

NEWS UPDATE FROM THE NBI

Pointers for Scaling up Workplace-Based Learning (WBL) June 2017

Statistics South Africa’s Quarterly Labour Force Survey puts the unemployment rate at 27.7% in the first quarter of 2017 and notes that ‘this is the highest unemployment rate observed since September 2003.’ In the same quarter, the unemployment rate increased by 1.6 percentage points to 38.6% for young people aged 15 to 34.

It is evident that youth unemployment in South Africa is worsening despite a variety of well-intentioned interventions. These range from small to large scale, short to long-term and local to national. Understanding the underlying factors contributing to spiralling youth unemployment and their interconnectedness, is one of the important steps towards designing informed interventions aimed at promoting youth employment, contends Statistician-General, Dr Pali Lehohla. He notes that, for South Africa to realise the benefits of the ‘demographic dividend’, it must adopt a fresh approach and ‘.....focus on the right questions and issues and develop a long-term view not an immediate gratification....’

Greater effort must therefore be put into gaining deeper and shared understanding of the underlying causes fuelling youth unemployment. This must include a critical analysis of current responses to youth unemployment identifying successes and barriers to success, building on the successes and developing an informed and coordinated comprehensive response that promotes social and economic inclusion for youth in readiness for the demands of the

Fourth Industrial Revolution. Given the magnitude of youth unemployment in South Africa, a multiplicity of approaches is required. It calls for a combination of innovative approaches and initiatives that address the immediate problem of school leavers who are ill-prepared for further study and unemployed graduates who are largely under-prepared for the world of work, whilst at the same time laying the ground for long-term and sustained systemic response to youth unemployment. It is worth noting that sometimes the answers to these complex issues are found in small-scale projects.

In search of an answer to the immediate problem of graduates from Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Colleges who are under-prepared for entry to jobs in the construction sector, the National Business Initiative (NBI) on behalf of the Construction Industry Partnership (CIP)¹ and in partnership with Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator² launched a placement project in February 2016.

28 candidates selected from over 70 candidates screened

17 females: 9 carpenters, 6 bricklayers and 2 Junior Foreman

11 males: 5 carpenters and 6 bricklayers

Work-readiness training: 3 months at Harambee, Aveng Grinaker- LTA and Group Five

Host companies: 9 months at Aveng Grinaker- LTA, Murray & Roberts and Ubuhlebethu Business Enterprise

The project seeks to enhance the employability of National Certificate (Vocational) graduates for entry jobs in the construction sector through a rigorous selection and matching process. This is followed by three months of structured work-readiness training, including team building, personal mastery, numeracy and literacy and skills training; and nine months of workplace-based learning at a construction site. The first 20 of 28 candidates have successfully completed their placements. Aveng Grinaker-LTA hosted 18 candidates in Johannesburg and Murray & Roberts two in Pretoria. The remaining eight candidates are expected to complete their placement in June 2017. A total of 17 females took part in the project; two as Junior Foreman.

¹ The CIP comprises Aveng Grinaker-LTA, Basil Read (Chair), Group Five, Murray & Roberts, Umso Construction, Construction Industry Development Board (cidb), Master Builders South Africa (MBSA) and the South African Forum of Civil Engineering Contractors (SAFCEC).

² Harambee connects employers looking for entry-level talent to young high-potential work-seekers who are currently locked out of the formal economy

The project could easily be dismissed as small and insignificant when placed against the scale of youth unemployment in South Africa. However, it offers points for critical reflections on the methodological approach adopted; policy implementation; responsiveness of the construction curriculum to the labour market; the role of companies and TVET colleges and institutional and funding arrangements. Critically important, the project provides a glimpse into some of the requirements for scaling up initiatives of this nature. Key reflections are presented below.

