RESEARCH REPORT

**WHOLESALE & RETAIL SETA
LEADERSHIP CHAIR: GAUTENG**

Project 01/2025

A comprehensive impact evaluation of W&RSETA strategic programmes: Towards addressing the imbalance (or not) between skills supply and demand

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Wholesale and Retail Sector Education and Training Authority (W&RSETA) plays a pivotal role in addressing the skills supply and demand imbalance within South Africa's wholesale and retail sector. This impact evaluation study assesses the effectiveness of W&RSETA's strategic programmes in equipping the workforce with industry-relevant skills, enhancing employability and supporting business growth. The study applied a concurrent-mixed methodology, which was considered pragmatic. The rationale was that it would allow a synthesis of multiple data sources and the use of various data collection points while facilitating the immersive parallel analysis of data.

Ethical protocols were adhered to, with informed consent being a requirement for participation. A self-administered survey was elicited through a structured questionnaire to understand bursaries' perceptions regarding the programme intervention's efficacy. The survey was distributed across various online platforms as a hyperlink for consideration by bursars who had been recipients of a programme intervention between 2020 and 2024. Concurrent pre-scheduled qualitative e-focus groups were conducted to seek clarity from industry experts and programme coordinators within various academic institutions. The e-focus groups were hosted on Zoom and comprised 45-minute recorded discussions. The platform ensures the development of transcripts, which were reviewed through data immersion and re-reading to understand the complex nuances of the discussions relating to exploring graduates' skills mismatch and misalignment with sectoral priorities. Expert debriefing was conducted with the research supervisor to get independent reviews of the chosen methods and procedures through evaluating the survey questionnaire as well as the focus group schedule development, seeking permissions to access databases from the W&RSETA as well and checking the appropriateness of the ethical protocols.

Parallel data analysis was employed on the survey data as well as the e-focus group transcripts. Survey data were analysed using frequency distributions and descriptive analysis, while e-focus group data were thematically analysed concurrently. Thereafter, data verifies data from multiple sources, thereby reducing the risk of bias while strengthening the accuracy of findings. The learners perceive the W&RSETA positively, with results pointing to the moderate effectiveness of the programme intervention, which allows the organisation to achieve its outcomes. While the survey sample was small, inferring a preliminary investigation, a notable finding from the survey was the multi-dimensionality of the metrics considered when assessing the programme effectiveness. In particular, transfer of practicable skills, evidence of support and learner satisfaction were noted as the initial ingredients in the beneficiaries' evaluation of the effectiveness of the W&RSETA programme intervention. These preliminary findings suggest an opportunity for further unravelling the possible complexity of the identified

metrics while also possibly checking the potential inclusion of other predictive assessment metrics in future research. On the other hand, while mixed reactions were uncovered from employers and academics concerning the retail graduate attributes of beneficiaries following a programme intervention, the quantitative data pointed to a web of retail skills relating to digital literacy, problem-solving, leadership, communication and customer service.

The findings of this study revealed that W&RSETA's interventions, ranging from leadership, bursaries and internships to SME development and digital retail training, had contributed significantly to bridging the critical skills gaps. These initiatives have improved youth employability, upskilled existing workers and supported entrepreneurial ventures, ensuring the sector remains competitive in an evolving economic landscape. However, challenges persist, including mismatches between training curricula and industry needs, slow adoption of digital retail competencies, and limited focus on sector-specific interventions. To enhance programme impact, the study recommends expanded stakeholder collaboration among stakeholders such as universities and industry to conduct research and encourage curriculum refinement to align with technological advancements. Industry-linked co-sponsored research should deliver futuristic recommendations regarding how to harness digital transformations' power to enhance retail graduates' skills development. As part of developing the competency framework of retail graduates, it is recommended that a retail career profiling tool be developed to assist in segregating graduates into specialised sectors that match their strengths and personalities. Developing models for work-integrated learning or internship that entail access to personalised mentors as well as virtual flipped coaching sessions will equip graduates with future-fit competencies, ensuring sustainable growth and transformation within the wholesale and retail sector.

KEY CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS

Skills Supply and Demand Imbalance: The mismatch between the number of graduates entering the workforce and the skills required by the industry leads to unemployment or underemployment. This issue arises due to outdated curricula, rapid technological advancements and a lack of collaboration between education providers and employers.

Work-Integrated Learning (WIL): A structured educational approach integrating academic learning with practical work experience. WIL includes internships, apprenticeships, and job placements to ensure students develop hands-on skills relevant to their industry before entering the workforce.

Digital Transformation in Retail: Integrating digital technologies, such as AI, e-commerce, data analytics, and automation, into retail operations. This shift requires employees to develop new competencies in digital literacy, customer data analysis, and omnichannel retail strategies.

Entrepreneurial Readiness: The ability and mindset to identify, develop, and execute business opportunities. Entrepreneurial readiness includes financial literacy, risk management, innovation, and business planning skills, essential for self-employment and job creation.

Industry-Academic Collaboration: A partnership between educational institutions and industry stakeholders to align curricula with real-world job market needs. This collaboration includes employer-led curriculum development, advisory boards, mentorship programmes, and joint research initiatives to ensure graduates possess relevant, job-ready skills.

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1. INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

This research project evaluates the impact of W&RSETA's strategic programmes, assessing their relevance and quality. A systematic review of supported educational qualifications will inform an inquiry into learners, academics, and employers' perceptions of programme efficacy. The study also examines the skills gap between higher education and industry demand, incorporating beneficiaries' insights to guide curriculum development. Additionally, it explores role incongruence between industry and academia, aiming to enhance partnerships for a more agile, industry-informed retail training framework in South Africa.

1.1 Background and rationale for the study

Employability extends beyond securing employment; it encompasses skills, attributes, and competencies necessary to remain competitive in the job market (Singh & Fan, 2021). South Africa's education system, particularly in disadvantaged areas, struggles to equip learners with basic and technical skills, worsening the skills gap. This study evaluates the effectiveness of W&RSETA-funded strategic programmes and explores the perceptions of key stakeholders regarding skills development and employability in the retail sector.

South Africa faces an imbalance between skills supply and industry demand due to a shortage of critical skills, complex governance, weak accountability, and inadequate legislative oversight (Windapo, 2016). These barriers hinder economic development. Academic institutions play a vital role in workforce preparation, but misalignment between education and industry demands results in graduates struggling to secure jobs while sectors face skills shortages (Allais, 2022). Addressing these issues requires enhancing education, strengthening state capacity, and implementing targeted skills development initiatives (Luke & Heyns, 2019). Economic instability, lack of investment, and difficulties small enterprises face exacerbate unemployment. South Africa also struggles with a shortage of trade and artisan skills, poor math and science literacy, and inadequate digital training. As industries demand technological proficiency, modernised education and training are crucial. Relevant and accessible training programmes are needed to ensure employability and career progression, while higher education institutions must align curricula with industry needs.

This study assesses learners, academics, and employers' perceptions of W&RSETA-funded programmes. Learners' insights help evaluate whether training aligns with industry needs, including e-commerce trends. Academics provide curriculum relevance insights, while employers assess graduate readiness and application of theoretical knowledge. Findings will inform W&RSETA on refining interventions to meet evolving market demands. A key issue is

the potential (mis) match between universities and industry expectations. Universities focus on theoretical knowledge, while industry prioritises job-ready skills. This misalignment leads to outdated curricula and an increasing skills mismatch. The study explores:

Collaborative Curriculum Design: Industry-informed curricula that adapt to technological advancements.

- Industry-Sponsored Research: Real-time case studies for curriculum updates.
- Feedback Loops: Continuous employer input for curriculum relevance.
- Work-Integrated Learning: Internships, apprenticeships, and job placements.
- Competency Frameworks: Clear industry-defined skills and attributes.
- Mutual Accountability: Defined roles for universities and industry in shaping training programmes.

This research will bridge the skills gap in South Africa's retail sector by improving W&RSETA-funded programmes. Aligning education with industry needs enhances employability, supports economic growth, and ensures a workforce equipped for evolving demands. Findings will inform policy enhancements, curriculum improvements, and sustainable skills development strategies in South Africa.

1.2 Research problem and research-associated gaps

This study examines the perceptions of learners, academics, and employers on the effectiveness of W&RSETA-funded programmes in equipping graduates with relevant skills for the evolving retail sector, including e-commerce and digital transformation. Insights from these stakeholders will help identify curriculum gaps, assess job readiness, and refine W&RSETA interventions to better align with industry demands. This study explores learners' perceptions of W&RSETA-funded programmes to assess their effectiveness in bridging the skills-demand gap in the retail sector. The research aims to inform programme improvements and ensure future programmes align with industry needs and learner expectations by capturing insights on training relevance, job preparedness, and employability barriers. The misalignment between universities' academic focus and the retail industry's demand for job-ready skills leads to outdated curricula and ineffective W&RSETA interventions. This study explores strategies for enhancing collaboration, including joint curriculum development, real-time industry feedback, and work-integrated learning, to align graduate competencies with evolving retail sector needs.

The research problem is anchored upon three identifiable gaps, as shown in the problem tree (Figure 1). This provides the basis within which this research is framed.
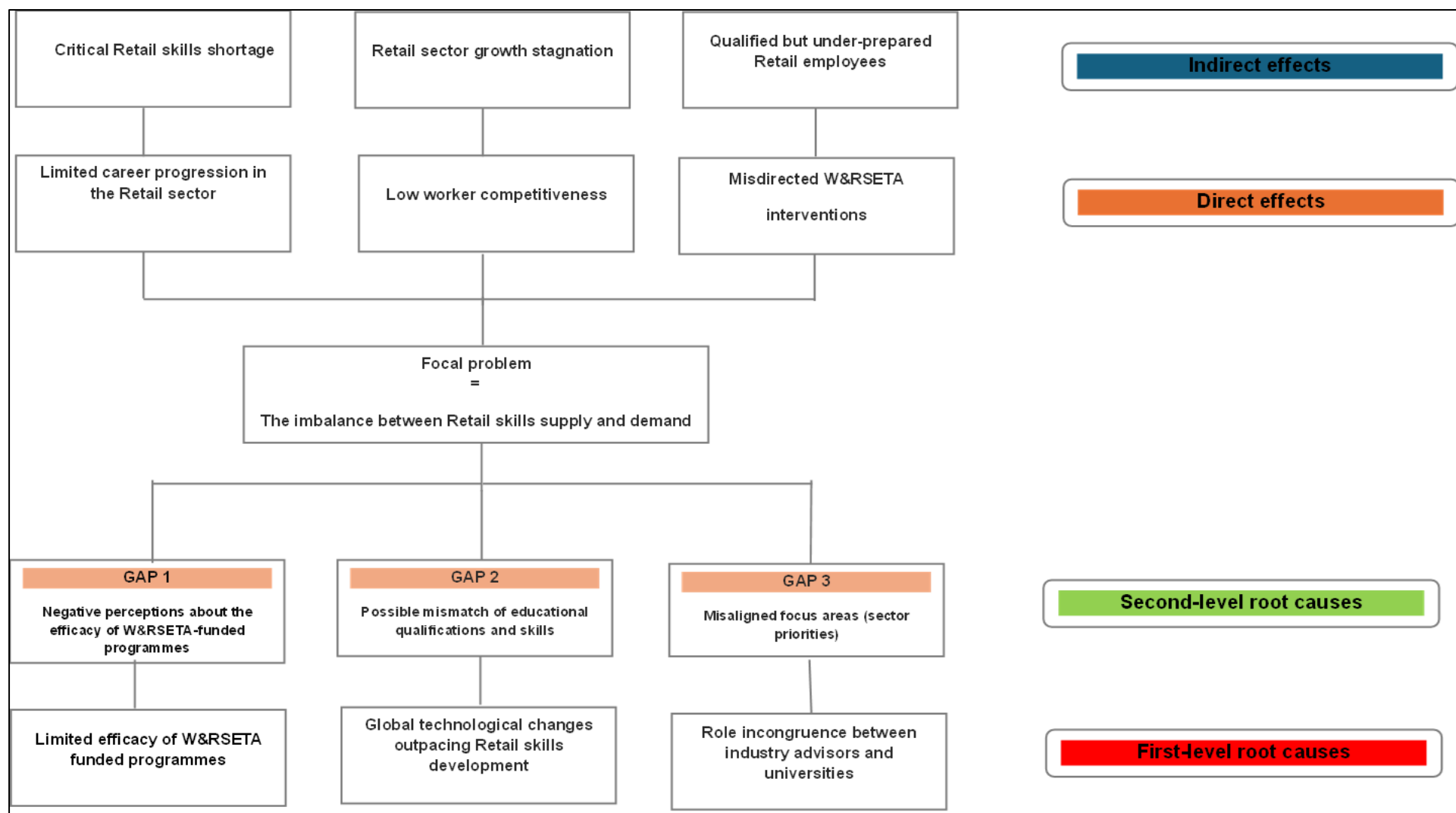
FIGURE 1: PROBLEM ANALYSIS TREE FOR THIS STUDY

1.3 Project assumptions and approach

This research takes a people-centred approach towards monitoring and evaluating W&RSETA programmes and interventions. Borrowing from Dyer and Holder (1998), the following four principles of people-centredness are considered:

I.   **Contribution**: What is the nature of behavioural or attitudinal changes expected from the beneficiary group after contact with the W&RSETA programme or intervention?

II. **Composition**: What is the number of recipients, ratio, and skills mix that had access to the intervention, and what would be the baseline measure of success (throughputs) for the W&RSETA interventions?

III. **Competence:** What is the general ability level required from the beneficiary group who received the intervention/s? In this research, competence is understood from the level of the individual graduate to the broader level of the curriculum competence.

