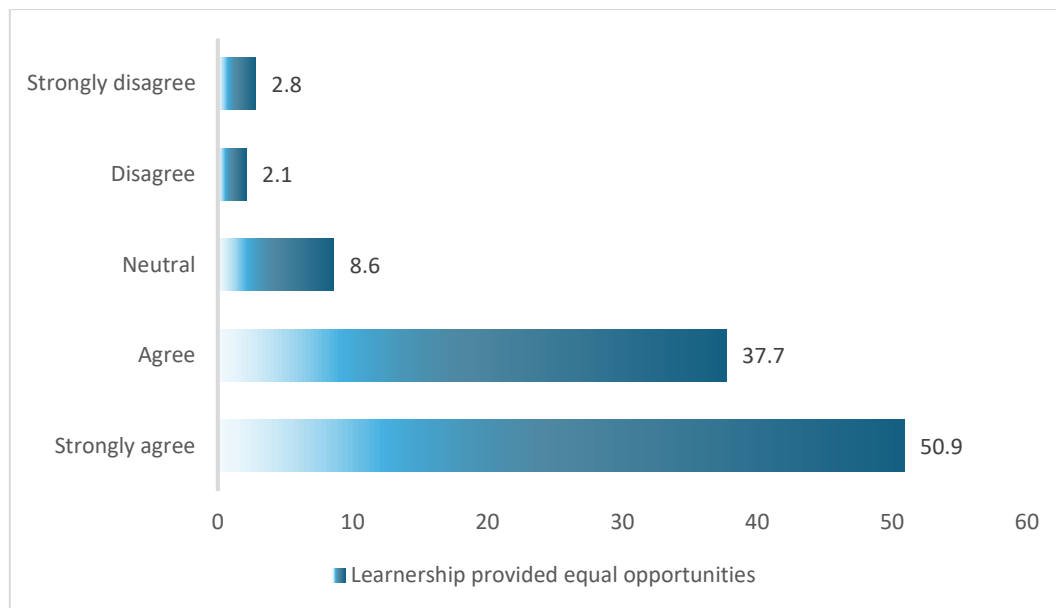


Figure 4.28: Learnership provided equal opportunities

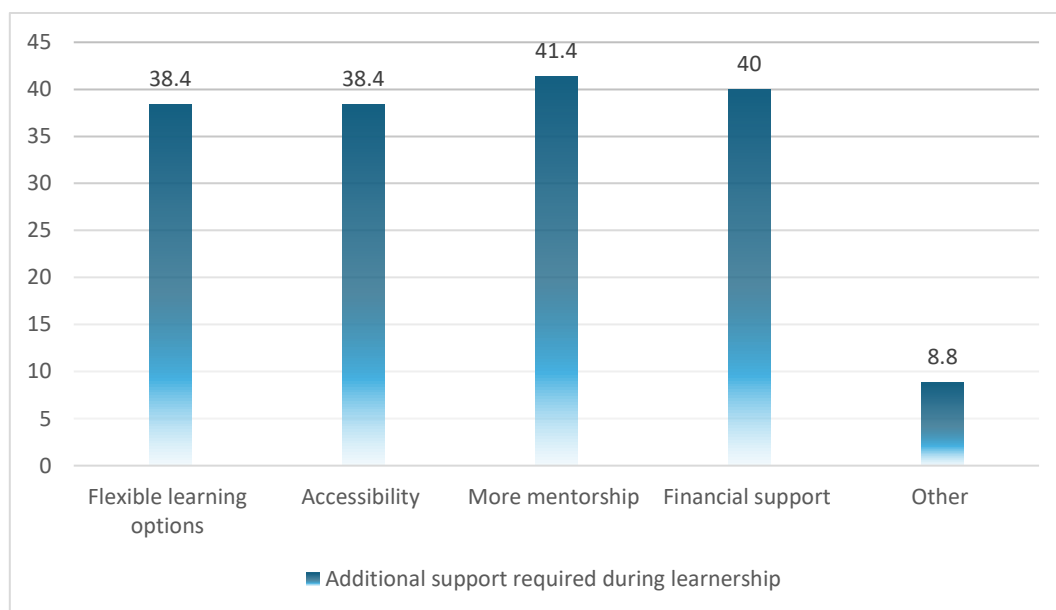


Figure 4.29: Additional support during learnership to improve learners' experience

With regard to the learnership addressing transformational imperatives such as geographic location, race, age, gender or disability during the learnership 50.9 % of the respondents strongly agreed with the statement “*I believe that the learnership provided equal opportunities regardless of race, gender, disability, or geographical location*”, whereas 37.7% agreed as indicated in Figure 4.28. The two most requested additional support resources during the learnership that respondents indicated would

improve their experience during the learnership were more mentorship (41.4%) and financial support (40%). Accessibility (38.4%) and flexible learning options (38.4%) followed closely behind (Figure 4.29).