A joint-up and coordinated approach

The CIP offers a non-mandated and common platform for the NBI, Harambee, industry bodies, construction companies and TVET colleges 'to think and act together' on matters relating to curriculum design and delivery, capacity building and workplace-based learning. The design and delivery of the placement programme took into account gaps in the curriculum, following a curriculum mapping exercise against the requirements of entry jobs in the construction sector. The platform has helped to build a shared understanding of each partner's role, respective capabilities and limitation. In turn it has fostered meaningful relationships and built the trust needed for addressing complex socio-economic challenges facing the country.

The NBI provides technical support and coordinates all project activities. This has proven critical to the success of the project in ensuring that partners discharge their respective and combined roles, in maintaining relationships amongst and between partners and candidates and in aligning the project with policy and relevant national initiatives, such as the CEO Initiative's YES (Youth Employment Service) Campaign.

Work-readiness training and workplace readiness

The curriculum mapping exercise identified gaps in some aspects of the curriculum. For example, there was insufficient attention to health and safety and the construction sector regulatory framework, thus confirming a widely held view that there is a disjuncture between training and the world of work and the under-preparedness of graduates for entry jobs. The work-readiness training helped to bridge the identified gaps and also provided a uniform starting point for graduates from different colleges. This in turn helped to minimise the risk to employers. To date the project has retained all 28 candidates and this can be attributed to candidates' selection, matching and work-readiness training.

The assumption that supervisors can provide the appropriate supervision, guidance and mentorship for graduates during placement came under scrutiny. During check-in sessions, candidates reported that some of their supervisors '... are not good teachers ... they just give instructions and don't help us to understand things...' Supervisors often found themselves having to balance the productivity demands and meeting datelines with guiding entrants who work below productivity levels.

Flexibility of funding and policy certainty

Whilst the project has highlighted the significance of policy certainty for workplace-based learning, it has also raised the importance of making provision for sector-specific peculiarities. For the construction sector, understanding the implications for companies of localisation, job mobility linked to project cycles and the resultant funding and contractual arrangements may influence the decisions of companies to take on candidates for workplace-based learning. These elements do not apply in sectors where workplace-based learning takes place in predictable settings. As large construction companies increasingly assume project management roles, small and emerging contractors carry out the bulk of the work. The readiness of contractors to offer workplace-based learning is an area that must be clearly understood.

A lack of uniform interpretation of some legislation, for example, concerning Broad Based Black Economic Empowerment, and the status of candidates during workplace-based learning, if not urgently addressed could influence the extent to which companies offer workplace-based learning.

Points to ponder

The project provides a 'laboratory' for generating lessons for quality and innovative training that enhances youth employability that is responsive to industry needs. It also offers pointers for scaling-up efforts as follows:

1. Employer participation in and commitment to workplace-based learning and meaningful partnerships between employers and TVET colleges are critical success factors for scaling-up quality youth employability initiatives.
2. Whilst recognising that some aspects of workplace-based learning apply across all economic sectors, it is important to understand sectoral requirements and peculiarities so as respond appropriately to individual sector needs. The policy and legislative framework must therefore allow flexibility for sector specific needs and priorities.

3. Leadership and a coordinated approach that affords all key actors a platform for ongoing reflection and joint action is crucial to the successful implementation of scaled-up workplace-based learning efforts. The platform also allows flexibility to inject innovation and adapt the initiative as directed by sector demands.
4. The focus on workplace-based learning has focused the spotlight on related critical areas requiring urgent attention. These include the selection of TVET college students so that they register for fields of study for which they are suited and likely to succeed and a review of the TVET college curriculum, to take account of labour market demand. Scaling-up workplace-based learning efforts requires the active participation of TVET colleges.
5. The real cost of workplace-based learning must reflect the contribution in kind made by companies.

The CEO Initiative's YES Campaign offers a unique opportunity for a coordinated business-led and large-scale response and the lessons learnt from the CIP structured placement project will in part contribute to its success.

For more information please contact **Makano Morojele** Head of Social Sustainability at the NBI: MakanoM@nbi.org.za.

Business Action for Sustainable Growth

www.nbi.org.za

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