IV. **Commitment:** What is the satisfaction, identification and commitment of the beneficiary group to the W&RSETA following access to the programme intervention?

1.4 Research aim and areas of exploration

The aim of this project was to evaluate the effectiveness of W&RSETA-funded programmes in addressing the skills gap in the retail sector by assessing learner, academic, and employer perspectives. To achieve the study aim, the following areas of exploration (AoE) were formulated:

AOE 1: Determine learners' perceptions of the efficacy and practical relevance of the W&RSETA programme intervention.

AOE 2: Understand the connection between university curricula and industry expectations in retail education.

AOE 3: Assess the alignment of W&RSETA-funded programmes with industry skill demands and retail sector (employer) priorities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The Wholesale and Retail Sector Education and Training Authority (W&RSETA) was established in 2000 to address skills development gaps in South Africa's wholesale and retail sector. W&RSETA is crucial in bridging the gap between education and industry by funding and facilitating training programmes, including leadership, apprenticeships, and bursaries, to enhance workforce readiness. Strategic interventions aim to align skills development with evolving market demands, ensuring that graduates and employees have the competencies for

sustainable employment and sector growth. However, despite W&RSETA's strategic initiatives, such as leadership and apprenticeships, significant gaps between skills supply and industry demand persist, impacting sector growth and employability (Luke & Heyns, 2019). This review explores the alignment of W&RSETA programmes with labour market needs, stakeholder perceptions, and policy interventions to improve workforce readiness.

2.2 The role of Higher Education in skills development

South Africa's higher education system struggles to align with industry requirements due to underfunded public institutions and inaccessible private education (Dube, 2024). While some universities engage in work-integrated learning (WIL) and industry partnerships, bureaucratic delays and outdated curricula hinder effectiveness (Scandurra et al., 2024). Employers report that graduates often lack digital literacy, data analytics, and supply chain management skills (Motsie, 2023). Strengthening academia-industry collaboration through mentorships and digital training is essential (Yende, 2021; Mesuwini & Mokoena, 2023).

Wholesale and retail-focused qualifications are scarce, reinforcing perceptions of the sector as low-skilled (Laizet, 2021). Many graduates require additional on-the-job training due to gaps in business education that fail to address e-commerce and AI-driven retail trends (Román & Mason, 2019). Digital transformation necessitates integrating data analytics, cybersecurity, and UX design into curricula (Sagar, 2024).

2.3 Industry Skills Demand and Supply Imbalance

Rapid technological shifts, evolving consumer behaviour, and digital retailing intensify the skills gap in the wholesale and retail sector (Asmal et al., 2020). Employers struggle to find job-ready candidates, with outdated curricula and limited practical training exacerbating mismatches (Abliazova, 2020). In rural areas, restricted access to technology further limits skill acquisition (Luke & Heyns, 2019).

Automation, AI, and e-commerce redefine skill demands, prioritising digital literacy, data analytics, and cybersecurity (Sagar, 2024). Retailers require employees proficient in omnichannel platforms, AI-driven customer service tools, and automated inventory management (Lincoln et al., 2020). Nevertheless, most graduates lack hands-on experience in these domains due to the theoretical focus of business education (Kruss, 2004). Expanding vocational training, public-private partnerships, and digital upskilling initiatives is crucial (Hlanganipai & Musara, 2016; Gartoumi & Tekouabou, 2024).

Government and Policy Influences on Skills Development

Policies such as the National Skills Development Plan (NSDP) 2030 aim to enhance sectoral skills through training and digital upskilling (Román & Mason, 2019). However, challenges

persist, including skills mismatches, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and funding constraints (Habiyaremye et al., 2022). Despite government support, weak accountability systems and slow curriculum revisions limit impact (Mlambo et al., 2023).

Corruption within SETA-funded programmes further hinders progress (Matha & Jahed, 2024). Limited coordination between government, industry, and academia results in poorly aligned training programmes, exacerbating the workforce skills gap (Mabotha & Ngcamu, 2024). To bridge these challenges, policies must integrate practical training, industry collaboration, and accessible education for disadvantaged populations (Mulaudzi, 2024).

Technological Advancements and Retail Education

Retail education must adapt to digital transformations, yet many institutions struggle due to outdated infrastructure and a lack of skilled lecturers (Reddy-Moonasamy & Naidoo, 2022). Emerging technologies like AI, mobile commerce, and big data require integration into training programmes (Ahmad et al., 2020). Without digital literacy, graduates risk falling behind in an increasingly tech-driven retail environment.

Blended learning, virtual internships, and e-commerce simulations provide scalable solutions (Coetzee et al., 2021). Virtual internships enhance accessibility for students in remote areas, offering practical experience without geographical limitations (Reid et al., 2023). Similarly, e-commerce simulations equip students with hands-on retail management skills, preparing them for digital retail (Redda, 2024). Investment in digital tools and faculty upskilling is critical to modernising wholesale and retail education.

2.4 Stakeholder Perceptions of W&RSETA Programmes

Stakeholders have mixed views on W&RSETA's impact. Learners appreciate workplace exposure but cite short training durations as a limitation (Mahembe, 2021). Academics advocate for stronger industry collaboration and updated curricula to reflect real-world needs (Human-Hendricks & Meier, 2024). Employers value W&RSETA initiatives but question graduates' job readiness, emphasising the need for structured workplace training and clearer industry partnerships (O'Neil et al., 2023).

Key gaps in W&RSETA programmes include inadequate hands-on digital retail training, outdated curricula, and insufficient employer engagement (Maphakela & Matlhoahela, 2023). Strengthening academic-industry linkages and incorporating emerging retail technologies will improve graduate employability (Mian et al., 2020; Sagar, 2024).

Collaborative Approaches in Wholesale and Retail Education

University-industry collaboration is essential to ensuring curricula align with modern retail demands. Industry-led advisory boards, guest lectures, and research partnerships can enhance academic offerings (Mavundla, 2021). Work-integrated learning opportunities, including internships and apprenticeships, provide practical exposure and help bridge the gap between education and employment (Mesuwini & Mokoena, 2023).

Retailers and academia must formalise continuous feedback mechanisms to refine curricula based on technological advancements and market trends (Taylor & Calitz, 2020). Strengthening these partnerships will ensure South African retail graduates are equipped with both theoretical and practical competencies required in the evolving sector.

Barriers to Employability

The lack of work-integrated learning and limited digital skills training contribute to low graduate employability in retail (Human-Hendricks & Meier, 2024). Many academic programmes still focus on traditional retail management, offering little exposure to e-commerce, data analytics, and digital marketing (Business Tech, 2022). Consequently, employers struggle to find candidates with essential digital competencies (Khatle et al., 2021).

A lack of mentorship and structured career development pathways within the sector hinders career progression. Many smaller retail businesses lack formal training programmes, leaving graduates with few opportunities for professional growth (Backman et al., 2024). Addressing these gaps through industry-driven skills development initiatives is crucial to improving employability outcomes.

2.5 Literature conclusion

Addressing the skills mismatch in South Africa's wholesale and retail sector requires a coordinated approach between academia, industry, and government. Enhancing digital literacy, updating curricula, and expanding work-integrated learning opportunities are critical steps toward bridging the skills gap. By fostering collaboration, modernising education, and improving access to industry-led training, South Africa can develop a workforce equipped for the evolving retail landscape, boosting employment and economic sustainability.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an outcomes-based methodology that is underpinned by a pragmatic philosophy. The associated paradigm, design, methods and approaches used in this study are outlined in the next section.

3.1 Philosophical underpinning of the study

This study adopts a pragmatism approach, which implies an outcome-oriented methodology focused on understanding the meaning of a situation or research results (Turner, Cardinal & Burton, 2017). Pragmatism is characterised by its emphasis on communication and shared meaning-making to develop practical solutions to social challenges (Shannon-Baker, 2016; Valeriani & Plano Clark, 2021). Given the nature of this study, pragmatism is well-suited for the W&R SETA research project, as it prioritises practical solutions and real-world applications that align with the project's objective of addressing skills development and labour market demands in South Africa (Shan, 2021). Furthermore, this philosophy supports a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative insights to generate actionable recommendations for policymakers and industry stakeholders (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2006).

3.2 Research approach

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative methodologies to provide a comprehensive and multidimensional understanding of the research problem (Turner et al., 2017). Given the complex and multifaceted nature of the skills mismatch in the wholesale and retail sector, a single-method approach would be insufficient to capture the full scope of challenges and opportunities. Mixed-methods research allows for triangulation, enhancing the validity of findings by corroborating results across different data sources (Timans, Wouters & Heilbron, 2019). It is particularly relevant in action research, where stakeholder engagement can be synergistically integrated with quantitative outcomes, enhancing intervention planning, implementation, and evaluation (Ivankova & Wingo, 2018). The study integrates quantitative surveys with learners to assess perceptions of programme effectiveness and qualitative focus groups with academics and employers to evaluate curriculum relevance and skills application. Structured interviews with retail employers and academic leaders uncover disparities in curriculum development and industry requirements, while statistical analysis helps validate these findings with empirical data (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

3.3 Research reasoning approach

This study employs an analytical, parallel research reasoning approach (Ostlund, Kidd & Wengstrom, 2011), enabling the simultaneous examination of qualitative and quantitative data to provide a comprehensive and multidimensional analysis of the skills supply-demand imbalance in South Africa's wholesale and retail sector. The parallel nature of the analysis allows for the independent yet concurrent collection and evaluation of both data types, ensuring that insights derived from theoretical constructs align with empirical findings (Venkatesh, Brown & Sullivan, 2016). This approach ensures that theoretical propositions

regarding the effectiveness of W&RSETA-funded programmes are examined alongside real-world data, strengthening the link between conceptual frameworks and practical realities (McKim, 2017). By applying an analytical lens, the study systematically dissects patterns emerging from stakeholder perspectives while concurrently validating these insights through quantitative measurement, resulting in a holistic and well-grounded understanding of the sector's challenges.

Parallel data analysis is particularly valuable in this study as it allows for theoretical clarity while enhancing the interpretation of empirical results (Hong, Rees, Sutcliffe, & Thomas, 2020). By integrating qualitative narratives with quantitative trends, this approach confirms the relevance of W&RSETA's strategic interventions and uncovers formed relationships between programme efficacy, skills alignment, and employability outcomes. Examining different data sources concurrently strengthens the validity of meta-inferences, ensuring that conclusions drawn are comprehensive, data-driven, and practically applicable (Guetterman, Babchuk, & Stevens, 2019). Furthermore, this research reasoning approach supports the study's goal of bridging the gap between theory and practice, allowing for the development of targeted recommendations that enhance policy, curriculum alignment, and strategic workforce planning.

By leveraging an analytical, parallel research reasoning approach, the study ensures that W&RSETA's programme evaluation is not only based on quantitative impact assessments but also enriched by qualitative stakeholder insights. This dual-layered exploration provides a balanced and validated perspective on how well W&RSETA-funded interventions address the sector's evolving needs.

3.4 Data collection

Quantitative data were elicited using a structured survey questionnaire comprising a few open-ended questions for clarity-seeking purposes. On the other hand, qualitative data were collected via multiple e-focus group discussions that were convened on the Zoom networking platform.

3.4.1 Instrument

This study's data collection instruments align with quantitative and qualitative research methods. For the quantitative component, a self-administered questionnaire was distributed to a sample of W&RSETA graduates (Malhotra, 2020). The questionnaire, designed to take approximately 20 minutes, utilised a five-point Likert scale. This scale was developed and adapted from the Learning Transfer System Inventory (LTSI) by Chatterjee, Pereira and Sarkar (2017) to assess how the programme intervention facilitates knowledge creation, transfer and

application in real-world settings. Additionally, elements of the questionnaire were adapted from Shin and Chan (2004) to measure learner satisfaction and perceptions of the support rendered by the programme intervention.

For the qualitative component, a semi-structured focus group schedule was developed to evaluate policy recommendations and identify key areas for improving the alignment of W&RSETA-funded strategic programmes.