4.6.9 Overall Satisfaction

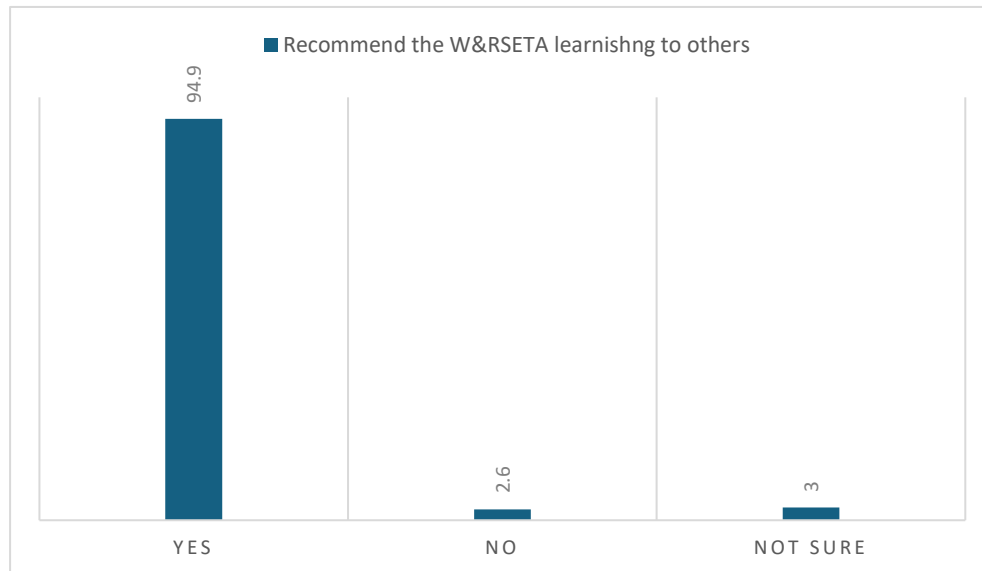


Figure 4.30: Recommend the W&R SETA learnership to others

With regards to whether respondents would recommend the W&R SETA learnership programme to others, 94.9% said yes as indicated in the above figure. This indicates a positive word-of-mouth response.

