A meta-analysis of W&RSETA input statistics in the Higher Education, Technical & Vocational Education and Training sectors, in the Free State.

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Shaping Skills in Food Safety Culture and Sustainability

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Abstract:

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to analyse WRSETA input statistics in the Higher Education, Technical & Vocational Education and Training sectors, in in the Free State. The W&RSETA has implemented various interventions to promote entry-level participation in the workforce, including the Bursaries Programme, the Graduate Placement Programme, internships and skills programmes.

Design/methodology/ Approach: In this paper a qualitative case study approach was used. Following a comprehensive literature review, based on factors known to be important in developing a meta-analysis of W&RSETA input statistics in the Higher Education, Technical & Vocational Education and Training sectors, in in the Free State in combination with literature of SETA interventions and guiding policies.

Findings/ Recommendations: This paper presents strategic recommendations to optimize the W&R SETA's skills development funding for both unemployed and employed beneficiaries in South Africa. Emphasizing bridging programs for unemployed youth. It advocates for increased upskilling initiatives for the employed, focusing on digital skills and emerging industry trends to boost productivity and career growth. Additionally, aligning programs with high-demand skills in the retail sector and regularly evaluating funding allocations based on outcomes could enhance the effectiveness of workforce development efforts, promoting sustainable economic growth.

Originality/ Value: this meta-analysis has the potential to influence policy at multiple levels, including institutional, sectoral, and national. By offering a nuanced understanding of the interplay between educational inputs and labour market outcomes, the study can support the development of more adaptive and impactful skills training frameworks, helping W&RSETA, other SETAs, organisations and South Africa to address its ongoing skills development challenges in a sustainable and effective manner.

Key Words: W&RSETA, learning interventions, SETA's, Higher Education

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1. Background and Introduction

Given South Africa's socio-economic challenges, particularly high youth unemployment and skills mismatches, a meta-analysis of learning interventions over the past four years can generate evidence-based insights that could guide resource allocation and enhance the design of learning programs.

A meta-analysis of W&RSETA (Wholesale and Retail Sector Education and Training Authority) input statistics in the Higher Education, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sectors in in the Free State is a critical undertaking. This analysis can provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact and effectiveness of various learning interventions aimed at addressing the skills gap in the wholesale and retail industry. By synthesizing input data from multiple programs—such as learnerships, skills programs, internships, and bursaries—this study offers a holistic view of how well these initiatives align with the sector's strategic objectives, thereby informing future policy decisions.

By rigorously evaluating the input statistics, the study can identify trends and patterns across different educational sectors, enabling W&RSETA to target funding and support more effectively. This data-driven approach would be invaluable for optimizing the efficacy of skills development initiatives, ensuring they meet the needs of both learners and employers in the wholesale and retail sectors.

The findings from this meta-analysis would also contribute to the academic discourse on skills development and labour market responsiveness in South Africa. By providing empirical evidence on the outcomes of interventions, the study can inform broader discussions on improving the integration of TVET and higher education with industry demands. Additionally, it could identify gaps where current initiatives fall short, thus guiding future research and programmatic adjustments. The results may also serve as a benchmark for other Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) seeking to improve the impact of their skills development programs, contributing to the national agenda of fostering an inclusive, skills-based economy.

Ultimately, this meta-analysis has the potential to influence policy at multiple levels, including institutional, sectoral, and national. By offering a nuanced understanding of the interplay between educational inputs and labour market outcomes, the study can support the development of more adaptive and impactful skills training frameworks, helping W&RSETA, other SETAs, organisations and South Africa to address its ongoing skills development challenges in a sustainable and effective manner.

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The purpose of this study is to analyse WRSETA input statistics in the Higher Education, Technical & Vocational Education and Training sectors, in in the Free State. The W&RSETA has implemented various interventions to promote entry-level participation in the workforce, including the Bursaries Programme, the Graduate Placement Programme, internships and skills programmes.

Data, encompassing both qualitative and quantitative information, serves as a foundational element in today's information-driven society. The diverse origins of data reflect the broad spectrum of data generation, from the structured observations in scientific studies to the detailed record-keeping of government agencies. The commercial sector generates data through market activities and transactions, while digital platforms contribute to the expanding data landscape with content creation and user interactions. In essence, data represents the accumulated knowledge and digital footprint of societal activities, providing crucial insights that drive strategic decision-making and innovation across sectors (Chaudhary, 2023).

The critical role of master data in organisational operations is a recognised strategic assed and data management has countless time shows advancement, especially in the increasingly digital economy. However, the emphasis on master data has resulted in the neglect of other important data types, such as metadata, which are essential for ensuring data quality. This oversight is especially problematic for public institutions, where strategic use of high-quality data is vital for effective decision-making and sustainable program management (Rambe & Bester, 2020).

Harrington, famous philosopher believed that measurement is the first step needed to control and eventually to improve (Downs, 1977). This aligns directly with the functions and responsibilities of Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) as defined in Chapter 3, Section 10 of the Skills Development Act, 1998. With the primary role data analysis is important to develop and implement sector skills plans, which identify trends in each sector, highlight in-demand skills, and establish priorities for skills development (W&RSETA, 2020). Additionally, SETAs are tasked with developing and managing learning programs, such as skills programs and learnerships, to facilitate workforce training and upskilling. In 2019, reports showed that South Africa had a skills mismatch of more than 50% and one of the lowest productivities in labour workforce when compared to 30 other countries (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2023). Given the above it is eminent that analysis of data from the SETA is needed to look at addressing the mismatch of skills and productivity rates.

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SETA's furthermore play a crucial role in supporting the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), which is a system that registers qualifications and learning outcomes across eight levels, thus ensuring standardized educational benchmarks. Another key responsibility of SETAs is to ensure quality assurance in education and training provision according to the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) requirements. This includes accrediting education and training providers, monitoring program implementation, registering assessors, and collaborating with other education and training quality assurance bodies. SETAs also manage the disbursement of levies collected from employers, who contribute 1% of their payroll to the South African Revenue Service (SARS). Of this amount, 80% is allocated to SETAs for administration and grants that companies can claim back (W&RSETA, 2020).

According to the Global Competitiveness Index for 2017–2018, South Africa ranks 61st out of 137 countries in terms of its ability to develop, attract, and retain talent (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2023). With money being paid by levy paying companies and the loss of talent to to foreign countries shows a drastic need to reassess and implement changes in the funding allocated and an assessment of key areas of improvement for talent retention. SETAs have a public accountability mandate to ensure that public entities operate responsibly, avoiding wasteful or improper use of resources (W&RSETA, 2020). With this mandate clearly set out by an Act of Parlement, the need for analysis of spending on training interventions should be closely examined and assessed.

A meta-analysis of WRSETA input statistics in the Higher Education, Technical & Vocational Education and Training sectors, in South Africa is highly valuable for W&RSETA when assessing learning interventions. By systematically aggregating data from multiple studies and evaluations, a meta-analysis provides a comprehensive overview of the effectiveness of various training programs such as learnerships, skills programs, internships, and bursaries. This approach enables W&RSETA to identify which interventions are most successful in improving skills development, employability, and workforce productivity within the sector.

Furthermore, a meta-analysis helps to uncover trends and patterns that may not be evident from individual studies (Mcshane & Bockenholt, 2017). This broader perspective can inform strategic decision-making, allowing W&RSETA to optimize resource allocation and design targeted interventions that address skills gaps more effectively. It also supports evidence-based policy formulation by providing a robust analysis of existing data, which can be used to justify continued investment in certain programs or to restructure initiatives for better outcomes.

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For W&RSETA, meta-analysis serves as a tool for continuous improvement, enabling the SETA to benchmark interventions against industry standards and global best practices. It can also highlight areas where additional research is needed, ensuring that future learning initiatives are grounded in reliable evidence. Ultimately, conducting a meta-analysis contributes to the long-term sustainability of W&RSETA's programs by enhancing their relevance, impact, and efficiency in addressing the sector's evolving skills development needs.

The study aims to assess the success of these initiatives by identifying the factors that contributed to their achievements, as well as the constraints that hindered their impact. Additionally, it seeks to provide recommendations for enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of W&RSETA's efforts. Through this analysis, the study aims to propose a strategic way forward, building on the lessons learned from the past 4 years of W&RSETA interventions.

2. Problem statement and Objectives

2.1. Problem Statement

The study aims to conduct a meta-analysis of W&RSETA's learning interventions from 2020 to 2024 within the Higher Education and Technical & Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sectors in the Free State. It seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of these interventions in addressing skills gaps in the wholesale and retail industry and provide evidence-based insights to guide future resource allocation and program design.