3.4.2 Survey Administration

The quantitative survey was launched between the 22nd of November 2024 and the 6th of March 2025, following all the protocols for an electronic survey. The screener comprised four parameters to be met by all respondents as follows:
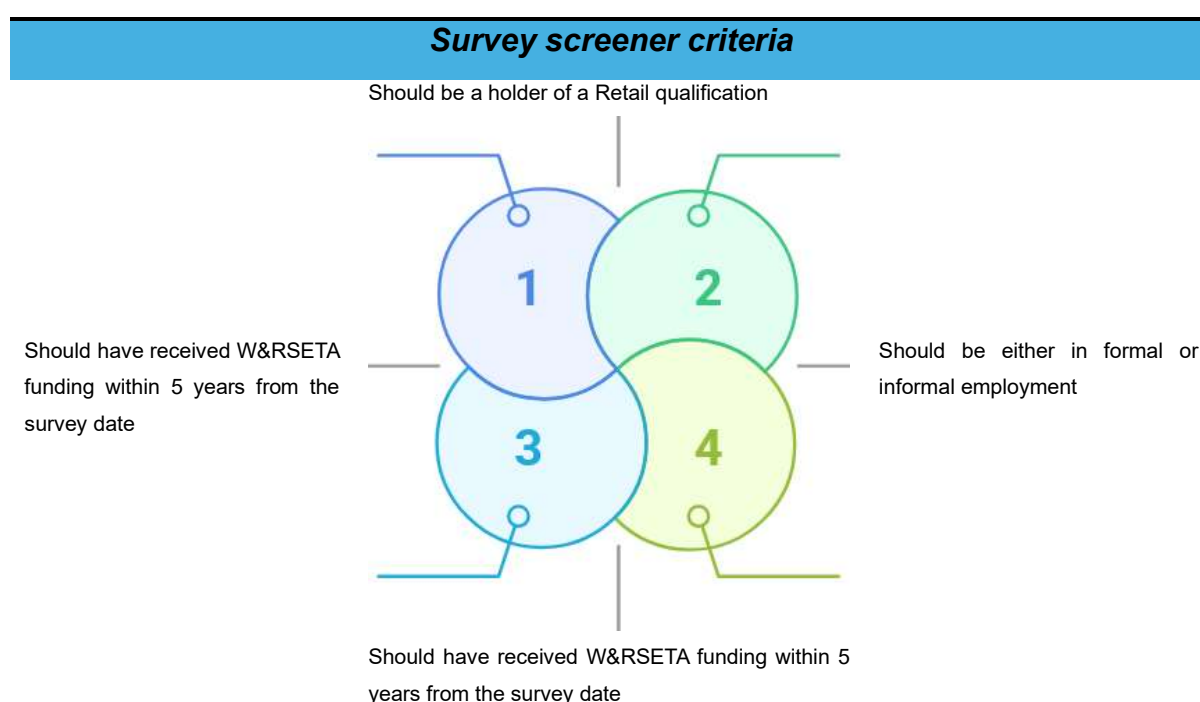
FIGURE 2: SURVEY SCREENER CRITERIA

The survey link was shared with former bursars who were randomly drawn from a database acquired with permission by the W&RSETA. The survey link was also shared on various platforms, including university alumni databases and social media, to draw attention to the study. The researchers monitored the number of survey responses and provided a weekly report to the entire research team about the number of survey responses. Survey completion was reflected using a progress bar, and the survey form indicated 100 percent upon completion of all the questions. A total of 71 responses were recorded as having entered the survey on Google Docs by the survey closure date, which had been determined by the project

timeframes set by the funder. Since Daikeler *et al.* (2020) submit that, in general, electronic surveys yield a lower response rate than other modes of surveys, a decision was then made to position these findings as preliminary to provide an opportunity for further exploration.

3.4.3 Administration of e-focus group discussions

The qualitative data collection involved 45-minute focus group discussions conducted electronically via Zoom. The focus groups comprised academics and programme coordinators in higher education. Additionally, a separate e-focus group session was conducted with retail industry players. The independently structured sessions assisted to explore the unfiltered and objective insights from these stakeholders. The focus groups comprised **eight (8)** academics and programme coordinators in higher education. The participants were purposively drawn from the stakeholder community based on their experiential encounters with the programme beneficiaries. Additionally, a separate e-focus group session was conducted with **eight (8)** training specialists in the retail industry. The independently structured sessions assisted in exploring the unfiltered and objective insights from these stakeholders.

3.4.4 Ethical aspects

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained by established research protocols. To ensure compliance with ethical standards, all survey respondents and focus group discussion participants were provided with a participant information sheet and required to sign a consent form before participating in the study (see Annexures A and B).

The information sheet outlined key ethical considerations, including the fact that participation was entirely voluntary and that participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences. It also assured participants that all data collected would be securely stored and treated with strict confidentiality, with no individuals or organisations being identified in any research outputs.

For the survey component, respondents were informed that their responses would be anonymised and used solely for research purposes. In the case of the focus group discussions, participants were made aware that discussions would be recorded to enable accurate transcription and thematic analysis. They were also informed that direct quotes might be used to illustrate key findings while maintaining confidentiality. By signing the consent form, all participants confirmed their understanding of the research procedures, ethical guidelines, and their rights in relation to the study.

3.5 Data analysis

Parallel data analysis was employed on the survey data, the e-focus group transcripts, and the researchers' field notes. Survey data were analysed using frequency distributions and descriptive analysis, while e-focus group data were thematically analysed concurrently. Thereafter, a data triangulation approach ensued, where findings from multiple sources were systematically cross-validated to enhance credibility. Quantitative data collected through structured surveys was analysed using descriptive analysis, whereas the sample composition was summarised through frequency distributions. On the other hand, qualitative data gathered through the e-focus groups were analysed using thematic analysis, where emerging patterns and recurring themes were coded and categorised to uncover underlying perceptions and contextual insights. The concurrent analytic approach enabled the identification of converging trends, discrepancies and complementary insights.

4. RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION OF THE FINDINGS

This section discusses the results of this study. The presentation of the results is consistent with the sub-areas of exploration identified in Section 1.4 of this report.

4.1 Survey sample composition

The survey data analysis followed a statistical approach, using SPSS (Version 29.0), while presenting numerical data with categorical breakdowns. In addition, the data analysis incorporates limited qualitative data from open-ended questions. Frequency distributions and descriptive statistics are summarised in the form of interactive graphical dashboards for data visualisation. The results are presented in the next sections. The next section outlines the outcomes of the survey data collection procedure by elaborating on the sample composition, the results of the employment status of the respondents as well as the descriptive analysis of the scaled responses.

4.1.1 Survey participants' gender

Per Figure 3, the survey participation was skewed in favour of female respondents (61% of the sample), whereas only 28 male respondents (39% of the sample) completed the survey.
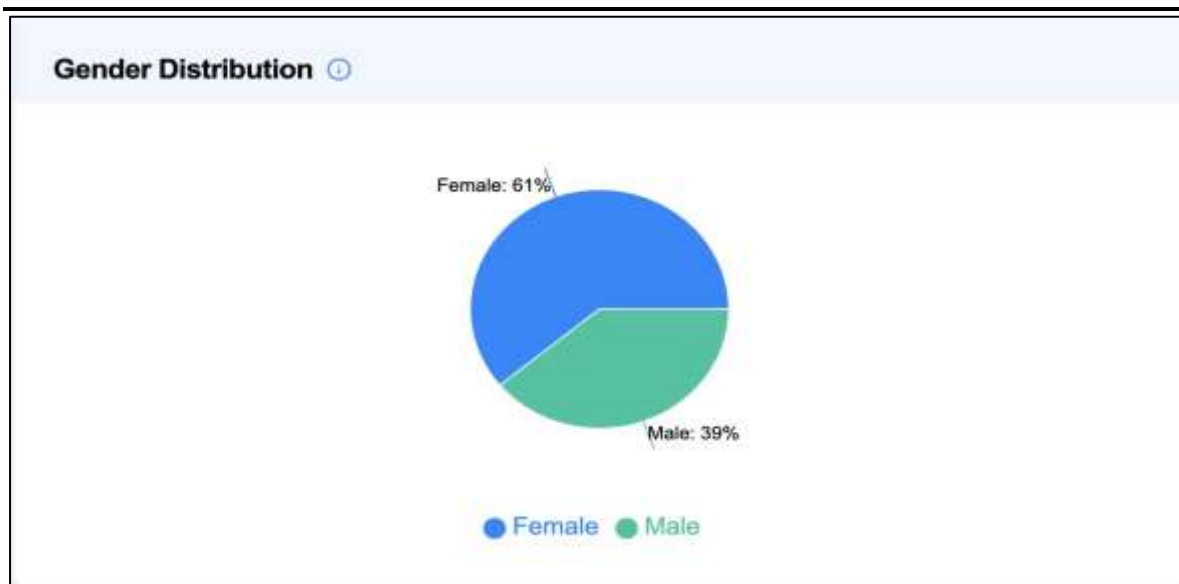
FIGURE 3: SURVEY PARTICIPANTS' GENDER DISTRIBUTION

Women, despite making up a significant portion of the workforce, are often concentrated in lower-level or casual positions. The gender distribution denotes a possible female funding skew by the W&RSETA, which is welcome since prioritisation of funding for female bursars can help bridge the gender inequality gap in South Africa by equipping more women with the necessary skills and qualifications to move into management and strategic roles.

4.1.2   Survey participants' ethnicity

Figure 4 depicts the ethnicity of the survey participants.
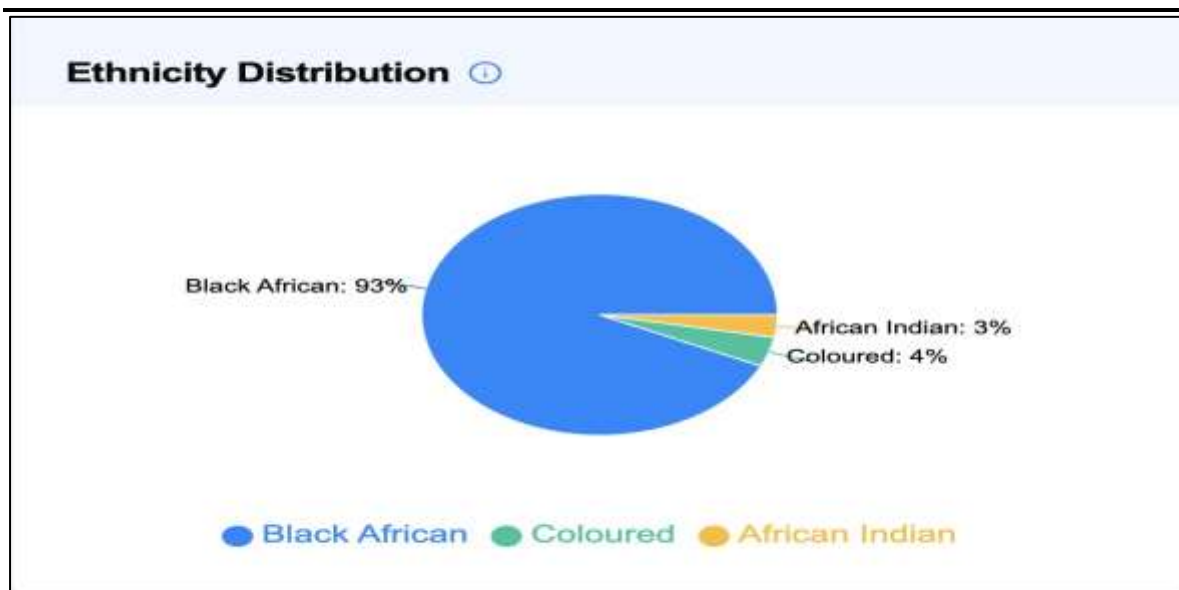
FIGURE 4: SURVEY PARTICIPANTS' ETHNIC DISTRIBUTION

As expected, most respondents were Black and of African descent (93% of the sample). This was consistent with the mandate of the W&RSETA to fund individuals from historically disadvantaged backgrounds, from which this ethnic group relates.

4.1.3   Survey participants' age distribution

The age category ranging between 21 and 24 years accounted for most participants in the study (n=44; 62% of the sample). The second largest age group in the sample was between 25 and 29 years old (n=15; 21% of the sample). The predominant age cohort in this research is consistent with the sample demographic funded by the W&RSETA for university undergraduate study, comprising SAQA - NQF level 6 and 7 qualifications. Additionally, this millennial cohort is the atypical demographic that has entered the retail sector within the past 5 years.
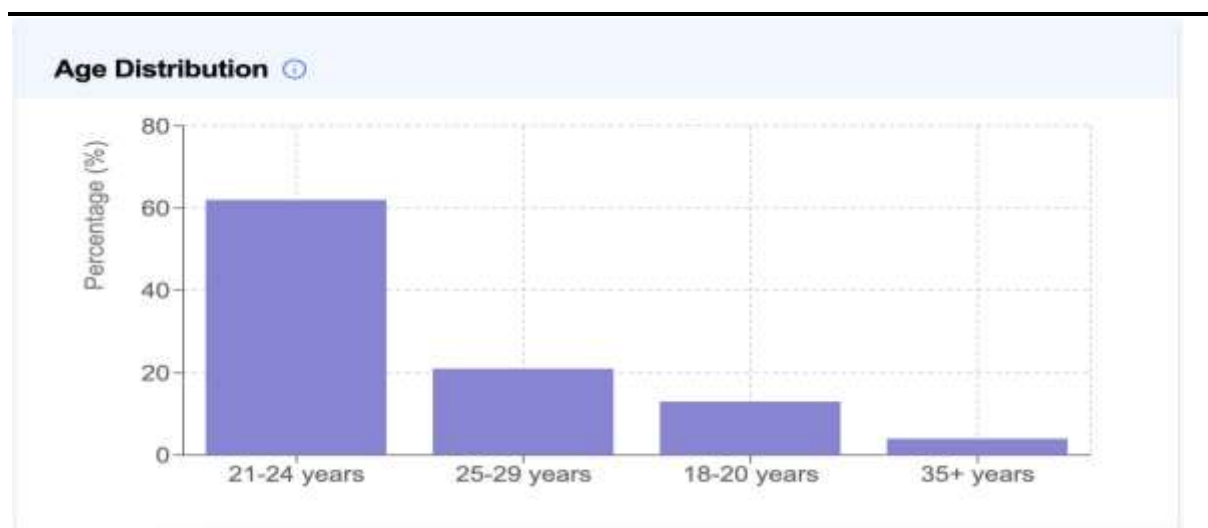
FIGURE 5: SURVEY PARTICIPANTS' AGE DISTRIBUTION

The minority groups comprised participants aged between 18 and 20 years (n=9; 13% of the sample) and those at least 35 years or older (n=3; 4% of the sample) as at the time of the survey.

4.1.4   Survey participants' educational qualifications

Figure 6 denotes the qualifications attained by the W&RSETA bursars.

Qualification Levels ⓘ

Diploma (NQF6): 37%

Other: 28%

Advanced Diploma (NQF7): 11%

Higher Certificate (NQF5): 24%

● Diploma (NQF6) ● Other ● Higher Certificate (NQF5)
● Advanced Diploma (NQF7)

FIGURE 6: SURVEY PARTICIPANTS' HIGHEST EDUCATION QUALIFICATIONS

Most of the survey participants were holders of a diploma in Retailing (n=26; 37% of the sample) as their highest qualification. On the other hand, a sizable portion of the sample, comprising 20 (28%) and 17 participants (24%), reported having completed either a higher certificate or other Retailing qualification. The Advanced Diploma holders (n=8; 11% of the sample) were the least represented in the sample owing to the recent introduction of these HEQSF-aligned qualifications in recent years.

