



A short report of the value of learnerships from an organisational stakeholder point of view



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Orientation: Learnerships has been operationalised in South Africa as part of the National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS). The success of a learnership programme is influenced by stakeholder involvement.

Research purpose: This study set out to explore the value of learnerships from an organisational stakeholder point of view.

Motivation for the study: The stakeholder theory perspective posits the importance of stakeholders buy-in and involvement in learnership implementation.

Research approach/design and method: Semi-structured interviews with three key stakeholders in a specific learnership programme were conducted in 2020. Data were analysed by means of thematic analysis using Atlas.ti 8.1.

Main findings: Although the primary objective of learnerships is to develop vocational skills, the organisation and even larger community also reap benefits from hosting a learnership. These benefits include lower recruitment costs, capacity building with employees that understands the culture of the organisation, simplified onboarding, and community involvement.

Practical/managerial implications: Skills development in the learnerships is largely facilitated by means of social and informal learning. Although formal training opportunities are an important part of learnership, it should be designed to include interaction and collaboration with employees in the organisation.

Contribution/value added: Skills development as operationalised in the NSDS is part of the learner benefit of the learnership programme in South Africa. This article highlights how external stakeholders can reap greater benefits in terms of capacity building if the learners are engaged in meaningful organisational contribution.

Keywords: employability; learnerships; training and development; vocational training; work-based learning.

Introduction

Orientation

The learnership system was operationalised in South Africa in 2001 as a vital segment of the National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS) (Akbar et al., 2016). A learnership is a learning programme teaching both theory and learning practical skills in a workplace, which in the end leads to a qualification registered on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) (South African Qualifications Authority [SAQA], 2015). Learnerships fall within the larger category of work-based learning (WBL) programmes (Trede, 2012). However, the learnership is a systematised form of WBL that will lead to a nationally acknowledged qualification (Davies & Farquharson, 2004; Potgieter, 2003; Visser & Kruss, 2009), and it exists in a highly legislated context (*Skills Development Act*, [Republic of South Africa, 1998]; *Learnership Regulations of April*, [Department of Higher Education and Training, 2011]). A typical learnership comprises 1200 h of learning on one level of the NQF and can usually be achieved within 6–12 months (Potgieter, 2003). Although similar WBL programmes are implemented in organisations globally, the learnership per se is unique to South Africa (Lockstone, 2021).

Learnerships have value to both the learner and the organisation. For the learner, it will promote skills expansion in the formal marketplace and further support inexperienced learners who are entering employment (Visser & Kruss, 2009). For the organisation, learnerships provide the

opportunity for developing candidates who are skilled for the specific workspace, while receiving significant tax rebates as well as achieving employment equity targets (Goldberg & Hamel, 2018; Lockstone, 2021). Despite these organisational benefits, there is a lack of organisational participation (Mummenthey & Du Preez, 2010). In this study, the focus is on the benefits of the learnership to the organisation from a stakeholder point of view.

From a stakeholder theory perspective, stakeholders are important in the successful implementation of an organisational learning programme. By definition, a stakeholder is a group or an individual who can impact or is affected by the outcome of the organisation or project objective (Freeman, 1984). For learnership programmes, key stakeholders are those who are involved in the decision-making and coordination of the learnership programme and include the learnership coordinator, the lead agency, the employer host and the training institution. Their roles are set out by Davies and Farquharson (2004), which can be viewed in Table 1a and b.

This article focuses specifically on the stakeholder's perceived value of the learnership programme. This focus is based on the stakeholder theory, which regards the diversity and value of stakeholder input on the success of a project (Al-Sharafi & Al-Rubai'ey, 2020). While stakeholder input and buy-in of a project are instrumental to its success, stakeholders' perceptions of success itself are also important (Davies & Farquharson, 2004; Davis, 2017). Furthermore, from an instrumental stakeholder view, consideration should be given to the input and buy-in of key stakeholders in the process (Bailur, 2007).

The input and buy-in of key stakeholders in the learnership process will allow for alignment between industry demand, programme content and delivery through stakeholder engagement (Kruss et al., 2012). This is especially important if one considers that despite the benefits of learnerships for organisations, there are still reluctance at an institutional level to include learnership programmes (Kruss et al., 2012).

TABLE 1a: Responsibilities of different stakeholders in the learnership process.

SETA-funded learnership coordinator	Lead agency
• Learner recruitment	• Project management
• Employer recruitment	• Quality control
• Cross-SETA relationship	• Materials development

Source: Davies, T.A., & Farquharson, F. (2004). The learnership model of workplace training and its effective management: Lessons learnt from a Southern African case study. *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 56(2), 181–203. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820400200253>

TABLE 1b: Responsibilities of different stakeholders in the learnership process.