2.2. Objectives

By means of a meta-analysis:

- Evaluate the Impact of Learning Interventions by analysing the effectiveness of various W&RSETA learning programs, including learnerships, skills programs, internships, and bursaries, in enhancing skills development, employability, and productivity within the sector.
- Identify Trends and Patterns in Skills Development by systematically examine data from the past four years to uncover trends and patterns across different educational interventions.

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- Assess Resource Allocation by evaluate the current allocation of resources to determine how effectively funds are being used across different initiatives and identify areas for optimizing investment in skills development.
- Provide Recommendations for Strategic Improvements by offering data-driven recommendations for refining W&RSETA's learning programs, including proposals for new initiatives or modifications to existing programs to better align with the sector's evolving skills needs.
- Contribute to Evidence-Based Policy Formulation by supporting evidence-based decision-making in W&RSETA and other SETAs by providing comprehensive insights that can inform policy adjustments to enhance the relevance and impact of skills development initiatives.
- Identify Gaps and Areas for Further Research by highlighting gaps in the current skills development framework and propose areas where further research or targeted interventions are necessary to improve program outcomes.

By achieving these objectives, the study aims to enhance the strategic direction of W&RSETA's learning initiatives, contributing to a more skilled and employable workforce in South Africa's wholesale and retail sectors.

3. Literature Review

The analysis of input data from the Wholesale and Retail Sector Education and Training Authority (W&RSETA) learning interventions is foundational to tackling South Africa's socio-economic issues, especially concerning high levels of youth unemployment and widespread skills mismatches within the labour market. Millions of young South Africans find themselves unable to engage in economic activities, resulting in severe exclusion from the workforce and increased susceptibility to long-term unemployment, disillusionment, and economic marginalization (Mosala, 2018). This exclusion of youth from active economic participation deprives them of essential skills and work experience, impeding their capacity to contribute effectively to the nation's economic growth. The resulting skill deficit not only affects individual career prospects but also threatens the broader economy by diminishing the pool of qualified, productive workers essential for sustainable development. Internationally, South Africa's youth unemployment rates stand out as some of the highest globally, underscoring the severity of the issue (Statistics South Africa, 2024). Comparative studies consistently reveal that South Africa ranks among the worst globally in youth unemployment, highlighting an urgent need to address the systemic factors contributing to this pervasive socio-economic crisis. (Mosala, 2018). South Africa's

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youth unemployment rate has reached critical levels, posing a deeply rooted and enduring challenge.

Mismatches, where the skills of job seekers do not meet the demands of available jobs, hinder economic growth and limit individual employment opportunities. In 2023, youth unemployment in South Africa was among the highest globally, reaching over 60% in some areas, underscoring an urgent need to close this gap. The significant disparity in transition rates between youth with and without work experience underscores the experience dividend, where those with prior workplace exposure are four times more likely to secure employment. This highlights the crucial role of initiatives like experiential learning, internships and learnerships in addressing youth unemployment, which stood at a 4.7% transition rate in 2022, a modest increase from 3.5% in 2021. Education further impacts employment prospects; however, the Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) for Q1 2024 indicates that only 9.8% of employed youth are graduates, contributing to high unemployment rates and a substantial NEET population. Gender disparities exacerbate the situation, with young women facing higher unemployment (49.4% in 2024) and lower labour market participation than men, who transitioned at rates of 6.5% compared to 4.6% for women in 2022. Geographic variations also influence opportunities, as urban areas like the Western Cape offer better job prospects than rural regions. Moreover, discouraged job seekers comprised 2.8% of youth in the Western Cape in 2024, highlighting a need for a comprehensive approach to tackle youth unemployment. Strategies should include education reform, skills development, and collaborative efforts among government, the private sector, and civil society to foster a supportive environment for youth employment and entrepreneurship, ultimately promoting economic growth and social cohesion (Statistics South Africa, 2024)

The Wholesale and Retail sector employed approximately 3.32 million individuals in 2020, contributing around 12.39% to South Africa's gross domestic product (GDP). However, the sector faced a significant decline of 67% in revenue during the second quarter of 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This downturn adversely impacted levy collections and highlighted the deep social inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic, disproportionately affecting vulnerable communities and sectors. In response, the W&RSETA has adopted a more inclusive planning approach, prioritizing women, rural communities, youth, and people with disabilities. There is an increased emphasis on empowering small, medium, and micro enterprises (SMMEs), cooperatives, and the informal sector through targeted skills development and access to enabling technologies. Moreover, the pandemic has accelerated the digital transformation within the wholesale and retail sector, leading to a surge in e-commerce adoption among customers. Consequently, the W&RSETA has

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aligned its strategies to enhance skills development in digital spaces, while also addressing heightened health and safety compliance requirements for employers. The implications of COVID-19 on skills planning include reduced business activity, declining revenues, a growing need for e-commerce skills, and the urgent requirement for reskilling and retraining to mitigate job losses amid increased health and safety risks (W&RSETA, 2022).

The pressing issue of unemployment in South Africa demands urgent and effective intervention (Altman, 2022). Alongside this, poverty and inequality remain persistent challenges, exacerbating the difficulties faced by young people in accessing economic opportunities (World Bank, 2018). Primary barriers preventing youth from active and meaningful participation in the economy includes joblessness, poverty, and inequality. The persistently high rate of youth unemployment is not only one of South Africa's most critical socio-economic challenges but also represents a significant risk to social stability. The National Planning Commission (2011) warns that this "ticking time bomb" poses the greatest threat to social cohesion in the country. Alarming estimates suggest that if young people do not secure employment by age 24, they are unlikely to ever obtain formal, full-time employment, further deepening the cycle of economic exclusion.

Input data analysis serves as a tool for understanding program effectiveness, revealing whether the design and implementation of learning interventions align with expected outcomes (Annandale et al., 2021). The wholesale and retail sectors, which constitute a significant portion of South Africa's economic activity, depend on a skilled workforce to meet consumer needs, manage complex supply chains, and adapt to global shifts in trade and retail practices (Habanabakize & Muzindutsi, 2018). W&RSETA's learning interventions were created to address these needs by building a pipeline of skilled, adaptable workers (Meyer & van Dyk, 2022). By analysing input data—such as program enrolment, completion rates, and job placement figures—W&RSETA and other stakeholders gain insights into the quality and effectiveness of each intervention. This evidence-based evaluation allows stakeholders to assess whether these programs are producing skilled workers who meet industry demands, thus addressing the country's pressing employment and productivity challenges.

Evaluating input data can support the authority in refining its strategic resource allocation, ensuring funds are directed toward initiatives that maximize impact. Given that W&RSETA's interventions are funded primarily through skills levies contributed by employers, there is a fiduciary duty to use these funds responsibly. In South Africa, companies contribute 1% of their payroll to the Skills Development Levy, with a substantial

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portion allocated to SETAs, including W&RSETA, to fund sector-specific skills programs. With these resources, W&RSETA has introduced numerous programs, yet a lack of analysis can lead to inefficiencies and suboptimal outcomes (W&RSETA, 2023). The W&RSETA's mandate encompasses the development of qualifications, the distribution of grants, the implementation of various learning programs—including learnerships, bursaries, and skills programs—and the quality assurance of education and training. Additionally, it aims to provide bursaries and work placements for youth. These initiatives are closely aligned with the goals and objectives set forth in the National Skills Development Strategy (NSDP) and the Skills Strategy Plan (SSP). The SSP identifies seven key skills priorities within the wholesale and retail sector: the Priority Skills Plan (PSP), the development of Small, Medium, and Micro Enterprises (SMMEs), support for informal traders and cooperatives, addressing youth unemployment, filling hard-to-fill vacancies, bridging skills gaps, stakeholder engagement, and promoting the training and employment of people with disabilities (PWD), along with sector transformation By identifying which interventions are most successful in terms of skills development, employability, and workforce productivity, W&RSETA can optimize its funding model, directing financial resources to programs that yield the greatest return on investment (W&RSETA, 2023).

Furthermore, data-driven analysis of these learning programs supports W&RSETA in achieving its mandate under the Skills Development Act of 1998, which outlines SETAs' responsibilities to develop sector skills plans, manage training programs, and allocate resources effectively. An analysis of input data helps W&RSETA fulfil these duties by informing the development and modification of sector skills plans based on empirical evidence. By leveraging data, W&RSETA not only enhances the quality and effectiveness of its programs but also aligns more closely with national economic objectives (W&RSETA, 2024a).