4.1.5 Survey participants' employment status

Figure 7 denotes the employment status of the survey respondents.

Employment Status ⓘ

Self-employed (non-retail)

Full-time (retail)

Part-time (retail)

Full-time (non-retail)

Self-employed (retail)

Percentage (%)
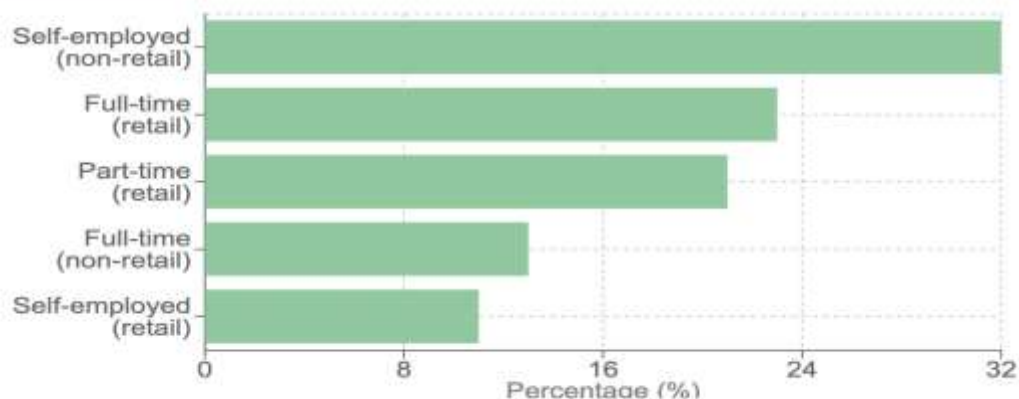
FIGURE 7:   SURVEY PARTICIPANTS' EMPLOYMENT STATUS

Approximately 44 per cent of respondents indicated that they were employed either full-time or part-time within various sections of retailing. Nevertheless, these preliminary findings indicated an unexpected result: 32 percent of the sample were self-employed in other non-retail sectors. This suggests ample opportunity for the W&RSETA to determine targeted retention strategies for the graduates within Retail.

4.2 Funding patterns and employment outcomes

This section reviews the sample in terms of funding instruments, patterns, and employment times.

4.2.1 Nature of funding patterns

Figure 8 outlines the nature of funding instruments used by the W&RSETA to support Retailing education and skills. Most respondents acquired bursary funding (n=45; 63% of the sample), implying that this seems to be the most viable instrument for the W&RSETA. Be that as it may, the sample also constituted bursars who were funded for learnerships (n=6; 8% of the sample), internships (n=3; 4% of the sample), as well as work-integrated learning (n=4; 6% of the sample). In totality, these four funding instruments are salient constituents in enhancing the employability of Retail graduates.
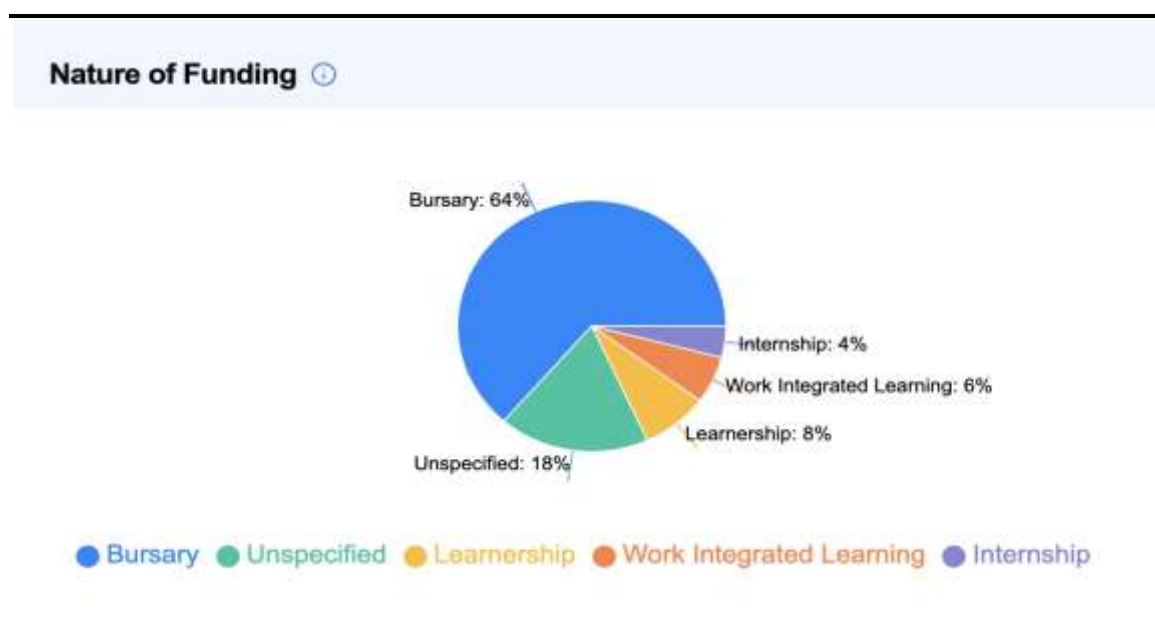
FIGURE 8: NATURE OF FUNDING INSTRUMENTS RECEIVED BY THE RECIPIENTS

Internationally, countries like the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia emphasise experiential learning to ensure graduates are employment-ready. Internships and learnerships provide hands-on experience in customer service, supply chain management, merchandising

and digital retailing. Additionally, many companies prefer hiring candidates with prior industry exposure, making these programs crucial for employment success.

4.2.2   Time taken to find employment

Figure 9 denotes that a majority of the Retail graduates (n=29; 41% of the sample) take an average of 6 to 12 months to find employment, this suggests identifying potential opportunities for employment acceleration.

FIGURE 9: TIME TAKEN TO SECURE EMPLOYMENT

It is noted that where 59 percent of the graduates took a shorter time to secure employment (below 6 months) in the retail sector, this could be attributed to exposure and talent referrals determined by employers during internships and WIL programmes. It could be that some of the graduates receive job offers from their host companies before completing their training.

4.3   Assessment of programme effectiveness (Achievement of AOE 1)

This section explains the achievement of AEO 1, consistent with research Gap 1 (See Figure 1) that sought to take a learner-centred approach to "***establish the perceived efficacy of W&RSETA strategic interventions***".

AOE 1
DETERMINE LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE EFFICACY AND PRACTICAL RELEVANCE OF THE W&RSETA PROGRAMME INTERVENTION

By adopting a perception-based approach, the research seeks to establish the perceived efficacy of the strategic programmes delivered by the W&RSETA. This assists in clarifying whether the primary beneficiaries are satisfied with the support they acquired during and after participating in the programmes as well as confidence in the suitability of the skills transferred (both hard and soft) for current retail job roles.

4.3.1 Metrics for assessing the programme effectiveness

Evaluating the effectiveness of educational programmes is crucial to ensure they meet their intended objectives and provide value to current and prospective recipients. Per Figure 10, three key metrics were used in the programme assessment, namely, the presence of support services, learner skills transfer and learner satisfaction.

FIGURE 10:   ASSESSMENT   METRICS   FOR   W&RSETA   PROGRAMME EFFECTIVENESS

Self-reporting effectiveness rating scales ranging from 1 (very ineffective) to 5 (Highly effective) revealed positive perceptions across the three identified metrics. The findings are discussed next.

4.3.1.1 W&RSETA support

The mean score of 3.7 revealed a positive perception regarding the efficacy of support from the W&RSETA intervention programmes. Notably, the most valuable aspect of the W&RSETA programme, according to respondents, was financial support. Likewise, bursary funding (the dominant form of support at 63%) appears to be the primary mechanism for supporting students, implying that equity weighs heavily on the beneficiaries' affinity to seek support from the W&RSETA programmes. Thus, since a majority of the respondents specifically mentioned

how the programme allowed them to focus on their studies without "**financial stress",** targeted programme protocols should be implemented to eliminate bursary leakages, to ensure that bursaries go to the most deserving learners to eliminate the so-called "free riders". In addition, the respondents note the availability of support services, such as academic advising, counselling and career guidance, which play a pivotal role in enhancing the learning experience. Their availability and quality can significantly influence a learner's ability to succeed. Measuring the presence of these services helps determine if learners have access to the necessary cognitive resources to overcome challenges and achieve their educational goals.

4.3.1.2 Transfer of skills

This section shifts to assess whether the application of the learning and skills from the intervention program leads to real-world improvements in job performance and productivity. Measuring learner skills transfer assesses the extent to which participants evaluate programme efficacy in assisting them in implementing the knowledge and skills in their professional roles.

FIGURE 11:   WEB OF SKILLS TRANSFER APPLICATION TO WORLD-OF-WORK

Most educational programmes aim to equip learners with skills they can apply in real-world settings. Thus, this metric is crucial for determining the practical impact of the training. In this vein, the beneficiaries reported a moderate effectiveness rating of 3.5 concerning the transfer of learning skills following the W&RSETA programme intervention/s. The moderate ratings confirm some disconnect between education and workplace application. Of note, the web in Figure 11 denotes the critical skills that the respondents felt require immediate investment for application in their job roles, including technical, communication, problem-solving, leadership and digital literacy skills.

25

4.3.1.3 Satisfaction with the W&RSETA programme intervention

Learner satisfaction directly indicates how well a programme meets the expectations and needs of its participants. High satisfaction levels often correlate with increased engagement, motivation and likelihood of programme completion. The rating scales involved collecting feedback on various aspects of the programme, such as content relevance, instructional quality and overall learning environment.
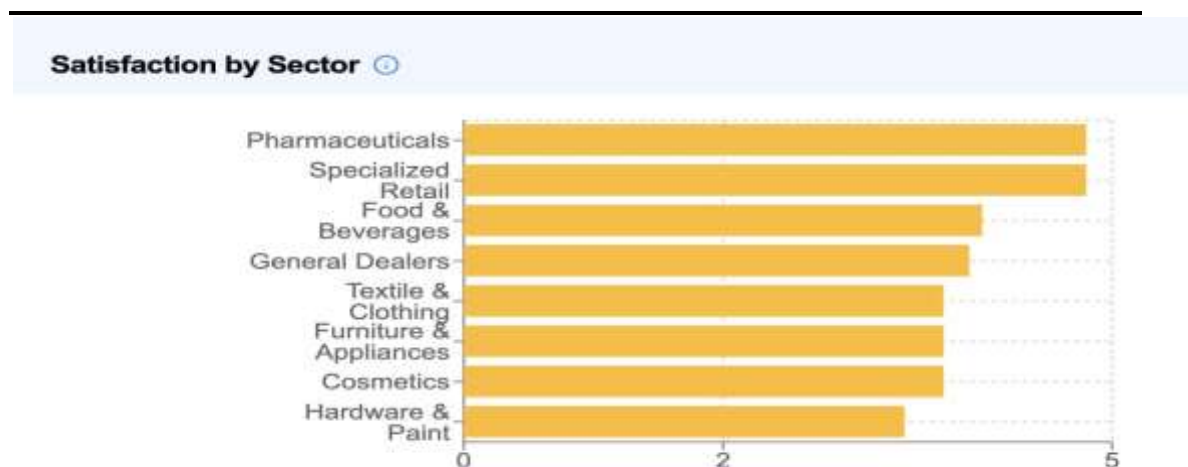
FIGURE 12:   W&RSETA PROGRAMME SATISFACTION RATING

Learner satisfaction is a significant indicator to track since it directly impacts engagement and the success of training programmes. The survey results demonstrated that the W&RSETA programme beneficiaries reported positive satisfaction ratings. Interestingly, satisfaction ratings vary across the different industry sectors, as shown in Figure 12. The highest satisfaction ratings were reported across pharmaceuticals and medical (mean score = 4.8) and specialised retail (mean score =4.8). The food and beverages sector reported moderated effectiveness ratings (mean score = 4.0). On the other hand, low satisfaction ratings (mean score = 3.7) were reported across the textile and clothing, household furniture and appliances and cosmetics and toiletries sectors.

4.4 Exploration of the (dis) connection between curricula and industry

This section explains the achievement of AEO 2 through thematic analysis e-focus group data, consistent with research Gap 2 (See Figure 1) that sought to explore a "***possible mismatch of educational qualifications and skills***".

AOE 2
UNDERSTAND THE CONNECTION BETWEEN UNIVERSITY CURRICULA AND INDUSTRY EXPECTATIONS IN RETAIL EDUCATION

4.4.1 Discussion on theme 1: Unprepared to work and unwilling to learn

This discussion covers five key areas identified through the iterative development of themes.