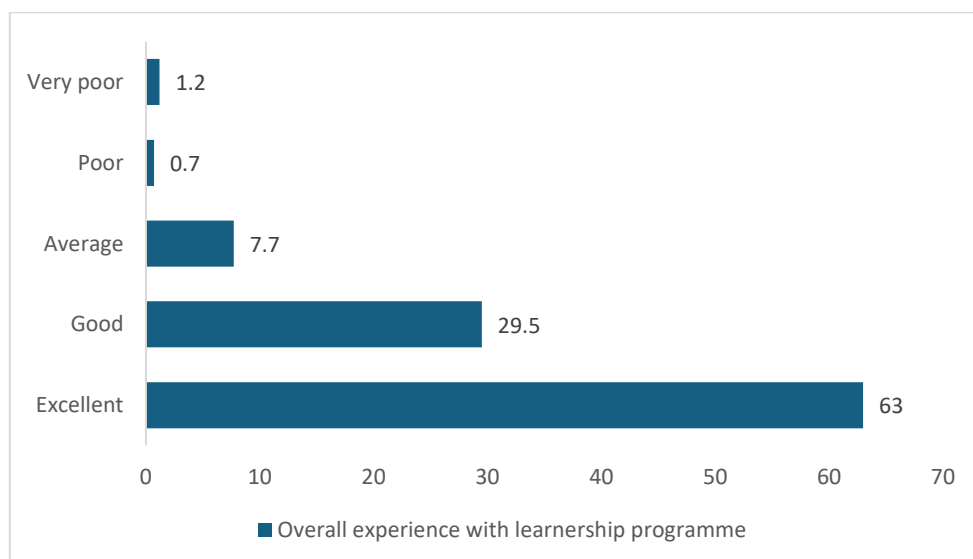


Figure 4.31: Overall experience with W&R SETA learnership programme

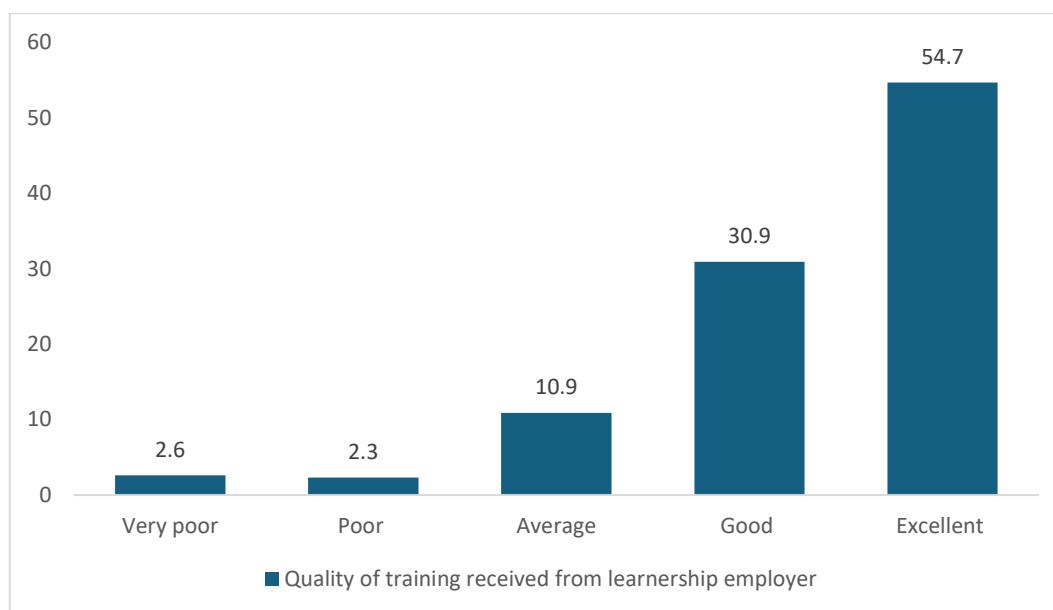


Figure 4.32: Quality of training received from the learnership employer

The respondents positively rated the W&R SETA learnership programme with regard to their overall experience and the quality of the training they received from the learnership employer. The findings indicate that 63% of the respondents rated their overall experience with the learnership as excellent and 29.5% as good (Figure 4.31). The respondents further rated the quality of training they received from the learnership employers as excellent (54.7%) and 30.9% as good. This suggests that 85% of the respondents were satisfied with the quality of the learnership.

4.7 RECOMMENDATIONS

4.7.1 For W&R SETA

4.7.1.1 Ongoing monitoring and evaluation

- A proper systematic data collection and recordkeeping of all programme participants' information must be put in place.
- Capture data at different stages of the programme and include alternative contact details (e.g., next of kin, email, etc.).
- Check in with the beneficiaries at least once a month during the funding period to address their concerns.

4.7.1.2 Impact assessment and tracking

- Conduct annual impact assessments or tracer studies to measure programme success.
- Perform long-term tracking of beneficiaries to evaluate the programme's sustainability and long-term effects.
- To strengthen post-programme, support the SETA must consider developing structured exit strategies, including job search support, CV writing workshops and interview preparation.
- Establish a formalised alumni network to monitor long-term learner progress and create peer mentoring platforms and enhance monitoring and evaluation:
 - Implement more robust tracking mechanisms for learner placement and progression to better inform programme improvements.
 - Use feedback loops from employers and learners for continuous quality improvement.

4.7.1.3 Improve employer collaboration

- Grow deeper partnerships with industry to co-create curricula that reflect current workplace demands.
- Introduce incentive models for employers who consistently absorb and mentor learners.

4.7.1.4 Promote entrepreneurial pathways

Equip the learners with business development skills and link them to funding opportunities, especially in underrepresented regions.

4.7.2 For Employers

4.7.2.1 Increase mentorship and supervision

Assign dedicated mentors or supervisors to ensure learners receive the guidance needed to transition successfully into the workplace.

4.7.2.2 Provide structured feedback

Offer regular performance evaluations and constructive feedback to support learner growth and alignment with organisational culture.

4.7.2.3 Collaborate with SETA on curriculum input and development

Actively contribute to the design of training content to ensure it matches sector-specific skill needs.

4.7.2.4 Support work-readiness programmes

- Standardise programme durations to either 12 or 24 months to allow adequate skill development.
- Manage learner expectations by preparing them for entry-level roles and career progression realities.
- Enhance workplace exposure, mentorship and entrepreneurship training opportunities.
- Collaborate with employers to facilitate structured work placements and provide relevant training resources.
- Offer financial support in the form of grants for entrepreneurship investment and arbitrate in the quest to ensure proper working conditions are adhered to by the graduates and their employers to prevent early termination of beneficiaries' contracts before finishing their training programmes.

4.7.3 For the Learners

4.7.3.1 Take initiative in career planning

Proactively look for mentorship, networking opportunities and career guidance during and after the programme.

4.7.3.2 Develop soft skills

Focus on improving communication, time management, teamwork and professionalism to enhance employability chances.

4.7.2.3 Embrace lifelong learning

Pursue additional qualifications or short courses to remain competitive in a dynamic labour market.

4.7.2.4 Leverage SETA and employer support

Use post-programme services offered by SETA and employers, including placement support, alumni networks and business incubation resources.

4.7.4 For Training Providers:

- Ensure curricula align with industry needs, as some surveyed employers found the learners to be lacking essential skills.
- Support learners throughout their work placements to ensure relevant training experiences.
- Regularly update training materials to include high-demand skills such as financial management, project management and IT competencies.

4.8 CONCLUSIONS

The tracer study has provided valuable insights into the outcomes and impact of W&R SETA learning programmes on beneficiaries. The results reveal that while many learners gain access to meaningful employment or further studies post-training, there are still challenges regarding placement support, work-readiness and alignment between training and workplace expectations. Qualitative data highlight learner satisfaction with programme structure but also expose concerns over limited post-programme support, lack of employer engagement and inconsistent mentorship. Employers recognise the potential of SETA learners but suggest improvements in soft skills and technical readiness.

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