In the context of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) standards, W&RSETA's responsibility extends to ensuring that training meets nationally defined quality benchmarks (Department Higher Education and Training, 2024). As such, input data analysis functions as a mechanism for quality assurance, validating that the training delivered aligns with NQF and QCTO standards and meets the needs of the wholesale and retail sectors. In a highly competitive global economy, ensuring training program quality can be pivotal in improving South Africa's workforce productivity and international competitiveness. the Global Competitiveness Report has repeatedly highlighted the importance of workforce skills in economic performance, noting that countries with well-aligned training systems are more

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competitive globally (Schwab & Zahidi, 2020). By providing evidence that W&RSETA programs meet these standards, the data analysis reinforces the credibility of W&RSETA's interventions and builds stakeholder trust.

The accountability requirements of public sector organisations further underscore the importance of input data analysis. W&RSETA, like all SETAs, operates with a public accountability mandate, ensuring that resources derived from public and private contributions are used efficiently and effectively. With constrained economic resources, there is an expectation that SETAs avoid wasteful or inefficient use of funds, emphasizing the need for data-driven oversight (W&RSETA, 2022). By scrutinizing input data, W&RSETA can make informed decisions about program continuation, modification, or expansion based on their demonstrated impact. This level of accountability ensures that W&RSETA meets public expectations, aligning with its fiduciary duties and contributing to the broader social goals of workforce development and economic resilience.

The broader socio-economic impact of analysing W&RSETA's input data cannot be overstated. Beyond providing a pathway to employment for individuals, these programs play a critical role in strengthening South Africa's overall economic framework. For example, evidence suggests that well-designed training programs can contribute to higher productivity rates, reducing the costs associated with low labour output. In South Africa, labour productivity has been cited as one of the lowest compared to similar economies, affecting the country's growth potential (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2023a). W&RSETA's learning interventions aim to address this issue by equipping the workforce with relevant, in-demand skills, thereby enhancing productivity. Input data analysis provides crucial insights into whether these interventions succeed in this regard, allowing W&RSETA to adjust where necessary to maximize the economic value of its programs.

In addition to sector-specific outcomes, input data analysis provides critical contributions to the academic and policy discourse on skills development and employability (Jackson, 2014). As South Africa works to address systemic unemployment and low productivity, insights from W&RSETA's program data inform discussions on how educational outcomes can align with industry requirements, creating a workforce that is responsive to both current and future labour demands. Input data reveals the key factors driving program success or hindrance, supporting academic research in fields like human resources development, labour economics, and educational policy. For policy-making bodies, these findings provide empirical evidence that can inform the design of more targeted, effective interventions across the national education and training landscape.

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The sector is characterized by a substantial workforce comprising unskilled and semi-skilled labour, predominantly from African backgrounds. The mismatch between the supply of wholesale and retail skills and the sector's demand for those skills has been exacerbated by several change drivers, including the impact of COVID-19, the expansion of retail chains into townships, technological advancements, and the advent of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). This context necessitates that the W&RSETA reassess identified skills gaps and emerging skill requirements within the sector. Employers must adapt to a future driven by technology, which entails the need for technical skills and ongoing reskilling of the workforce. The skills shortage is also tied to transformational imperatives within the sector, highlighting the urgency of addressing these priority areas for sustainable development (W&RSETA, 2022).

Moreover, analysing W&RSETA's input data can reveal important trends in the demographic makeup of program participants, such as age, gender, and educational background, which can inform future interventions aimed at specific population groups. For instance, by understanding how youth, women, or marginalized communities are engaging with learning programs, W&RSETA can make data-driven adjustments to improve access and outcomes for these groups. The study of demographic trends also allows for the evaluation of how well programs align with the National Skills Development Plan, which prioritizes inclusivity and the development of historically disadvantaged groups. In a diverse society like South Africa, achieving equitable access to training and skills development is critical to fostering an inclusive economy (Fourie, 2018).

An analysis of input data also extends beyond the immediate educational outcomes, providing insights into how programs affect other areas of participants' lives. Increased employability and job placements due to program completion can lead to broader socio-economic improvements, such as poverty reduction, better health outcomes, and improved standards of living (Karnani, 2009). Additionally, as individuals gain employment and contribute to the economy, there is a potential for increased consumer spending, which can stimulate further economic growth (Kritikos, 2014). By examining the social impact of W&RSETA's interventions, the input data analysis offers a comprehensive view of the multifaceted benefits of skills development, emphasizing the far-reaching implications of these programs beyond the wholesale and retail sectors.

In conclusion, analysing input data from W&RSETA's learning interventions is of paramount importance for the ongoing success of skills development efforts within South Africa. This data-driven approach not only supports program improvement and strategic resource allocation but also ensures that W&RSETA remains accountable to its

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stakeholders and aligned with national socio-economic objectives. Through this comprehensive analysis, W&RSETA and its partners are better positioned to make informed, impactful decisions that advance workforce readiness, productivity, and economic resilience. The study of input data thus not only enhances the Authority's operational effectiveness but also reinforces its role in building a competitive, inclusive economy prepared to meet the challenges and opportunities of a rapidly evolving global marketplace.

4. Research Design and Methodology

4.1. Introduction

This chapter describes the methods used to study W&RSETA input statistics in the Higher Education, Technical & Vocational Education and Training sectors, in the Free State. It provides an overview of the research design. Furthermore, it outlines the data collection and analysis procedures adopted for the purposes of this study. In consideration of the aim of the study, a meta-analysis research design was used. Using available data provided by W&RSETA Free State Reginal offices, this study was quantitative in nature. The ethical considerations of the study are also described.

This chapter describes the methods used to study the effects of Emotional Intelligence and Mindfulness on Self Efficacy amongst WIL students at an HEI. It provides an overview of the research design, including an overview of the measures taken to ensure that the study was conducted ethically, as well as a description of the participants and sampling method. Furthermore, this chapter outlines the data collection and analysis procedures adopted for the purposes of this study. Using questionnaires as the main tool for data collection, this study was quantitative in nature. A cross-sectional study will be used for the research as it involves looking at data from a population at one specific point in time and Respondents are selected based on the variables of interest (Cherry, 2019).

4.2. Research approach

To conduct a meta-analysis of WRSETA input statistics in the Higher Education (HE) and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sectors in the Free State, the study will employ a systematic and structured research approach. This approach includes several stages: data analysis, interpretation of findings, and the formulation of recommendations. Given the availability of the data, the study will draw from a variety of primary and secondary sources to ensure a comprehensive analysis.

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The decision to adopt a quantitative approach in this study is primarily driven by the need for objective measurement and statistical analysis to understand the patterns and trends in funding allocations and their outcomes. Quantitative research allows for the collection of numerical data. This approach is particularly suitable for examining the large datasets involved in this study, enabling the researcher to provide a more comprehensive and generalizable understanding of the effects of funding fluctuations on skills development programs. By using quantitative methods, the study can generate statistically significant findings that offer evidence-based recommendations for policy adjustments. The objective nature of quantitative analysis also enhances the reliability and validity of the results, allowing for clearer insights into the impact of funding on workforce development in the wholesale and retail sectors. The data provided outlines the number of students funded under various W&R SETA initiatives—learnerships, skills programmes, graduate internships, and bursaries—from 2020 to 2024. This analysis explores trends and shifts in funding allocations across these categories, offering insights into the evolving focus on student skill development in the retail sector.

Primary Data Sources will include W&RSETA annual reports, performance audits, program evaluation reports, and datasets provided by HE institutions and TVET colleges. These documents contain quantitative data on student enrolments in the various W&RSETA interventions.

Furthermore, Secondary Data Sources such as Academic research articles, industry reports, and government publications on skills development and workplace readiness in South Africa will be utilized to provide additional context and support for interpreting the primary data.

A standardized data extraction template will be utilised to systematically collect relevant information from each data source.

4.3. Sampling

Population characteristics for this study included clear specifications regarding learners, both employed and unemployed, funded by W&RSETA from 2020 to 2024 in learning interventions including Learnerships, Graduate Internships, Skills Programmes and Bursaries.

The sampling method employed in this study is characterized as non-probability purposive sampling, which is particularly suited for research focused on specific participant characteristics. This approach involves deliberately selecting individuals who meet

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predetermined criteria, thereby enhancing the relevance of the data to the research objectives. In this instance, the sample comprises individuals participating in a W&RSETA Learning intervention.