Unprepared to work and unwilling to learn

South Africa's wholesale and retail sector faces a persistent skills mismatch, with graduates entering the workforce unprepared and employers expecting job-ready hires. Employers believe students lack real-world experience, relying on workshops and theory without practical application. Evidence was highlighted when (M8) stated that; *"They just want to be employed—they can't prove themselves".* Despite structured training like the Woolworths induction model, graduates struggle with problem-solving and adaptability, requiring on-the-job learning that should have happened earlier. One participant noted, "*Skills come naturally or can be learned in time. You must have the capacity to solve problems on your own" (M6).*

Outdated curricula and limited employer-academic collaboration worsen the disparity between education and employment. This was highlighted by [M6] *"Educators are not up to date with industry trends—we're more theoretical" (M6).* While initiatives like W&RSETA's lecturer placement programme provide exposure, deeper integration of real-world learning is needed. *"W&RSETA has this great programme of placing lecturers in retail spaces for hands-on experience" (M3).*

Retailers emphasise soft skills and motivation, as students tend to do the bare minimum, rarely engaging beyond their required duties. This was pointed out by one of the participants, *"They don't go the extra mile, and when it's time to go home, they go home" (M4).* However, those who experience in-store work demonstrate higher adaptability and workplace confidence as emphasised by another participant, *"When students are given in-store experience, it lets them see the real deal" (M16).*

Table 1: Summary of findings from theme one

Major findings	
Key issues	**Challenge**
⇒ Graduates lack work readiness.	⇒ Minimal practical experience before employment.
⇒ Education-industry disconnect.	⇒ Universities focus on theory and not industry practicality.
⇒ Low workplace engagement.	⇒ Students lack soft skills, problem-solving ability.
⇒ Retail digital transformation.	⇒ Graduates lack Artificial Intelligence (AI), E-commerce and data skills.

⇒ Retail is seen as a "temporary job"	⇒ High attrition due to unrealistic job expectations.

Source: Authors' own work

By closing the employer-education divide, fostering continuous learning mindsets, and enhancing work-integrated learning, South Africa's retail sector can build a skilled, adaptable, and future-ready workforce

4.4.2 Discussion on theme 2: Disconnect between education and employment

🎓 Disconnect between education and employment

The South African retail sector faces a disconnect between industry needs and education, with theory and practice operating in silos, leaving graduates unprepared for the workforce. One academic pointed out "*There is a distinction between theory and practical work. One side is technical, and the other intellectual. Those who perform well are able to balance the two—applying theory in practice" (M2).* However, many grasp industry realities only through in-store experience, which helps bridge the gap between academic learning and real-world retail demands. *"When students are given the opportunity to do in-store experience, it lets them see the real deal" (M14).* "*Students think and operate differently after W&RSETA—it works at the intersection of academia and a typical retail experience" (M14).*

Academia's slow response to industry evolution further widens the gap, as universities prioritise theory while retail requires agility to meet consumer trends and digital advancements. *"Academia is largely fixed in the way things have always been done, while the industry looks ahead" (M5).* Educators acknowledge this shortfall, with one admitting, *"We are not up to date with industry trends or changes—we lack practical experience; we're more theoretical" (M5).* *"W&RSETA's lecturer placement programme provides some hands-on exposure" (M3),* but deeper industry-academic collaboration is needed. To bridge this divide, participants recommend advisory boards where retail experts provide curriculum feedback and structured industry partnerships to enhance practical learning. *"Blur the lines between academics and work" (M1).* A retail internship database could help businesses track and reintegrate students' post-graduation, improving workforce retention (M14). Employers should also seek student feedback to refine hiring and training strategies. Aligning education with industry needs, fostering practical exposure, and strengthening partnerships, South Africa's retail sector can build a competent, adaptable workforce.

Table 2: Summary of findings from theme two

Major findings

Key issues	Challenge
⇒ Theory-practice divide.	⇒ Universities focus on theory while retailers need practical, job-read graduates.
⇒ Slow curriculum adaptation.	⇒ Academic institutions struggle to keep up with retail's fast evolution.
⇒ Limited industry-academic collaboration.	⇒ Universities and businesses operate in silos, reducing learning relevance.
⇒ Talen retention and engagement.	⇒ Graduates disconnect from retail post-internships, leading to a loss of skilled talent.

Source: Authors' own work

4.4.3   Discussion on theme 3: Gen Z says IRL is overrated

Gen Z says IRL is overrated

The integration of Generation Z into the workforce presents a growing challenge for both educators and employers, as digital dependence hinders engagement, communication, and workplace adaptability. With online learning becoming the norm during COVID-19, many students have lost interest in in-person education, preferring digital over physical interactions. As one academic observed, *"Since teaching went online during Covid, students have been reluctant to return to campus. They think campus life is overrated. Class attendance is poor, but the pass rate is still good" (M5).* This reliance on digital tools such as ChatGPT has resulted in passive learning, where students struggle to think critically or engage in problem-solving independently. *"Covid babies. They are used to ChatGPT. They are lazy in applying their own mind" (M3).* The consequence of this digital detachment is seen in low engagement, lack of initiative, and reluctance to participate in discussions, all skills critical for success in the retail sector.

Many educators note that students prefer written over verbal engagement, avoiding real-time discussions. *"They can write but not do on-the-spot presentations. They ask if they must present to the whole class or just the lecturer" (M1*). This reliance on structured incentives like participation marks reflects a lack of self-driven motivation, which extends into the workplace. While Gen Z excels in digital marketing and social media, they often lack soft skills, workplace etiquette, and adaptability. *"We love hiring individuals fresh from school. We now hire based on their looks, energy, and social media content" (M10),* highlighting a shift toward digital fluency over traditional qualifications. Meanwhile, older employees struggle to adapt, with some exiting the workforce. *"New employees are in touch with trends. Older employees are detached and leaving the workplace" (M13).*

The disconnect between Gen Z's digital preferences and traditional workplace expectations highlights the need for a balanced skillset that integrates digital fluency with interpersonal and problem-solving abilities. Educators must modernise teaching strategies to bridge this gap, incorporating interactive and real-world scenarios to enhance classroom participation. Employers, in turn, must provide structured workplace training that combines digital expertise with hands-on experience, ensuring that employees develop both technical and interpersonal competencies. By enhancing work-integrated learning (WIL) and fostering multigenerational collaboration, businesses can leverage Gen Z's digital strengths while ensuring they thrive in customer-facing retail environments, ultimately improving workforce readiness and long-term employability.

Table 3: Summary of findings theme three

Major findings	
Key issues	**Challenge**
⇒ Over-reliance on digital tools.	⇒ Students struggle with face-to-face communication and problem-solving.
⇒ Low classroom engagement.	⇒ Students avoid participation and require incentives to engage.
⇒ Digital vs. traditional workplace divide.	⇒ Employers value social media fluency, but Gen Z lacks soft skills and adaptability.
⇒ Older employees struggle with digital shifts.	⇒ Digital transformation is pushing experienced employees out of the industry.

Source: Authors' own work

4.4.4   Discussion on theme 4: Polarising opinions: praise and criticism

Polarising opinions: praise and criticism

The effectiveness of retail graduates in the workplace remains a divisive issue, with employers praising their digital fluency, creativity, and fresh perspectives, while also criticising their lack of resilience, time management, and workplace etiquette. Graduates excel at leveraging digital tools and engaging customers in innovative ways, as seen when *"they pulled in a crowd by playing relevant music, making the shopping experience enjoyable" (M10).* They are eager to learn and take initiative in handling situations independently, rather than blindly following manuals. *"They come with their cups empty, ready and eager to learn new things. Before, employees followed a manual without question. Now, graduates handle situations themselves" (M15).* However, despite these strengths, many struggle with the realities of retail work, such as long hours, customer aggression, and workplace accountability. *"The trading hours are long – they need better time-management skills" (M16).* Some lack motivation and give up too

easily when faced with difficulties, showing a don't-care attitude that affects reliability. *"If something is hard, their self-esteem just drops. They don't take responsibility – if they don't feel well, they don't come in" (M15).* Employers also note a disconnect between education and workplace expectations, where graduates expect immediate success but struggle with conflict resolution and decision-making. *"They need to be able to handle customer aggression while remaining professional" (M1).* Additionally, many fail to take initiative and adapt to the industry's fast-paced demands, leading to boredom and disengagement. *"They get bored and don't follow the rules" (M11).*

To bridge these gaps, graduates must develop a balanced skill set that integrates digital proficiency with soft skills such as resilience, adaptability, and problem-solving. Structured conflict resolution and customer engagement training should be mandatory, as well as discipline and reliability coaching to prepare them for long-term career success in retail. *"Students are now expected to have maths and cash skills, but their grades are lower" (M11).* The findings emphasise the need for work-integrated learning (WIL) and structured mentorship programmes to help graduates navigate workplace challenges and improve their professional preparedness.

Table 5: Summary findings theme four

Major findings	
Key issues	**Challenge**
⇒ Graduates excel in digital retail but lack soft skills.	⇒ Strong in customer engagement and digital marketing, but struggle with resilience and adaptability.
⇒ Poor workplace etiquette and accountability.	⇒ Lack time management, give up easily and struggle with long hours.
⇒ Expect immediate success but lack career commitment.	⇒ Struggle with customer aggression, conflict resolution, and decision-making.
⇒ Disconnection between education and industry needs.	⇒ Graduates aren't fully prepared for the demands of retail work.

Source: Authors' own work

4.5 Exploration of the (mis) alignment of programme interventions with industry priorities

It is noteworthy to take time to expound on the employer's positionality, as this is a key stakeholder in the development of Retailing skills. Therefore, this section explains the achievement of AEO 3, consistent with research Gap 3 (See Figure 1) that sought to explore possible "***misaligned focus areas with sector priorities***".

AOE 3

4.5.1   Discussion on theme 5: Fear being replaced by Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Fear being replaced by Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Retail professionals are increasingly concerned about AI-driven automation replacing traditional roles, particularly cashiers, sales assistants, and inventory managers. One participant noted, *"AI is taking over. There will be no cashiers in the future. People will lose their jobs. You must enhance yourself in the digital world" (M11).* As retail shifts towards data-driven operations, employees must develop omnichannel expertise, digital marketing, and analytics skills to remain employable. *"Your CV must reflect omnichannel experience, or you take a back seat" (M14).* This transition demands more than basic retail skills, with the industry moving from transactional roles to technology-enabled experiences as pointed out *"It was maths then, and now it's robotics and cybersecurity" (M15).* With competition intensifying and consumer preferences shifting to online and app-based shopping, retailers must integrate AI, e-commerce, and data analytics into their strategies. A retail manager noted *"The retail industry is so data-driven now. You need to work with Excel, create graphics, and analyse data" (M13).* However, the human touch remains essential, as customers still value authenticity and personal connections, this was also pointed out *"They must still have that human touch and authenticity in their work" (M5).*

Rather than seeing AI as a threat, employees should embrace technology to improve efficiency and productivity. Tasks like stock-taking have been simplified, reducing manual workload. One retailing manager noted *"Stock-take used to take hours. You had to scan every garment and reprint tags if there were none. Now you just wave the scanner. Easy" (M14).* Retailers must leverage digital tools to remain competitive, with employees required to develop expertise in social media marketing, competitor analysis, and data-driven decision-making. *"Use technology to save time. The resources are there. You must analyse data, notice competitors, and use social media for marketing. It's about communication and presentation" (M16).* To future-proof retail careers, workers must balance technological proficiency with human-centred service, ensuring they can adapt, innovate, and thrive in an evolving digital economy.

Table 4: Summary of key findings theme five

Major findings	
Key issues	**Challenge**

⇒ AI replacing traditional retail roles.	⇒ Self-checkouts and automation threaten cashier and sales assistant positions.
⇒ Retail becoming data-driven.	⇒ Workers need to analyse data, create digital content, and manage e-commerce.
⇒ Customer preferences shifting online.	⇒ AI-driven shopping experiences are reducing face-to-face interactions.
⇒ AI should be seen as a tool, not a threat,	⇒ Employees fear losing jobs rather than using AI to enhance efficiency.

Source: Authors' own work

4.5.2   Discussion on theme 6: Expectations lead to disappointment

☹   **Expectations lead to dissapointment**

Many students and graduates enter the retail industry unprepared for its demands, assuming it is fun and easy rather than a dynamic and challenging career. *"There's a misconception that retail is fun and easy. The narrative needs to shift" (M1).* This false expectation leads to workplace dissatisfaction, skill gaps, and high turnover, as graduates anticipate rapid career progression but struggle with long hours, customer service pressure, and operational complexity. A retail manager notes that *"They are expected to adapt quickly" (M8),* yet many require further training despite employers assuming they are job-ready. *"Graduates are expected to know everything. A familiar phrase they hear is: 'Didn't you go to school?'" (M12).* These challenges are worsened for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, who face financial constraints, limited work experience, and the need to juggle full-time jobs while studying. *"Finances are a big factor. It was affordable to study in the past, but not anymore" (M3).* This limits access to internships and career development opportunities, making retail employability even more difficult. *"They can't juggle work and studying" (M4),* and *"some work full-time while they study full-time" (M5),* leaving little room for skill-building.

To bridge the retail expectation gap, there must be a fundamental shift in how retail careers are presented, positioning them as growth-driven professions with clear career pathways rather than temporary jobs. Structured industry interventions can reshape perceptions, ensuring graduates understand retail's long-term potential. Employers and educators must collaborate on targeted training, financial support, and real-world exposure, helping students transition smoothly into sustainable retail careers.

Table 6: Summary findings of theme six

Major findings	
Key issues	**Challenge**
⇒ Retails seen as a low-skill and temporary job.	⇒ Leads to poor retention and unrealistic expectations.
⇒ Financial and social barriers.	⇒ Students struggle to gain work experience while studying.
⇒ Graduates expect job readiness but require training.	⇒ Employers assume graduates are prepared, but they lack key skills.

Source: Authors' own work

4.5.3 Discussion on theme 7: Leadership makes a difference

Leadership makes a difference

Government initiatives like the **YES programme** have encouraged retail employers to train students, offering stipends and tax incentives to businesses while improving youth employment. *"The YES programme forced employers to deliver 18-month courses. It also paid stipends to students. It works because of consistency and initiatives" (M14).* While the programme benefits both government and corporate sectors, its impact is limited by inconsistent support, lack of visibility, and weak follow-through. *"The YES programme has benefits for government and corporate. The youth gets employed, and businesses get tax incentives" (M13).* Graduate trainee programmes have helped students gain practical experience, often shifting their understanding of retail work*. "Graduate trainee programmes help students gain a different perspective to what they were taught" (M12).* However, greater transparency and accessibility are needed, as some participants remain unaware of available support. *"W&RSETA would occasionally assist with student placement, but I'm unsure if the chair is still there at my institution" (M5).*

To maximise impact, government-funded programmes should focus on long-term career development, ensuring placements lead to sustainable employment and skills growth rather than short-term job placements. Greater visibility, structured mentorship, and employer accountability would enhance these programmes' effectiveness.