By focusing on this targeted group, the study aims to gather in-depth insights into the number of learners funded and the effect of this in the broader South Africa. While this method allows for the collection of detailed and contextually rich data, it is essential to acknowledge that the findings may not be generalizable to a broader population due to the non-random selection process (Palinkas, et al., 2015). Nonetheless, purposive sampling facilitates the exploration of specific research questions and provides valuable information about the experiences and outcomes of participants within the defined demographic (Campbell, et al., 2020).

4.4. Selection of Test Persons

This study aims to conduct a meta-analysis of W&RSETA input statistics within Higher Education, Technical & Vocational Education and Training sectors, in in the Free State. The selection of test participants for a meta-analysis is a critical step that ensures the robustness and relevance of the findings.

Selection criteria was based thereon that participants must be enrolled in the learning interventions as previously stated. Al participants must have received SETA funding, with applications approved as of 2020 to 2024. All learners for HEI's not receiving funding or receiving funding from other entities, both government and private were excluded from this study.

Through this systematic approach to participant selection, researchers can enhance the quality and applicability of their meta-analytic findings, thereby contributing valuable insights into the effectiveness of the interventions under investigation (Shenton, 2004).

4.5. Data Collection

Data collection is the systematic process of gathering and measuring information on relevant variables, which facilitates the answering of research questions, testing of hypotheses, and evaluation of outcomes (Hox & Boeije, 2005). The data used in this study was input data received from W&RSETA in the Free State, comprising of the date learning interventions were conducted, the details of the funding, employers funding was given to and the intervention type.

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4.6. Ethical Considerations

In conducting a meta-analysis of the W&RSETA input statistics within the Higher Education, Technical, and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sectors in South Africa, several ethical considerations will need to be addressed to ensure the integrity and credibility of the research. Confidentiality and anonymity of the data sources will be maintained to protect sensitive information, especially when dealing with demographic data or organisational identifiers. Responsible handling of the data will be essential, employing secure data storage and limiting access to authorized personnel only. Moreover, the research will uphold the principle of honesty and transparency, accurately representing the findings without manipulation or misinterpretation of the data. Proper acknowledgment of all data sources and contributions will be crucial to avoid plagiarism and to give credit to original researchers. The study will also consider the potential implications of its findings on various stakeholders, particularly marginalized groups within the education and labour market sectors, ensuring that the research does not inadvertently reinforce existing inequalities.

5. Research analysis

5.1. Learnerships
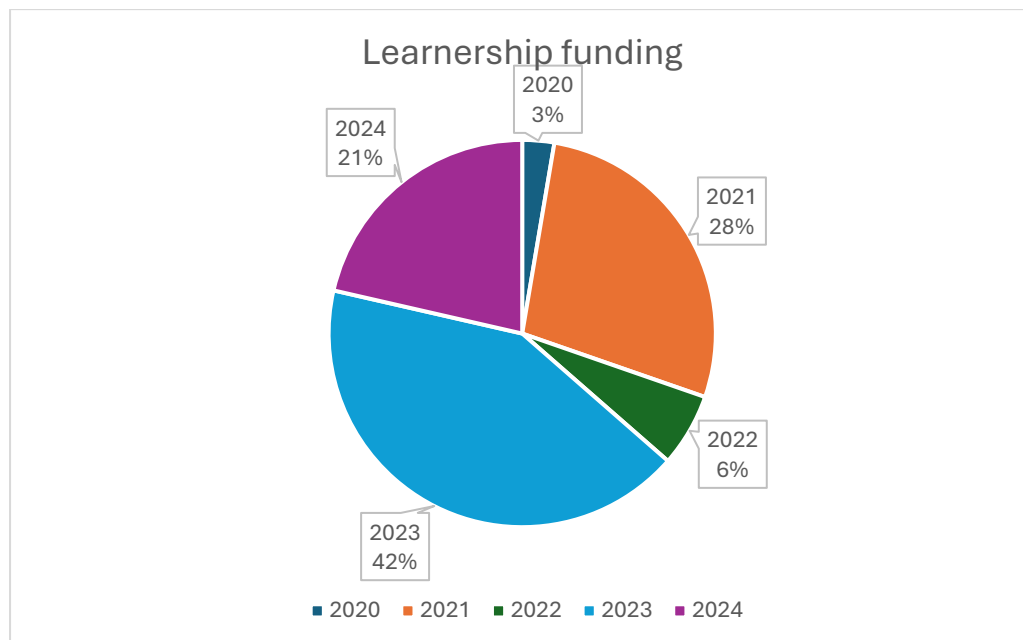
Figure 1: Learnership funding allocated 2020-2024

The funding for learnerships showed significant fluctuations over the period. In 2020, the W&R SETA funded 92 learners, which is used as the baseline for the purpose of this study. The following year, 2021, saw a dramatic increase to 954 learners, a more than tenfold rise. This

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sharp spike likely reflects a concerted effort to address workforce development challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. As many industries, including retail, struggled with the economic fallout and workforce disruptions, there was likely a push to enhance employability and reskill workers to support economic recovery.

However, in 2022, the number of funded learners dropped significantly to 21, representing an almost 78% decline from 2021. While this is still more than double the 2020 baseline, it suggests that the surge in 2021 might have been driven by a specific, short-term initiative or funding boost aimed at mitigating the immediate impacts of the pandemic. In 2023, funding rebounded significantly, with 1,454 learners supported, the highest number over the five-year period. This resurgence could indicate a renewed focus on large-scale workforce development and the need to equip more individuals with critical skills for the retail sector. The slight decline to 739 learners in 2024 suggests some stabilization in funding levels, possibly aligning with strategic adjustments or shifting budgetary priorities.

The analysis of learnership funding trends from 2020 to 2024 highlights the need for a more consistent and strategic approach to workforce development. The fluctuations in the number of funded learners suggest that establishing a multi-year funding plan with set targets could help stabilize funding levels and support sustained growth in skills development. This approach should include contingency measures to adapt to potential economic disruptions, such as downturns or sector-specific challenges, to ensure that training efforts remain resilient. The dramatic rise in 2021, followed by a steep decline in 2022, indicates that short-term funding boosts may not be the most sustainable way to support long-term workforce needs. A gradual increase in funding allocations could help avoid drastic shifts and provide more predictable support for training providers, enabling them to plan effectively and deliver high-quality training without disruptions.

Additionally, there is an opportunity to develop targeted programmes that address specific skills gaps in the retail sector, such as digital competencies, supply chain management, customer service, and e-commerce capabilities. These programmes should cater to both reskilling initiatives for individuals transitioning into new roles and upskilling opportunities for current employees aiming for career advancement. To support the long-term sustainability of learnerships, it is also important to strengthen partnerships with retail companies, training providers, and other stakeholders. Collaborative efforts, such as co-funding initiatives or public-private partnerships, can bring in additional resources and ensure that training aligns with industry needs, thus enhancing the employability of graduates.

Moreover, it is crucial to monitor and evaluate the impact of funding increases, such as the spike seen in 2023, to assess the quality of training and employability outcomes. This could

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involve tracking metrics like completion rates and career progression of participants to guide future funding decisions and improve programme effectiveness. Given the variability in funding over the years, introducing flexible learnership models may help accommodate changes while maintaining a focus on skills development. Options such as modular training or shorter programmes could allow learners to gain skills incrementally, while blended learning approaches can make training more accessible and cost-effective.

To optimize the use of available funding, W&RSETA should also engage in outreach efforts to raise awareness about learnership opportunities, particularly in underserved communities. This could involve partnerships with educational institutions, career guidance initiatives, and targeted awareness campaigns, especially during years with higher funding levels, to maximize enrolment and programme impact. Addressing potential barriers that might prevent learners from completing their programmes is another key consideration. Providing support such as stipends, travel allowances, or mentorship could help improve completion rates, ensuring that the investment in learnerships yields a higher return in terms of skilled graduates entering the workforce.

Overall, while the trends from 2020 to 2024 reflect efforts to scale up workforce development, there remains room for improvement in terms of funding stability, programme planning, and targeted skills training. Implementing these strategies could help create a more sustainable and impactful learnership programme that meets the evolving needs of the retail sector, contributing to long-term economic growth and employment.