Table 7: Summary of theme seven

Major findings	
Key issues	**Challenge**
⇒ Inconsistent programme support.	⇒ Lack of visibility and weak follow-through limits impact.
⇒ Limited career growth opportunities.	⇒ Many placements focus on short-term employment rather than skill-building.

| ⇒ Employers benefit, but youth need more support. | ⇒ Tax incentives drive employer participation, but graduates need stronger career pathways. |

Source: Authors' own work

5. DATA TRIANGULATION OF THE STUDY FINDINGS

Data triangulation is the process of using multiple data sources, methods or perspectives to enhance the reliability and validity of research findings. Findings (i.e. data from transcript audits, survey questionnaires, and observational notes from the researchers) and the literature were all reviewed and cross-referenced. By triangulating the data, the study validated key findings and provided a nuanced understanding of the W&RSETA programme's effectiveness, highlighting areas for improvement and strategic intervention. The programme evaluation methodology followed in this study was centred on the Kirkpatrick (1959) model of training evaluation. This model was developed in 1959 by Donald Kirk Patrick. This model measures outcomes in four levels that should result from a highly effective training programme. Kirkpatrick (1977) divided the evaluation model into four parts, namely: Reaction, learning, behaviour and results, as shown in Figure 13.
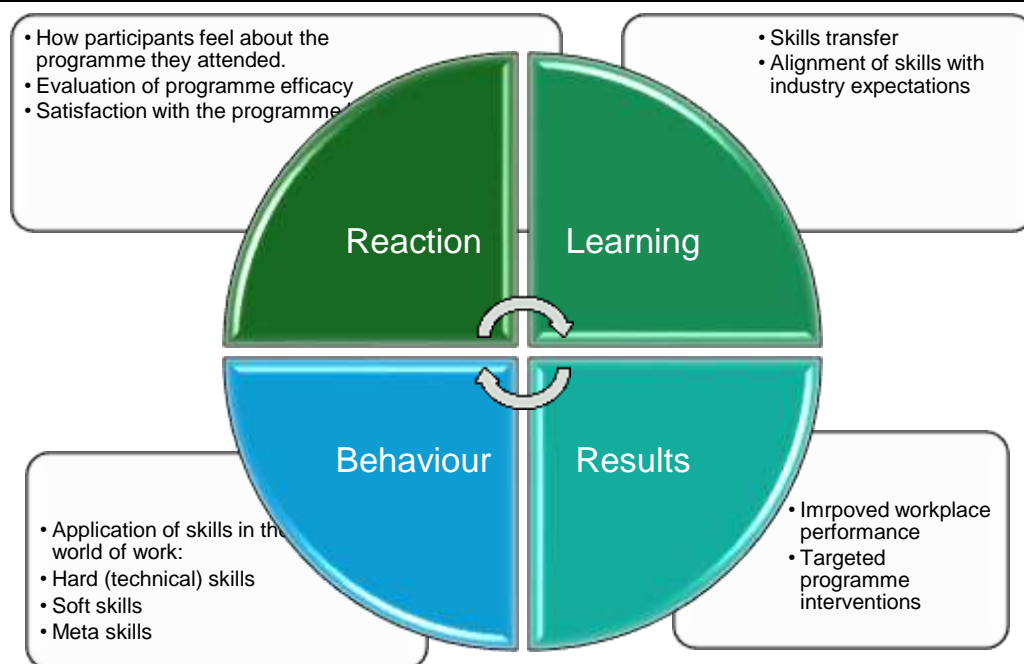
FIGURE 13: PROGRAMME EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

By focusing on behavioural outcomes, the Kirkpatrick evaluation model ensures that the W&RSET programme intervention is not just about knowledge acquisition but also the practical, on-the-job application of hard, soft and meta-skills. This level of assessment helps determine whether graduates are translating their training into measurable improvements in

performance, customer engagement and business efficiency across different retail sectors. The next sections draw inspiration from this methodology in outlining the key insights from the triangulated data analyses.

5.1 Survey insights in response to research Gap #1

Preliminary findings from the survey established the W&RSETA programme interventions as having a positive impact. The beneficiaries' perceptions of the efficacy of the W&RSETA programmes are that they are **moderately effective, with notable positive outcomes**. The preliminary findings in this report point to a tripartite set of metrics in programme evaluations, which provide a learner-centred approach to understanding effectiveness. The open-ended questions outlined mixed assessments by industry players with both praise and criticism for student skills and attitudes.
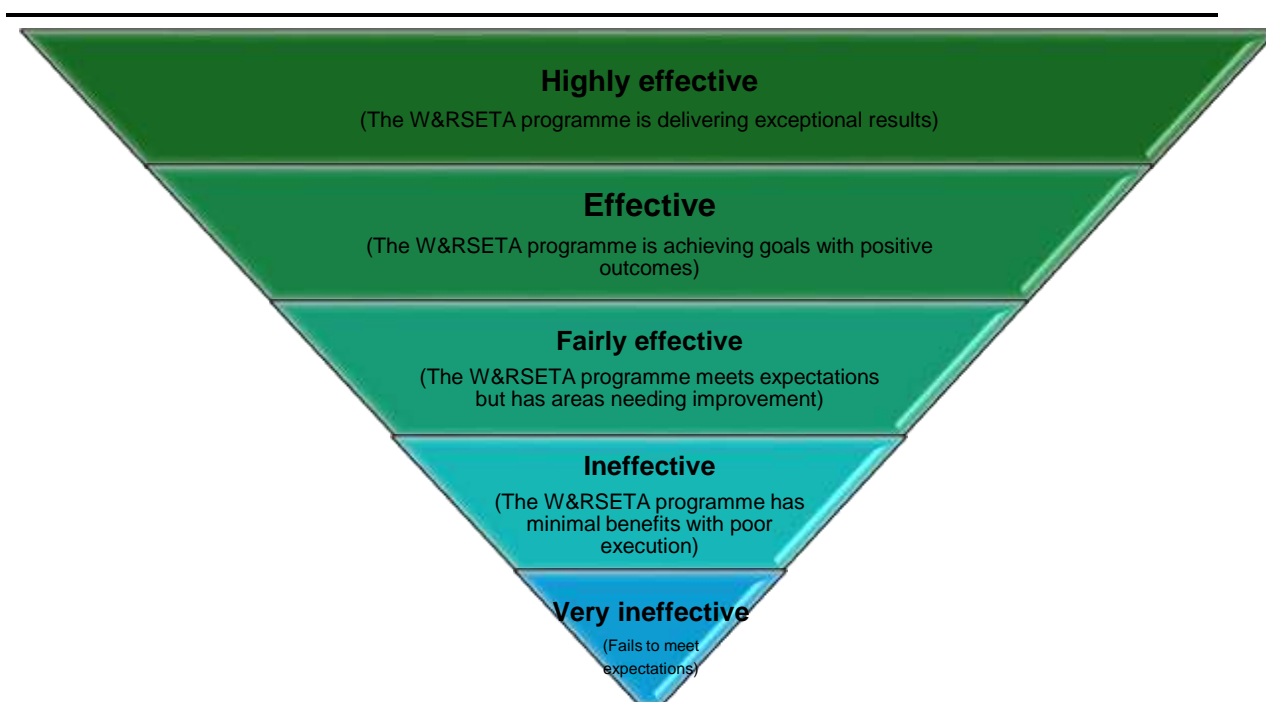
FIGURE 14:   W&RSETA PROGRAMME EFFECTIVENESS RATING SCALES

5.2 Survey insights and focus group insights in response to research Gap #2

It is noted that the turnaround time for the employability of graduates between 6 and 12 months is moderately acceptable for the responsiveness of the teaching and learning programmes in their ability to prepare students for the world of work and industry. In particular, programme interventions such as internships and learnerships can assist in bridging the practise gap with agility by ensuring that the supply of a well-trained working force matches the demand for skilled labour. However, this finding should be interpreted against the background that this was

a preliminary sample of bursaries, leaving room for improvement in potentially conducting a longitudinal study. Likewise, the moderate ratings for "Transfer of Learning" (3.5/5) seem to confirm some disconnect between education and workplace application, highlighting tensions around student preparedness and employer expectations, with critiques of students being "unprepared to work and unwilling to learn". Data from the e-focus groups points to an evident soft skills gap, especially among the Gen-Z first-time career employees, which yields generational communication differences and vast technological adaptation challenges.

5.3 Focus group insights in response to research Gap #3

Despite the growing demand for specialised retail skills, many graduates enter the workforce with generalised retail knowledge that does not adequately prepare them for the distinct demands of these sectors. This is a matter requiring urgent attention since the e-focus group findings in Theme 7 complement the results of the statistical analysis in Figure 12 to suggest significant differences in satisfaction across retail sectors, indicating that certain sectors may benefit from targeted interventions. Noting that different retail sectors require specialised knowledge and skills beyond basic retail principles, this finding was an interesting highlight for the study since it points to an urgent need to identify and address retail sector-specific competency gaps. This finding poses important implications for the W&RSETA in developing programme interventions that are targeted rather than broad. This will foster the market currency of the graduate skills in terms of relevance and adaptability to technological transformations. On the other hand, designing targeted programme interventions that are selectively focused on diverse sectors such as pharmaceuticals, food, cosmetics, electronics, and fashion will better prepare the graduates for the unique market dynamics, regulatory requirements, consumer behaviour, and operational practises of each sector.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

This section outlines the practical relevance of this research and then proceeds to outline selected recommendations based on the study findings.

6.1 Practical relevance (contribution) of this study

Data from the survey, as well as the focus group discussions, provide complementary perspectives that together offer a more comprehensive understanding of the skills gap in South Africa's retail sector. While the qualitative study reveals underlying tensions and cultural shifts, the quantitative study provides concrete metrics to measure program effectiveness and identify specific areas for improvement. Considering that a relatively small sample size was used, the results of this study are the first attempt to run a post-implementation study involving multiple stakeholders and, importantly, attempts to evaluate both the efficiency and the effectiveness of the W&RSETA programme interventions in terms of its outcomes. This nascent evaluation of the system is therefore significant not only for the employer in the sector but also from a more general perspective, contributes to what is a scarce research and knowledge area in the inculcation of salient graduate attributes among learners. Figure 15 depicts the contribution from the preliminary results of this research, yielding a proposed framework for skills alignment and continuous impact evaluation by the W&RSETA. Considering that the sample data was limited, this proposed framework is identified as a starting point for possible interrogation through larger impact evaluation programmes.
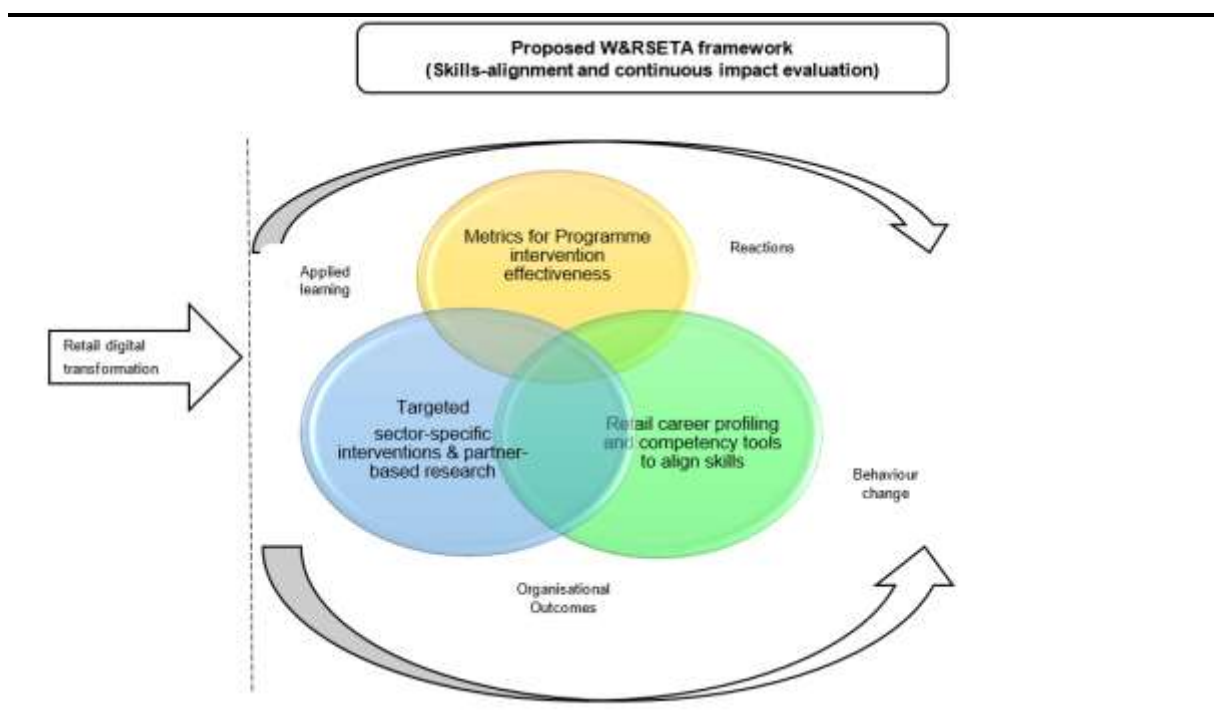
FIGURE 15: PROPOSED W&RSETA FRAMEWORK FOR SKILLS-ALIGNMENT AND CONTINUOUS IMPACT EVALUATION

Underpinned by Kirkpatrick's (1959) model, the framework supports the measurement of learners' reactions through feedback from efficacy surveys. Future impact surveys should utilise various metrics to enhance the multi-dimensionality of beneficiaries' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of programme interventions. In addition, targeted and sector-specific interventions could be developed through partner-based research, yielding richer interventions with fulfilling performance attributes relating to applied skills development and learning. Another stream of observation would be to seek tangible behavioural changes linked to competency skills through conducting streamlined career profiling of South African retail graduates. This would go a long way to ensure that competency and success are carefully determined from a 'person-sector' fit. For sustainability, the framework purports that all workforce supply and demand should pivot on emerging retail digital transformations as a fundamental baseline for all programme interventions. Finally, a holistic evaluation of the programme intervention should be ascertained from positive organisational outcomes and positive feedback from all stakeholders involved, including HEIs, industry, government and the general population alike.

6.2 Recommendations for the W&RSETA and stakeholder partners

The following recommendations are put forward for possible consideration by the W&RSETA and associated stakeholder partners.

6.2.1 Bridge the work readiness gap through an integrated programme intervention

The study shows that there is ample opportunity for investing in programme interventions that incorporate practical experience, soft and digital literacy skills. Expanding **Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) to inculcate structured mentorship programmes** could assist graduates to transition smoothly into the workforce. Other strategies which are proactive attempts to attain good outcomes for industry and graduates are industry-specific programs that combine mentorship and training. For example, a unique programme intervention could be developed that seamlessly integrates classroom-based learning, industry internship and virtual flipped coaching and mentoring in one. Such a methodology provides a rich mix of learning modalities aimed at improving participation and retention of graduates in the Retail sector.

6.2.2 Co-create a retail career profiling tool with industry and HEIs

On the matter of aligning skills and competencies with industry expectations, it may be worthwhile for projects to be initiated on the possible development of an **adaptive career profiling tool for retail graduates**, seeking to enter employment. Career profiling helps to assess an individual's skills, interests, strengths and career aspirations to align them with the most suitable career path. It involves evaluating a person's competencies, personality traits and industry preferences to match them with job roles or specialized training programmes that best fit their professional growth. This ensures that graduates possess the right mix of skills needed for different retail sectors. In addition, industry will also be able to use this tool to identify and prepare first-time-entering retail employees to receive sector-relevant training based on their strengths and career goals. Profiling will assist in ensuring that graduates are placed in roles that align with their competencies and interests, which is likely to reduce turnover rates as the young employees are likely to feel more fulfilled and productive in the job roles that align with their interests.

6.2.3 Develop micro-skills programmes to address sector-based competency gaps

Most retail graduates enter industry with generic skills and sometimes, limited knowledge about specific sectors in retailing. This skills mismatch results in longer onboarding periods, increased training costs for employers, and reduced productivity, ultimately affecting business performance and customer satisfaction. Be that as it may, this study's findings showed statistically significant differences in the beneficiaries' satisfaction with W&RSETA programme interventions.

There is an opportunity to re-model the programme interventions to address persistent competency gaps across the different sectors within Retailing. In doing so, the W&RSETA would be in a position to ensure that retail graduates do not enter the workforce with a cohort of generalised skills that do not fully align with the demands of specific retail sectors, such as pharmaceuticals, food, and cosmetics. Such **sector-specific interventions** could pivot on familiarising the graduates with the unique regulatory frameworks and sectoral dynamics. This recommendation should be read in conjunction with the career profiling tool instead of delivering targeted rather than one-stop shop programme interventions for maximum effects.

6.2.4 Invest in research to understand emerging sector priorities

All programme intervention decisions need to be data-driven. In this case, the W&RSETA is encouraged to continue to invest in **industry-linked co-sponsored research** and case studies on emerging areas and trends related to the retail sector, with outcomes linked to the curriculum. Such research will nudge the participants to consider the value of formal feedback

loops (in real-time) as a mechanism to incorporate continuous feedback from employers to update the curriculum quickly and effectively.

7   CONCLUDING REMARKS

The impact evaluation study on retail programmes and government interventions by the W&RSETA in South Africa highlights the critical role of targeted skills development in strengthening the retail sector. Findings indicate that while existing initiatives have made strides in improving employability and business sustainability, significant competency gaps persist, particularly in sector-specific knowledge, digital adaptation, and entrepreneurial readiness. Government-backed interventions, including SETA-led training programmes, have demonstrated positive outcomes in workforce readiness and economic participation, yet their scalability and long-term impact remain dependent on industry collaboration, continuous curriculum refinement and policy alignment. Future programme designs should incorporate digital transformation tools, structured internship-mentorship models, and stronger linkages between education and industry needs to maximise effectiveness. By refining these interventions and ensuring they are sector-responsive, inclusive, and innovation-driven, South Africa can cultivate a more resilient, competitive, and future-ready retail workforce, ultimately contributing to sustainable retail sector transformation.

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ANNEXURE A

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY

Ms J. Turner

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Contact: +27 (0)66 220 4174

Prof. N. Dlodlo

nobukhosid@vut.ac.za

Contact: +27(0)16 950 7562

Topic: A comprehensive impact evaluation of W&RSETA strategic programmes: Towards addressing the imbalance (or not) between skills supply and demand

I have been invited to take part in the research project conducted by the University of Johannesburg and Vaal University of Technology, as outlined above. I have read and understood the Explanatory Statement, and I consent to participate in this project under the following terms:

Provide a tick in the right-hand column to provide your consent.

I am aware that the research is being conducted by a lecturer from the Department of Marketing Management on behalf of the W&R SETA Chair at the University of Johannesburg and Vaal University of Technology	
I understand the purpose for which the data is being collected.	
I know my role as a participant in this study.	
I am aware of why I have been selected to participate in this study.	
I understand that data collection through interviews will take approximately 60 minutes of time.	
I understand that data collection via online survey will take approximately 20 minutes of time.	
I am aware that the face-to-face group interview is audio and video recorded.	
I know that my participation is voluntary.	

I know that I can withdraw at any time, without implications	
I understand the benefits of my participation in this study.	
I am aware that the University of Johannesburg and Vaal University of Technology can keep my responses for up 5 years.	
I know that all the information will be kept under lock-and-key or password protected encrypted.	
I know that I will not be asked for any personal or identifiable information during data collection.	
I understand that the data will be treated anonymously, and that no information provided in the group discussion or online survey will be linked to a specific, identified participant. If this data is used in future study, the same anonymity applies.	
I am aware that I can access the results of this study upon request, in the published doctoral thesis, conference papers and or journal articles.	

Tick this box if you consent to participate in this study

ANNEXURE B

A COMPREHENSIVE IMPACT EVALUATION OF W&RSETA STRATEGIC PROGRAMMES: TOWARDS ADDRESSING THE IMBALANCE (OR NOT) BETWEEN SKILLS SUPPLY AND DEMAND

Dear Participant,

Thank you for participating in this survey. Your responses will help us evaluate the impact of the Wholesale and Retail SETA's funding on the success of retail programs in higher education. Your answers will remain confidential and will only be used for research purposes.

The study is expected to understand your perception (s) about the influence of selected factors on the efficacy of the W&RSETA strategic funding interventions. In addition, you will be requested to indicate the extent of your satisfaction and intention to recommend the W&RSETA strategic funding programme (s) in which you participated. The survey duration is expected to be approximately 20 minutes, and you are requested to answer all the questions to the best of your ability. The W&RSETA funds this study. Therefore, you are encouraged to participate in this survey as the outcomes are intended for the improvement of the W&RSETA strategic funding programmes.

close the research gap by developing a perception improvement strategy for the W&RSETA strategic programmes while enhancing their efficacy. Be that as it may, the study will provide no financial benefits to participants.

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the School of Consumer Intelligence and Information Systems at the University of Johannesburg (Approval number: 2024SCiiS085).

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions, you may contact the following researchers:
Ms J Turner: jturner@uj.ac.za | cell number: 066 220 4174

Thank you for your time and effort in completing the questionnaire enclosed.

Please tick the box below to confirm that:

□ I agree to participate in the study   □ I do not agree to participate in the study

---

SCREENING QUESTIONS

Please place an 'X' in the box with the most appropriate answer.

(i)   Do you currently possess any qualifications in Retailing?

Yes	No
1	2

(ii)   Did you previously receive a funding intervention from the W&RSETA?

Yes	No
1	2

(iii)   Specify the year or years in which W&RSETA funding was received. If funding was received for more than one year, please include the list of all the funded years in full here.

2024	2023	2022	2021	2020	Before 2020
1	2	3	4	5	6

(iv)   Please outline the nature of funding that was received from the W&RSETA.

Bursary	1
Learnership	2
Internship	3
Work integrated learning	4
None of the above	5

(v)   Are you currently in formal employment?

Yes	No	Self-employed
1	2	3

If you answered NO Or None of the above to any of the above questions, you cannot proceed with this survey; otherwise, thank you for your time! If your answers are 'Yes' to these questions, please proceed to complete the questions included in the rest of the questionnaire.

SECTION A: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Please answer the following questions by selecting the appropriate box. Mark with 'X' to show your selection.

A1	**Age at last birthday:**	18 to 20 years	21 to 24 years	25 to 29 years	30 to 34 years	35 years and above
		1	2	3	4	

A2	**Gender:**	Male	Female	Genderqueer	Prefer not to say
		1	2	3	4

A3	**Ethnicity:**	African Indian	Black African	Coloured	Asian	White
		1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**

A4	**Physical disability status:**	Sight impairment	Hearing impairment	Learning impairment	Other……………. Please specify
		1	**2**	**3**	**4**

A5	**High School location:**	Eastern Cape (1)	Free State (2)	Gauteng (3)	KwaZulu Natal (4)
		Limpopo (5)	Mpumalanga (6)	Northern Cape (7)	North-West (8)
		Western Cape (9)			

A6	**Highest retail qualification completed through the funding programme:**	Higher certificate (NQF 5)	Diploma (NQF 6)	Advanced Diploma (NQF 7)	Other…… Please specify
		1	**2**	**3**	**4**

A7	**Year of graduation:**	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020
		1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**

A8	**Name of the institution from which you graduated with a Retailing qualification:**	Please specify

A9	**Province where you completed your retail qualification:**	Eastern Cape **(1)**	Free State **(2)**	Gauteng **(3)**	KwaZulu Natal **(4)**
		Limpopo **(5)**	Mpumalanga **(6)**	Northern Cape **(7)**	North-West **(8)**
		Western Cape **(9)**			

SECTION B: EMPLOYMENT STATUS AND EMPLOYABILITY

B1	**Current employment status:**	Employed full-time in the retail sector	Employed part-time in the retail sector	Employed full-time outside the retail sector	Self-employed in the retail sector	Self-employed outside the retail sector
		(1)	**(2)**	**(3)**	**(4)**	**(5)**
		Unemployed		**(6)**		

B2	**How long did it take to secure your first job after graduation?**	Less than 3 months	Between 3 to 6 months	6 to 12 months
		1	2	3

B3	**Industry where you have been employed since graduation:**	Retail only	Non-retail only	Both retail and other non-retail sector
		1	2	3

B4	**Period of employment since graduation:**	Less than six months	6 to 12 months	One year to 3 years	3 to 5 years	More than 5 years
		1	2	3	4	5

B5	**Province where you are currently working:**	Eastern Cape **(1)**	Free State **(2)**	Gauteng **(3)**	KwaZulu Natal **(4)**
		Limpopo **(5)**	Mpumalanga **(6)**	Northern Cape **(7)**	North-West **(8)**
		Western Cape **(9)**		Currently unemployed **(10)**	

B6	**Sector where you are currently employed:**	Cosmetics and toiletries **(1)**	Food, beverages and tobacco **(2)**	General dealers **(3)**	Hardware, paint and glass **(4)**
		Household furniture and appliances **(5)**	Pharmaceuticals and medical **(6)**	Specialised retail services **(7)**	Textile, clothing and footwear **(8)**
		Other non-retail sector: ……………. Please specify **(10)**			

B7	**Write a short, descriptive narrative (maximum 50 words) about your work experience to date:**	……………………………………………………………………………………

B8	**Write a short, descriptive narrative (maximum 50 words) about the most valuable aspects about the W&RSETA programme intervention (Bursary programme):**	……………………………………………………………………………………

SECTION C: LEARNING TRANSFER SYSTEM INVENTORY

This section seeks to understand the extent to which you have been able to transfer the skills and competencies covered in the undergraduate qualification, which was funded by the W&RSETA to your current role in the Retailing sector. Please, answer all the questions. If you are not sure about the answer, please, choose between the options that seem more appropriate. You are requested to indicate the extent to which you either agree (or not) with each of the following statements. Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements anchored along 1 (Strongly disagree), 2 (Disagree), 3 (Neutral), 4 (Agree) and 5 (Strongly agree). Mark only one number with an 'X' for each statement.