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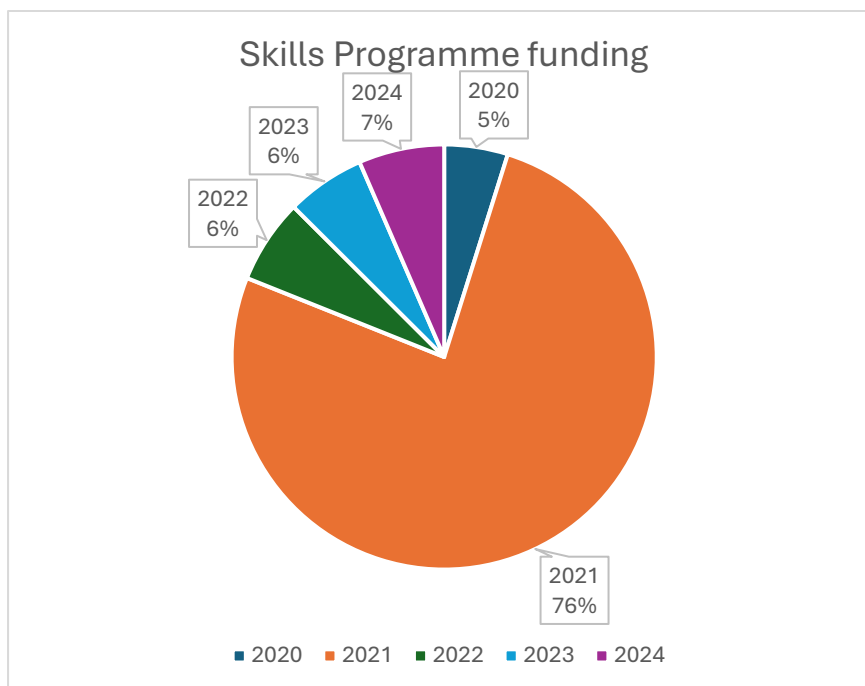
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5.2. Skills Programmes

Figure 2: Skills Programme funding allocated 2020-2024

The funding for skills programmes demonstrated a similar trend of volatility, with some distinct peaks and troughs. In 2020, 179 students were supported, and in 2021, there was a substantial surge to 2,817 students. This over fifteenfold increase likely reflects heightened demand for skills training in response to the economic conditions shaped by the pandemic. The retail sector, facing a need for rapid adaptation and digital transformation, may have driven increased enrolments as workers sought to upskill in areas such as e-commerce, supply chain management, and customer service.

The sharp decline in 2022 to 237 students, followed by a slight decrease to 222 in 2023, suggests a return to more regular funding levels after the extraordinary measures in 2021. This stabilization could point to the conclusion of short-term initiatives or a strategic shift towards more sustainable funding. By 2024, the number of students increased slightly to 241, indicating continued investment in skills development, albeit at a lower scale compared to the peak in 2021.

The trends in funding for skills programmes from 2020 to 2024 show a pattern of volatility with notable peaks and troughs, reflecting shifts in response to external economic factors and strategic adjustments. In 2020, 179 students were supported, establishing the baseline for subsequent years. The following year, 2021, experienced a dramatic surge to 2,817 students, marking an over fifteenfold increase. This substantial rise is likely a result of the heightened demand for skills training brought on by the economic challenges and workforce disruptions

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due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As the retail sector faced the urgent need for rapid adaptation and digital transformation, many workers sought to upskill or reskill in areas like e-commerce, supply chain management, and customer service to remain competitive in a changing job market.

However, the sharp decline in 2022 to 237 students, followed by a slight reduction to 222 in 2023, suggests a return to more typical funding levels after the extraordinary measures taken in 2021. This stabilization may indicate the conclusion of short-term funding initiatives aimed at pandemic recovery, or a strategic shift towards more sustainable and targeted allocations. The slight increase to 241 students in 2024 points to ongoing investment in skills development, albeit on a smaller scale compared to the peak in 2021, suggesting that while the emphasis on skills training continues, the programme is operating within more constrained or rebalanced budget priorities.

To optimize the impact of skills programme funding, it is recommended to develop a long-term strategy that accommodates both urgent economic needs and ongoing skills gaps in the sector. Establishing a multi-year funding plan with predictable levels of support can help smooth out the volatility and ensure that resources are available to meet consistent demand. Given the spike in 2021, it would also be beneficial to implement targeted initiatives during periods of economic downturn or industry transformation, which can act as buffers to prevent drastic reductions in support. Furthermore, W&R SETA should focus on aligning skills programmes with evolving industry trends, such as digital literacy and sustainable retail practices, to ensure that participants are equipped with the skills most in demand.

Strengthening partnerships with companies and training providers can help leverage additional funding sources and improve the quality of skills training by aligning programmes with specific employer needs. Ongoing evaluation of programme outcomes, including employment rates and participant satisfaction, can inform funding decisions and identify areas for improvement. Additionally, efforts to increase awareness of skills programme opportunities and remove participation barriers, such as financial constraints or lack of access to learning materials, can help boost enrolment and completion rates, maximizing the impact of the investment in skills development.

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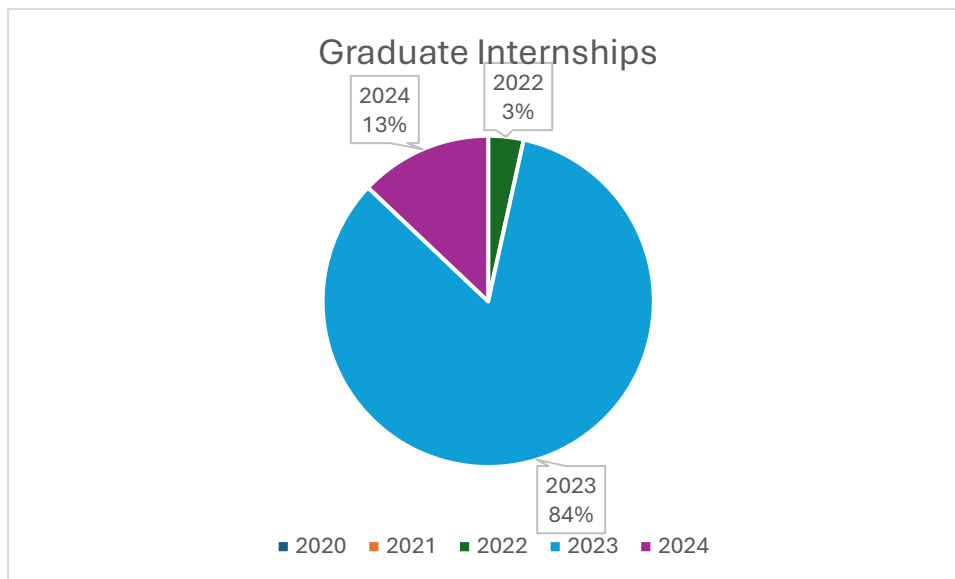
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5.3. Graduate Internships

Figure 3: Graduate Programme funding allocated 2020-2024

The graduate internship programme showed a delayed but significant response. In 2022, only 8 interns were funded, likely marking the programme's start or reintroduction after COVID-19. The substantial increase to 194 interns in 2023 suggests a strategic emphasis on fostering graduate employment and bridging the gap between academic qualifications and practical work experience. Internships can provide valuable exposure to the industry, making this rise a positive development for boosting employability among recent graduates. However, the number of funded interns dropped to 30 in 2024, which may reflect adjustments in programme size, budget constraints, or a shift in focus towards other forms of workforce development.

The trends in the graduate internship programme from 2022 to 2024 suggest a phased approach to scaling up support, with a notable increase in 2023 followed by a decrease in 2024. The initial funding of only 8 interns in 2022 likely marks the programme's launch or reintroduction, potentially hindered by the lingering impacts of COVID-19, which affected both hiring practices and the availability of practical training opportunities. The significant jump to 194 interns in 2023 indicates a deliberate strategy to prioritize graduate employment by providing meaningful work experience and helping bridge the gap between academic qualifications and the skills needed in the workplace. Internships can play a critical role in enhancing employability by offering exposure to the industry and practical experience, making this increase a valuable step in supporting workforce readiness.

However, the drop to 30 funded interns in 2024 may reflect several factors, such as budgetary constraints, strategic adjustments to programme scope, or a shift in focus towards other workforce development initiatives. This decrease raises concerns about the sustainability of

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graduate internship funding and highlights the need for a more consistent approach to supporting graduates in their transition to the workforce.

To improve the effectiveness and impact of the internship programme, it is recommended to establish a more predictable and stable funding framework that avoids large fluctuations in the number of supported interns. This could involve setting minimum annual targets for internship placements to ensure ongoing support for graduates while allowing for flexibility based on budgetary considerations. Additionally, enhancing partnerships with employers in the retail sector can create more internship opportunities by sharing the cost of placements or offering incentives for companies that host interns.

To further enhance the value of the internship programme, W&R SETA could focus on developing structured internship pathways that include mentorship, skills development plans, and career guidance. This approach would help interns gain not only industry exposure but also tailored learning experiences that align with their career goals. Monitoring the outcomes of the internships, such as post-internship employment rates and skills acquired, will provide valuable insights into the programme's effectiveness and inform future improvements. Additionally, outreach efforts should be strengthened to ensure that graduates from various backgrounds, including those from underserved communities, are aware of and can access internship opportunities. This could help maximize the reach and inclusivity of the programme, fostering a more diverse and skilled workforce.

5.4. Bursaries

Figure 4: Bursary funding allocated 2020-2024
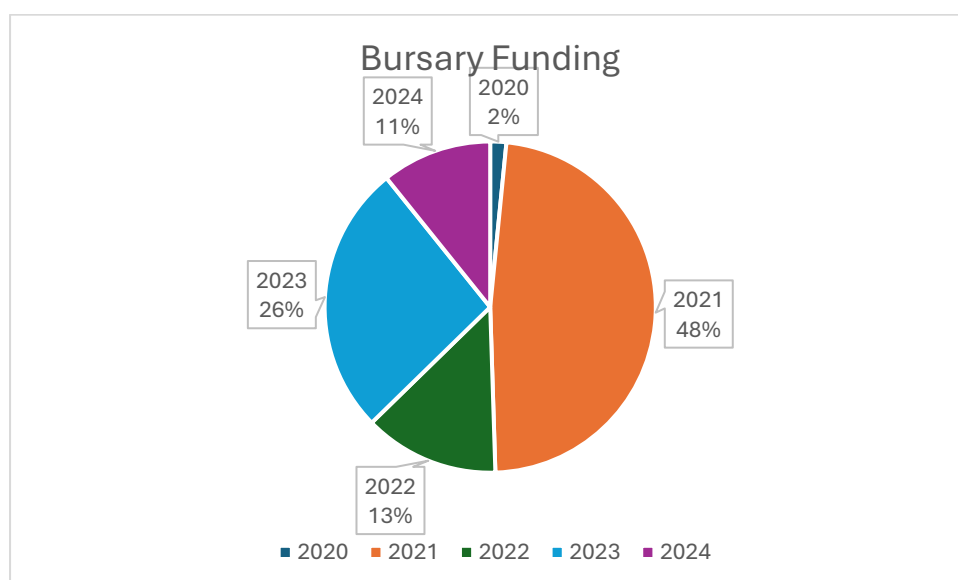
Bursary funding followed a unique trajectory, starting with 22 recipients in 2020. The number surged to 672 in 2021, a more than thirtyfold increase. This significant rise suggests a targeted

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effort to support higher education and ensure that more students could access educational opportunities amid the challenges posed by the pandemic. As bursaries are often linked to socio-economic conditions, this surge could reflect an attempt to mitigate the impact of job losses and financial strain experienced by students during the pandemic.

The subsequent decrease to 185 bursaries in 2022 and the rise to 372 in 2023 indicate fluctuations in funding priorities. In 2024, the number dropped to 151 bursaries, suggesting a potential stabilization of funding as emergency measures associated with the pandemic waned and the programme returned to a more balanced allocation. These changes may also reflect evolving strategies to distribute resources across different educational and skills development programmes.

The trends in bursary funding from 2020 to 2024 highlight the need for a strategic approach to support higher education and student access amid fluctuating socio-economic conditions. The initial surge from 22 recipients in 2020 to 672 in 2021 indicates a proactive effort to address the educational challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. By significantly increasing bursary allocations, W&R SETA likely aimed to ensure that more students could pursue higher education despite the financial difficulties brought about by the economic downturn, job losses, and other pandemic-related disruptions. The subsequent drop to 185 bursaries in 2022, followed by an increase to 372 in 2023, and another decline to 151 in 2024, reflects changing funding priorities and perhaps an effort to stabilize the programme as emergency measures began to subside.

To enhance the long-term impact of the bursary programme, it is recommended to adopt a more consistent funding approach, with gradual adjustments based on demand and economic conditions rather than abrupt changes. This could involve establishing a minimum baseline for annual bursary funding to ensure that students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds continue to have access to educational opportunities. Maintaining predictable funding levels can help students plan for their studies and minimize the uncertainty associated with fluctuating bursary availability.

Additionally, W&RSETA should consider implementing a needs-based assessment to prioritize students who are most at risk of financial hardship. This approach could target vulnerable groups, such as those from low-income households or regions with limited access to quality education, to ensure that bursary support reaches those who need it most. Another strategy could be to create tiered bursary offerings based on the level of financial need or the course of study, which would allow for more flexible and targeted support.

To optimize the outcomes of the bursary programme, integrating academic support services such as tutoring, career counselling, and mentorship can help recipients maximize their

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educational experience and improve retention and graduation rates. These services could be particularly beneficial for first-generation students or those in fields where additional academic assistance is crucial for success. Moreover, partnering with higher education institutions to monitor the academic progress of bursary recipients can help identify any challenges early on, allowing for timely interventions to support students in completing their studies.

Finally, promoting awareness of the bursary programme and the application process is essential for reaching a wider pool of eligible students. W&R SETA could engage in targeted outreach efforts, such as collaborating with high schools and community organisations, to inform prospective students about available bursary opportunities. By incorporating these recommendations, the bursary programme can become a more robust tool for fostering equitable access to higher education and developing a skilled workforce for the retail sector.

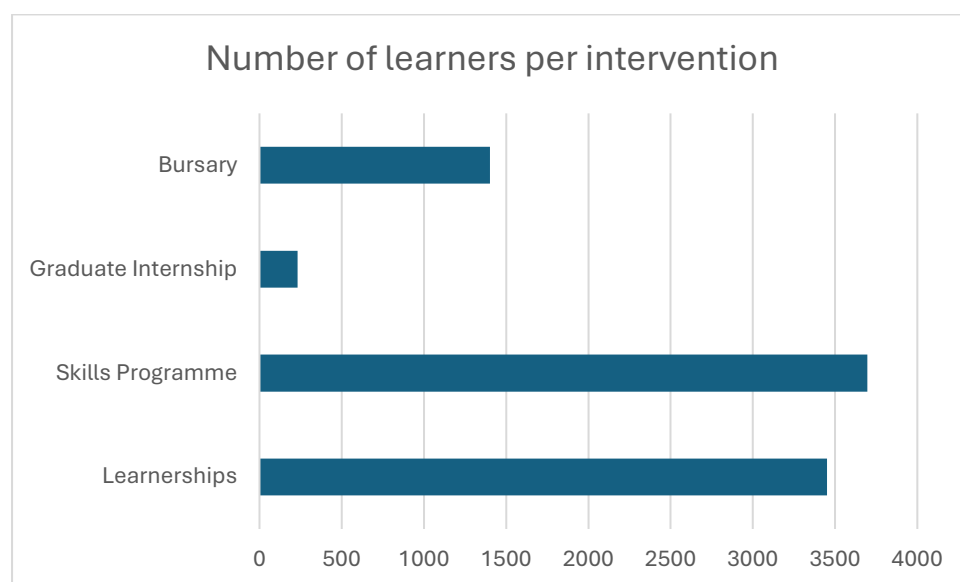## 5.5. Funding ratios per intervention

Figure 5: Funding Rations per intervention 2020-2024

The data provided shows the total number of individuals funded across different types of programmes under the W&R SETA over a certain period. The four categories of funding are learnerships, skills programmes, graduate internships, and bursaries, each aimed at enhancing workforce development and educational support.

Skills programmes received the highest total funding, with 3,696 individuals supported. This suggests a strong focus on skills development within the retail sector, possibly due to the need to rapidly upskill workers to meet changing market demands, such as digital transformation and customer service improvements. Skills programmes likely addressed short-term training needs, helping employees adapt to new technologies and industry practices, thus making this the most funded category.

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Learnerships follow closely with 3,450 individuals funded, indicating substantial investment in longer-term vocational training. The emphasis on learnerships suggests an effort to develop a more skilled workforce over a sustained period, equipping participants with the necessary qualifications and hands-on experience to thrive in the retail sector. Given that learnerships often combine theoretical learning with practical work experience, this investment aligns well with objectives to improve employability and fill skill gaps within the industry.

Graduate internships, with 232 participants funded, reflect a smaller but significant allocation aimed at bridging the gap between formal education and employment. This programme likely focused on providing recent graduates with practical work experience and enhancing their career readiness. Although the number of funded internships is much lower than for skills programmes and learnerships, the targeted approach to placing graduates in the workforce can still have a meaningful impact on youth employment rates and career development.