C1	Before landing the Retailing job, I knew how the qualification content would affect my performance on the job	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C2	Before landing the Retailing job, I had a good understanding of how the qualification content would fit my job-related development	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C3	Before landing the Retailing job, I knew what to expect	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C4	I never doubted my ability to use newly learned skills from the qualification on the Retailing job	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C5	I am sure I can overcome obstacles that hinder my use of qualification skills or knowledge on the job	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C6	At work, I feel very confident using what I learned in the Retailing qualification even in the face of difficult situations	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C7	The retailing job will increase my productivity	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C8	I cannot wait to get back to work to try what I learned in the Retailing qualification	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C9	I believe the materials taught in the Retail qualification will help me do my current job better	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C10	My job performance improves when I use new things that I have learned in the Retail qualification	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C11	The harder I work at mastering the Retail curriculum, the better I do my job	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C12	The more content from the Retail curriculum that I apply on my job, the better I do my job	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C13	For the most part, the people who get rewarded around here are the ones who do something to deserve it	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C14	When I do things to improve my job performance, good things happen to me	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C15	My job is ideal for someone who likes to be rewarded when they do something good	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C16	People often make suggestions about how I can improve my job performance	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C17	I get a lot of advice from others about how to do my job better	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C18	People often tell me things to help me improve my job performance	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C19*	My supervisor meets with me regularly to work on improvement areas required to perform my job role	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree

C20*	My supervisor meets with me to discuss ways to apply the content of the retail qualification on the job	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C21*	My supervisor assists me to set realistic goals for job performance based on what I learned in the retailing qualification	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C22*	My supervisor opposes the use of techniques I learned in the retailing qualification	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C23*	My supervisor believes I am less effective when I use the techniques taught in the retailing qualification	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C24*	My supervisor would probably criticise the curriculum in the retailing qualification	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C25	My colleagues appreciate my use of the skills I learned in the retailing qualification	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C26	My colleagues encourage me to use the skills I have learned in the Retailing qualification	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C27	At work, my colleagues expect me to use what I learned in the Retailing qualification	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C28*	Experienced employees ridicule others when they use techniques they learned in the Retailing qualification	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C29	People in my workspace are not willing to put in the effort to change the way things are done	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C30*	My work colleagues are reluctant to try new ways I learnt from the retailing qualification	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C31	Successfully using the knowledge from the Retailing qualification will help me get a salary increase	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C32	If I use the skills from the Retailing qualification, I am more likely to be rewarded	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C33	I am likely to receive some recognition if I use the skills from the Retailing qualification on the job	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C34	Employees in this organisation will be penalised for not using what they have learned in the Retailing qualification	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C35	If I do not use new techniques taught in the qualification, I will be cautioned about it	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C36	I am able to try out the qualification content on my job	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C37	The support and systems needed to use what I learned in the retailing qualification are available to do my job	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C38*	I am not given sufficient time to use my retailing qualification content on the job	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C39*	Trying to use the Retail curriculum content will take too much energy away from my other work	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C40*	There is too much happening at work right now for me to try to use the Retailing curriculum	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree

C41	The instructional aids (equipment, illustrations, etc.) used in the Retailing qualification are very similar to real things I use on the job	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C42	The teaching methods used in the Retailing qualification are very similar to how we do it on the job	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C43	I like the way the Retailing qualification seems so much like my job	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C44	It is clear to me that the lecturers in this qualification understand how I will use what I learn on the job	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C45	The lecturers used a lot of examples that showed me how I could use my learning on the job	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C46	The way the lecturers taught the material made me feel more confident that I could apply it to my job	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C47	In general, I am using knowledge and/or skills learned from the Retailing qualification to carry out my current job task	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C48	The W&RSETA-funded qualification I completed transferred the skills necessary for the job market	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C49	The W&RSETA-funded qualification I completed adequately prepared me for the job market	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
C50	The curriculum in the W&RSETA-funded qualification I completed is aligned with the Retailing industry.	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree

SECTION D: W&RSETA Presence/support

	This section seeks to understand your perception about the presence and visibility of the W&RSETA to support you. Please, answer all the questions. If you are not sure about the answer, please, choose between the options that seem more appropriate. You are requested to indicate the extent to which you either agree (or not) with each of the following statements. Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements anchored along 1 (Strongly disagree), 2 (Disagree), 3 (Neutral), 4 (Agree) and 5 (Strongly agree). Mark only one number with an 'X' for each statement.							
D1	I find it easy to contact the student support staff at the W&RSETA	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
D2	When I see the W&RSETA logo, I feel a sense of appreciation	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
D3	I have a strong sense that I am a beneficiary of the W&RSETA	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
D4	W&RSETA support staff were willing to help me if I had technical problems while registering for the programme intervention	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
D5	I feel a sense of belonging to the W&RSETA	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
D6	Departmental staff were willing to help me with applying for the W&RSETA intervention programme	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
D7	Departmental staff were willing to help me find learning resources	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree

D8	I find it convenient to get information about other courses that are funded by the W&RSETA	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
D9	I feel attached to the W&RSETA	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree

SECTION E: SKILLS ACQUISITION AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

This section seeks to understand your perception regarding the skills gains from completing a W&RSETA-funded course or qualification up to and including learning outcomes relating to career progression. The gains could be identified as attainment of professional development in the workplace or more generic intellectual growth of the individual. Please, answer all the questions. If you are not sure about the answer, please, choose between the options that seem more appropriate. You are requested to indicate the extent to which you either agree (or not) with each of the following statements. Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements anchored along 1 (Strongly disagree), 2 (Disagree), 3 (Neutral), 4 (Agree) and 5 (Strongly agree). Mark only one number with an 'X' for each statement.

E1	From the W&RSETA-funded Retailing qualification, I gained practical ideas that I can apply to my work	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
E2	The W&RSETA-funded Retailing qualification provided me with professional knowledge for work	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
E3	The W&RSETA-funded Retailing qualification provided me with an opportunity to develop time management skills	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
E4	The W&RSETA-funded Retailing qualification prepared me with management and leadership skills	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
E5	The W&RSETA-funded Retailing qualification prepared me with digital and e-commerce knowledge	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
E6	The W&RSETA-funded Retailing qualification prepared me with problem-solving skills	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
E7	The W&RSETA-funded Retailing qualification prepared me with brain-based reasoning and critical thinking skills	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
E8	The W&RSETA-funded Retailing qualification prepared me with numeracy skills	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
E9	The W&RSETA-funded Retailing qualification prepared me with language skills	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
E10	The W&RSETA-funded Retailing qualification helped improve my intellectual competencies	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
E11	My views of work were enriched with insight gained from studying the W&RSETA-funded Retailing qualification	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
E12	The W&RSETA-funded qualification that I completed helped me to be more employable	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
E13	The reputation of the W&RSETA-funded qualification positively influenced my chances of getting a retail job	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree

E14	Overall, how applicable are the skills you acquired to your current job role	Not applicable at all	1	2	3	4	5	Very applicable
E15	Overall, did the retailing qualification that you completed assist with other trans-disciplinary skills?	Yes				No		
		1				2		
E16	If you indicated **"Yes"** for question E15, please specify the nature of skills gained							

SECTION F: CAREER PROGRESSION THROUGH THE W&RSETA PROGRAMME INTERVENTION

This section seeks to understand your perception regarding the extent to which the W&RSETA funding assisted with your career progression in the Retailing sector. Please, answer all the questions. If you are not sure about the answer, please, choose between the options that seem more appropriate. You are requested to indicate the extent to which you either agree (or not) with each of the following statements. Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements anchored along 1 (Strongly disagree), 2 (Disagree), 3 (Neutral), 4 (Agree) and 5 (Strongly agree). Mark only one number with an 'X' for each statement.

F1	The W&RSETA funding of the Retailing qualification has had a positive impact on my career	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
F2	Since graduating, my career in the retail sector has progressed	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
F3	Completing the W&RSETA-funded qualification in retailing increases my chances of earning a promotion	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
F4	Completing the W&RSETA-funded qualification in retailing opens new opportunities for further study	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree

SECTION G: GRADUATE SATISFACTION AND PROGRAMME EFFECTIVENESS

This section seeks to understand your sense of whether there is a positive association between the W&RSETA-funded course and the extent of your satisfaction with the funded programme intervention. In addition, the section seeks to measure the programme effectiveness and ability to assist you're your career progression. Please, answer all the questions. If you are not sure about the answer, please, choose between the options that seem more appropriate. You are requested to indicate the extent to which you either agree (or not) with each of the following statements. Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements anchored along 1 (Strongly disagree), 2 (Disagree), 3 (Neutral), 4 (Agree) and 5 (Strongly agree). Mark only one number with an 'X' for each statement.

G1	Completing a W&RSETA-funded retailing qualification has been a valuable experience for me	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
G2	I have learnt a lot from the W&RSETA-funded retailing qualification	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
G3	I do not regret enrolling in the W&RSETA-funded retailing qualification	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
G4	The W&RSETA-funded retailing qualification enables my job growth	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
G5	Completing a W&RSETA-funded retailing qualification provides a sense of accomplishment	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
G6	I am satisfied with completing a W&RSETA-funded retailing qualification	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree

G7	The W&RSETA bursary funding allowed me to focus on my studies without financial stress	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
G8	The W&RSETA bursary funding met my expectations	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
G9	I am likely to recommend the W&RSETA bursary funding to my peers who are interested in retail	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
G10	The W&RSETA bursary funding has had a positive impact on my retail career	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
G11	Write a short, descriptive narrative (maximum 50 words) about your views about the most valuable aspects of the W&RSETA bursary funding:							
G12	Write a short, descriptive narrative (maximum 50 words) about any improvement suggestions that you can give to the W&RSETA about their bursary funding:							

SECTION H: INTENT TO PERSIST IN THE RETAILING PROFESSION

	This section seeks to understand your intention to persist in patronising the Retailing profession, either as an employee or for further study and completion of qualifications in the discipline. Please, answer all the questions. If you are not sure about the answer, please, choose between the options that seem more appropriate. You are requested to indicate the extent to which you either agree (or not) with each of the following statements. Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements anchored along 1 (Strongly disagree), 2 (Disagree), 3 (Neutral), 4 (Agree) and 5 (Strongly agree). Mark only one number with an 'X' for each statement.							
H1	I intend to pursue post-graduate studies in retailing	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
H2	I intend to overcome obstacles that could derail me from furthering my professional development in retailing	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
H3	I intent to participate in further training development in retailing	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree
H4	I intend to seek out more work opportunities in retailing	Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly agree

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study

ANNEXURE C

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

Please mark "X" where relevant.

Gender	
Male	
Female	
Genderqueer	
Prefer not to say	

Please select the options that apply to you.

Employment profile	
I am currently an academic educator at a higher education institution that offers qualifications in retailing.	
I am currently a programme manager at a higher education institution that offers qualifications in retailing.	
I am currently employed in the retail sector and hold the retail manager position.	

Please specify the number of years of experience you have in your current role.

Number of years' experience	
1 – 2 years' experience	
2 – 5 years' experience	
5 – 10 years' experience	
More than 10 years' experience	

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

Research topic: A COMPREHENSIVE IMPACT EVALUATION OF W&RSETA STRATEGIC PROGRAMMES: TOWARDS ADDRESSING THE IMBALANCE (OR NOT) BETWEEN SKILLS SUPPLY AND DEMAND

Topic breakers	
Generic	- Can each of you briefly share your role and experience in the retail sector? - From your perspective, how has the retail industry evolved in the last 5 years? - What skills or knowledge do you find most critical in your role today? - Are there specific challenges in your work that you feel you were not adequately prepared for by your education or training? - Thinking about your team or colleagues, what common skill gaps have you noticed among new hires or junior staff?

Research Gap 2: Possible mismatch of retail education & sectoral skills		
Research Gap	**Secondary research objectives**	**Discussion guide**
Possible mismatch of retail education & sectoral skills	**RO1:** To identify emerging skills in the retail sector that are not adequately covered in existing educational curricula.	1. To what extent (if so) does South Africa's higher education system contribute to skills development? **[HEI contribution]** 2. What trends do you foresee shaping the retail industry in the next 5 to 10 years e.g., technology, consumer behaviour, sustainability? **[Sectoral trends]** 3. What <u>emerging skills</u> of the future do you think will be essential for retail professionals to adapt to these changes in the retail sector? e.g., AI, e-commerce logistics, sustainability practices that require new skill sets? **[Future skills]** 4. How do rapid technological advancements impact the skills gap? **[Tech revolution driving skills]** 5. What are the <u>critical skills</u> and competencies do industry practitioners consider as critical for future success in the retailing sector? **[Competency mapping for Retail graduates]**
	RO2:	1. How well do current tertiary education programs align with the practical demands of the retail sector? **[Areas of alignment]**

	To investigate if there is a match between retail graduates and the competencies required by the retail industry.	2. What areas are the curriculum misaligned with industry needs? **[Areas of mis-alignment]** 3. Are there specific topics or skills you believe should be added to retail-related curricula? **[curriculum gaps]** 4. Have you or your organisation collaborated with educational institutions to address skill gaps? If yes, how did you do this in a structured manner? How effective was this collaboration? **[bridging the skills gap]** 5. If you were designing a retail-focused curriculum today, what three areas or skills would you prioritise as a matter of urgency? **[bridging the skills gap]**
	RO3: To evaluate the effectiveness of current retail education programmes in addressing the sectoral skills demands.	1. How prepared do you think retail graduates are for addressing real-world challenges in areas like customer engagement, digital retailing, or supply chain management? 2. Do you believe that current educational programs for retail adequately reflect the practical and technical demands of the industry? Why or why not**?** **[Graduate preparedness]** 3. Is the W&RSETA strategic bursary intervention an effective tool in bridging the skills gap in the retail sector? Why or Why not? **[Intervention efficacy]**

Recommendations for improving the efficacy of W&RSETA strategic interventions	Possible areas of strategic improvement	1. What strategic interventions can be developed and proposed to improve the alignment: a) between educational outputs and labour markets? b) between employability of graduates and sustainable retailing practises? 2. What strategic improvements can be recommended to strengthen the W&RSETA's role in addressing the skills gap? 3. What policy recommendations can be made to ensure that educational institutions are better equipped to meet the demands of the evolving job market?