Bursaries, with 1,402 recipients, represent an important investment in higher education, helping students from financially constrained backgrounds access educational opportunities. The funding allocation suggests a commitment to supporting long-term academic development, potentially allowing recipients to pursue further studies that are critical for their professional advancement in the retail sector.

Overall, the distribution of funding highlights a strategy that combines immediate skills development (skills programmes), sustained vocational training (learnerships), graduate employability (internships), and educational access (bursaries). This balanced approach reflects an effort to address diverse workforce needs, from immediate skills gaps to long-term educational support, ensuring that the retail sector is well-equipped with a capable and adaptable workforce. Future recommendations could involve increasing funding consistency for graduate internships to expand opportunities for recent graduates and continuing to align learnership and skills programmes with evolving industry demands.

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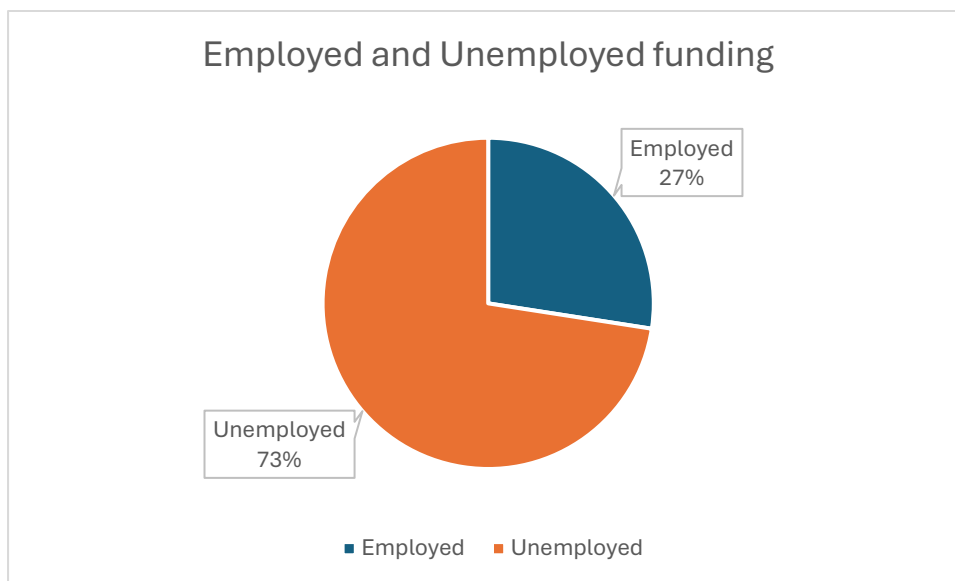
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5.6. Employed Versus Unemployed funded

Figure 6: Employed versus Unemployed funding allocated

The funding data for 2020 to 2024 shows that 73% of W&R SETA's funding was directed towards unemployed individuals, while 27% went to those who were already employed. This pattern indicates a strong emphasis on addressing unemployment through skills development programs, aiming to help unemployed individuals gain marketable skills and enter the workforce. The strategic allocation aligns with efforts to reduce unemployment and support economic recovery, especially in the context of the post-pandemic job market.

The prioritization of funding for the unemployed reflects a proactive approach to addressing the significant challenges posed by unemployment in South Africa. The large allocation to unemployed individuals suggests an understanding that skills development is crucial for integrating jobseekers into the economy. With high unemployment rates, especially among youth, targeted skills training can play a significant role in improving employability, filling skill gaps, and driving economic growth.

On the other hand, the 27% of funding allocated to the employed indicates some level of investment in upskilling and reskilling the existing workforce. This is important for keeping up with industry changes, such as digital transformation in retail, and ensuring that employees can continue to add value to their organisations.

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6. Research Findings

6.1. Sosio Economic Impact

The research on W&R SETA's funding trends for learnerships, skills programmes, graduate placements, and bursaries from 2020 to 2024 demonstrates a substantial socio-economic impact on workforce development, education, and economic resilience. The observed fluctuations in funding, particularly the significant increases in 2021 for skills programmes, bursaries, and learnerships, indicate a targeted response to the socio-economic challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach helped to address workforce disruptions and mitigate the adverse effects of job losses, ensuring that individuals had opportunities to upskill or reskill in response to shifting labour market demands. Such initiatives are essential in enhancing employability, particularly among young and unemployed individuals, and contribute to reducing unemployment rates (Li, 2022). By increasing the number of skilled and employable workers, these programmes help alleviate poverty and improve the socio-economic conditions of beneficiaries and their families, thereby stimulating broader economic growth (Friedman & Bhengu, 2008).

Moreover, the strategic allocation of bursary funding to support higher education plays a crucial role in fostering equitable access to educational opportunities, especially for students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds (Yende, 2024). The substantial increase in bursary recipients in 2021 likely helped mitigate the impact of economic hardships on students, enabling more individuals to pursue higher education during a period of heightened financial strain. This not only supports social mobility but also contributes to the development of a skilled workforce that is better equipped to meet the evolving needs of the retail sector and the economy at large. The wholesale and retail industry in South Africa is experiencing significant changes due to technological advancements and evolving consumer behaviour. As a result, there is a growing demand for employees with the skills necessary to thrive in this rapidly changing environment. Additionally, by focusing on targeted skills development in areas such as digital literacy, e-commerce, and supply chain management, the funding allocations support economic adaptation to industry trends, improving productivity and resilience in the retail sector (W&RSETA, 2024).

The decline in funding levels during subsequent years, however, underscores the need for a more stable and consistent approach to workforce development. While emergency funding surges may address immediate socio-economic challenges, long-term economic growth requires sustained investment in skills development and education. Establishing predictable funding levels, coupled with strategies to reach vulnerable and underserved populations, can help ensure that the socio-economic benefits are evenly distributed and that programmes

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remain effective in addressing skills gaps and labour market demands (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2023). Overall, the research highlights the critical role of targeted educational and skills training programmes in fostering economic resilience, supporting social equity, and driving sustainable development in South Africa.

6.2. Impact on HEI's

The impact of this research on higher education is significant, as it highlights the crucial role of funding allocation in shaping access to educational opportunities, student retention, and workforce readiness (Essack et al., 2010). The fluctuations in bursary funding, particularly the dramatic increase in 2021, suggest that targeted financial support can greatly enhance access to higher education, especially for students from low-income or disadvantaged backgrounds. Such funding increases can help alleviate financial barriers, enabling more students to pursue tertiary education during times of economic hardship. This not only supports higher enrolment rates but also encourages diversity in higher education by broadening access for students who may not otherwise afford the costs associated with post-secondary education (Njoko, 2018).

However, the subsequent decline in bursary allocations from 2022 onwards points to the need for a more consistent approach to funding higher education. Abrupt changes in financial support can create uncertainty for both students and institutions, potentially affecting enrolment decisions and the ability of universities to plan and allocate resources effectively. A more stable funding strategy would help ensure that students can rely on continuous financial support throughout their academic journeys, which is critical for improving retention and graduation rates. Additionally, higher education institutions could benefit from a predictable funding framework that allows them to maintain or expand student support services, such as tutoring, mentorship, and career counselling, which are key to academic success and employability (Johnson et al., 2022).

Moreover, the alignment of bursary funding and skills development initiatives with industry needs, as indicated by the emphasis on digital skills and supply chain management, enhances the relevance of higher education curricula to labour market demands (W&RSETA, 2023). This creates opportunities for universities to strengthen partnerships with industry and W&RSETA, ensuring that academic programs are closely tied to the skills required by the retail sector and the broader economy. As a result, graduates are better equipped with practical skills and knowledge, improving their employability and making higher education a more direct pathway to economic participation (Chetty, 2012). Overall, the research suggests that strategic, sustained funding for higher education can significantly contribute to social mobility, economic resilience, and the development of a skilled workforce capable of driving future growth as

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outlined in the National Plan for Post-School Education and Training (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2023b).

6.3.   Impact on Students

The impact of this research on students funded by W&R SETA could be profound, as it sheds light on the challenges and opportunities associated with fluctuating funding levels for bursaries, skills programs, and graduate internships. The findings underscore the importance of financial stability in supporting students' educational and career trajectories. For students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, predictable and adequate funding can significantly alleviate financial stress, allowing them to focus on their studies without the constant worry of losing financial support. This, in turn, can enhance academic performance, increase retention rates, and improve the likelihood of completing their qualifications.

The insights from the research could also lead to more targeted and equitable funding strategies, such as needs-based bursary allocations. If W&R SETA implements a funding approach that prioritizes students most at risk of financial hardship, it would help ensure that those who face the greatest barriers to higher education receive the necessary support. Such strategies would not only increase access to education but also foster inclusivity by enabling a more diverse student population to pursue their academic goals.

Furthermore, the research highlights the benefits of integrating skills development programs and internships into the funding framework. For W&R SETA-funded students, access to industry-relevant training and practical work experience could significantly boost their employability. Programs that align with the evolving demands of the retail sector, such as digital skills training or e-commerce, provide students with valuable competencies that enhance their job prospects. Internships can help students transition smoothly from academic settings to the workplace, providing them with the experience needed to secure employment upon graduation.

Overall, this research could drive policy changes that result in a more sustainable and impactful approach to funding. By advocating for a consistent and strategic funding plan, the findings could ensure that W&R SETA-funded students receive ongoing support throughout their studies, thereby improving educational outcomes, career readiness, and long-term economic participation.

6.4.   Impact on the Wholesale and Retail industry

The impact of this research on the wholesale and retail industry could be significant, influencing how the sector approaches workforce development and skills training. The findings provide insights that can guide more strategic allocation of W&R SETA funding, ensuring that

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training programs better align with the industry's evolving needs. For the retail sector, which is undergoing rapid transformation due to digitalization and changing consumer behaviors, having a skilled workforce that can adapt to these changes is crucial. The research emphasizes the importance of funding stability and targeted skills development, which could help bridge the skills gap in areas such as e-commerce, supply chain management, and customer service.

By identifying trends and fluctuations in funding for skills programs, internships, and bursaries, the research suggests that more consistent investment in workforce development could yield better long-term results for the industry. If W&R SETA adopts a multi-year funding plan with set targets, it would enable training providers and companies to better plan and deliver high-quality programs, resulting in a more skilled and adaptable workforce. This approach would help reduce the negative impacts of abrupt funding changes, such as skills shortages or undertrained employees, which can hinder the industry's growth.

Moreover, the research highlights the need for stronger collabouration between W&R SETA, training providers, and industry stakeholders. By aligning skills programs with the specific requirements of the wholesale and retail sectors, companies can ensure that new hires and current employees possess the competencies needed to drive productivity and innovation. Enhanced partnerships, such as co-funding initiatives or public-private collabourations, could bring additional resources and tailor training content to meet the real-world demands of the sector, leading to more effective workforce upskilling and reskilling efforts.

Overall, implementing the research recommendations could improve employee retention, career progression, and job satisfaction within the industry, as workers gain access to relevant training and development opportunities. For the wholesale and retail sectors, this translates into a stronger talent pipeline, reduced recruitment costs, and a more competitive position in the market. The long-term effect would be a more resilient and sustainable industry, capable of navigating economic fluctuations and technological advancements with a skilled and agile workforce.

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7. Recommendations

This section presents a series of recommendations derived from a meta-analysis of W&R SETA funding interventions from 2020 to 2024. These recommendations aim to enhance the effectiveness, stability, and inclusivity of funding strategies directed at both unemployed and employed individuals in the retail sector.

7.1.   Establish Stable Funding Frameworks

Multi-Year Funding Plans: It is essential to develop structured, multi-year funding strategies with clearly defined targets. These plans will minimize funding volatility and support sustained growth in learnerships and skills programs. By providing long-term financial commitments, W&R SETA can facilitate better planning and resource allocation for training providers.

Contingency Measures: Integrating contingency measures that allow for rapid mobilization of resources in response to economic fluctuations is crucial. Such measures will safeguard the effectiveness of funding interventions, ensuring that programs can swiftly adapt to changing market conditions and unforeseen challenges, such as economic downturns or shifts in consumer behaviour.

7.2.   Targeted Skills Development Programs

Focus on Industry Needs: The design of skills development programs should specifically address identified skills gaps within the retail sector. Key areas for focus include digital literacy, supply chain management, and other emerging technologies. Additionally, initiatives should be put in place to upskill employees facing redundancy, thereby enhancing their employability and productivity.

Evaluate and Improve Program Outcomes: Regular assessments of program effectiveness are necessary to ensure they meet the intended objectives. Key performance indicators (KPIs) should include employment rates, participant satisfaction, and skills acquisition metrics. This data will inform continuous refinement of offerings and improve overall program efficacy.

7.3.   Strengthen Stakeholder Partnerships

Collabourative Initiatives: W&R SETA should actively foster partnerships with retail companies, training providers, and other relevant stakeholders. Such collabourations can enhance co-funding opportunities and ensure that training programs are aligned with

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industry needs. By leveraging the expertise and resources of multiple stakeholders, programs can achieve greater impact and sustainability.

Public-Private Partnerships: Encouraging partnerships between public entities and private organisations will leverage additional funding sources, enhancing resource availability for training programs. These collabourations can also improve the quality and relevance of training by aligning it with real-world business practices and needs.

7.4. Strengthen Upskilling Initiatives for the Employed

Despite a smaller percentage of funding being allocated to employed individuals, increasing investment in continuous learning and upskilling is vital for helping the workforce adapt to new technologies and industry trends. This should include training in digital skills, management practices, and emerging retail technologies to enhance productivity and career advancement opportunities for current employees.

To maximize the impact of funding, W&R SETA could introduce flexible learning options that cater to both employed and unemployed beneficiaries. This may include online learning, part-time courses, and evening classes, enabling employed individuals to upskill while still working. For the unemployed, providing access to flexible training can accommodate different schedules and increase participation rates.

7.5. Promote Awareness and Engagement

Increase Outreach Efforts: Enhancing awareness campaigns targeting diverse communities is critical. These campaigns should inform individuals about available learnerships, internships, and bursary opportunities, with a particular focus on underserved populations. Utilizing multiple channels, including social media, community events, and local partnerships, will maximize reach and impact.

7.6. Monitoring and Evaluation

Robust Evaluation Framework: Establishing comprehensive metrics to monitor the impact of funded programs on participants' employment outcomes and skills acquisition is essential. Regular feedback from participants and employers should guide future program adjustments, ensuring that initiatives remain relevant and effective.

Longitudinal Studies: Conducting longitudinal studies to assess the long-term socio-economic impacts of funding interventions will provide valuable insights into their

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effectiveness. Understanding how participants fare over time can inform future funding strategies and program designs.

7.7. Innovative Training Approaches

Aligning skills development initiatives with the needs of the retail sector—such as e-commerce, supply chain management, and customer service—can help close skills gaps and enhance employability. Regular reviews of industry trends and updates to training programs are essential for ensuring that funding is used effectively to prepare beneficiaries for current job market conditions.

Flexible Learning Models: The development of adaptable training models, such as blended learning and modular approaches, is recommended to accommodate the diverse needs of learners. These models should allow for a mix of online and in-person training to enhance accessibility and engagement.

Gamification of Training Programs: Integrating gamification techniques into training programs can significantly enhance engagement and motivation among participants. By incorporating game-like elements such as rewards, challenges, and competition, training can become more interactive and enjoyable, leading to improved retention of skills and knowledge.

Stay Responsive to Market Changes: Continuous monitoring of labour market trends is necessary for adjusting funding strategies. By staying informed about industry developments, W&R SETA can ensure that training programs remain relevant and effectively prepare participants for current job market conditions.

7.8. Increase the Focus on Bridging Programs for Unemployed Youth

Given the substantial portion of funding directed at the unemployed, implementing bridging programs that combine skills training with practical work experience could further enhance employability. Collabourating with businesses to offer internships or on-the-job training as part of the skills programs will provide participants with real-world exposure, thereby improving job placement rates.

7.9. Evaluate and Adjust Funding Allocation Based on Outcomes

W&R SETA should regularly assess the effectiveness of its funding allocation by tracking employment outcomes for beneficiaries. If unemployed participants consistently demonstrate higher placement rates after completing certain programs, increasing the share of funding for those specific initiatives may be warranted. Conversely, if outcomes

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for employed participants indicate a strong return on investment, adjusting the allocation to favour upskilling initiatives could be considered.

7.10. Conclusion

The data from 2020 to 2024 illustrate the impact of external factors, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, on funding patterns for skills development. There were marked increases in 2021 across almost all program categories, indicating significant investments aimed at economic recovery and workforce upskilling. The subsequent fluctuations and stabilization in funding levels from 2022 onwards suggest ongoing adjustments in strategic priorities, likely aimed at balancing immediate workforce needs with sustainable skills development goals.

By implementing these recommendations, W&R SETA can enhance the stability, effectiveness, and inclusivity of its funding strategies. This balanced approach is essential for fostering a skilled workforce capable of meeting the evolving demands of the retail sector, ultimately contributing to economic growth and resilience.

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