Training institution	Employer 'host'
• Programme coordination	• Workplace trainers
• Communication	• Mentors
• Standardisation	• Workplace training
• Record-keeping	• Workplace assessment
• Monitoring	

Source: Davies, T.A., & Farquharson, F. (2004). The learnership model of workplace training and its effective management: Lessons learnt from a Southern African case study. *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 56(2), 181–203. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820400200253>

Furthermore, where learnerships are implemented, they may not always be successful. Aigbavboa and Twhala (2014) indicated that confusion and ignorance among learnership stakeholders led to poor programme outcomes.

Research purpose and objectives

The specific question that this study aims to answer is how the learnership holds value for the organisation from a key stakeholder perspective. With learnerships being a key strategy in the skills development plan of South Africa, knowledge regarding the success and processes involved in these programmes is essential. In 2004, Davies and Farquharson (2004) noted the lack of research on learnerships. Over the past two decades, several studies have been conducted to better understand the success of learnership programmes (or the lack thereof) (Aigbavboa & Thwala, 2014; Mummenthey & Du Preez, 2010; Rankin et al., 2014). Some studies specifically focused on the skills development and employability of learners (Visser & Kruss, 2009; Wildschut, 2012). Several studies have focused on the learner in the learnership programme. For example, Beukes (2013) and Blandin de Chalain (2015) investigated factors that impact learner performance, while Akbar et al. (2016), Naidu (2019) and De Louw (2009) investigated the learner perceptions of the learnership programmes.

Davies and Farquharson (2004) focused on the effective management of learnership programmes and did not focus on stakeholder perceptions per se. The findings do, however, highlight the importance of stakeholder contribution to the success of the programmes. This study will contribute to shedding light on the stakeholder point of view of learnerships, with specific reference to their perception of the value of the learnership.

The major organisational benefit from learnerships noted from previous studies is the incentives that organisations receive (Ebrahim & Pirttilä, 2019). This incentive is, however, on an organisational level and may not directly impact the key stakeholders who are responsible for the implementation of the learnership. From a key stakeholder perspective, the value of the programme should be recognised on a stakeholder level, especially if one considers the importance of the stakeholder in the successful implementation of a learnership programme at an organisation, since learnerships have been found to be an enormous task operationally as they are time consuming and difficult to implement (Kraak, 2008). Learnerships rely on complex institutional and structural arrangements that require an agreement among the Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA), the training provider and the employer to ensure that both the workplace and theoretical components of the learnership are actualised (Kruss et al., 2012). Naidu (2019) argues that agreement between stakeholders is necessary, but we argue from a stakeholder theory perspective that stakeholders should also see value in the learnership. Value may impact the overall buy-in of the stakeholders, which is an important success factor in learnership roll-out (Gibb, 2014).

Literature review

All stakeholders are important to the overall success of an organisation. Success is, however, defined by how well the aims of a project or programme have been realised. Therefore, it is important to understand the aims of learnerships in general.

The aim of learnerships

Geminiani and Van Wyk (2002) explored the learnership system specific to the construction industry and listed three aims of the system as follows: (1) learnerships were intended to serve broader social and economic objectives; (2) they are deemed central to the implementation of the *Skills Development Act*; and (3) they were set out to be the conduit for achieving a set of transformations by aligning education and training to market needs and equipping learners with the confidence required in the labour market. Davies and Farquharson (2004) expanded the second objective by adding that due to the shift in the South African economy from mainly mining and agriculture to more knowledge-based industries and activities, a considerable amount of the population lacked the essential skills necessary to meet emerging challenges.

Potgieter (2003) noted that the aim also includes reversing the declining apprenticeship system and redressing past discrimination. Visser and Kruss (2009) echoed this, arguing that it is a redress function to develop foundational competence at lower NQF levels and not simply a training system for those in the formal sector. A learnership should therefore aim to provide workplace training to create skills that would get youth into jobs more quickly and ensure a link between structured and unstructured work experience (Ebrahim & Pirttilä, 2019). Training should accrue to a nationally recognised qualification and should target both the employed and the unemployed in South Africa to combat unemployment (Smith et al., 2005; Groener, 2014, Rankin et al., 2014). The aim of learnership programmes was clarified in the NSDS and SAQA (2015–2020) with the objective and mission to equip South Africa with the skills necessary to succeed in the global market by addressing the gap between education, training and market needs and also to offer opportunities to individuals for advancement to assist them in playing a productive role in society (Republic of South Africa, 2001).

The strengths of learnerships

The importance of workplace training is acknowledged globally, as confirmed by the widespread research and publications of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER). The learnership programmes hold strengths and provide benefits to both the learners and the organisation that offers the programme.

On an individual level, after the successful completion of the programme, the learner will have an acknowledged

qualification that is registered at the NQF, signalling their occupational competence (De Jager et al., 2002; Potgieter, 2003) and increasing their chances of employment (Davies & Farquharson, 2004). In addition, Young (2018) argued that WBL programmes, coupled with reflecting on professional and classroom learning experiences, can help students to engage in deep learning and convert hands-on experiential learning to abstract conceptualisation.

Smith et al. (2005) conceded that learnerships seem to meet the intended purpose and determined that prior learning played a significant role, as did using private service providers rather than the learnership programme itself for the acquisition of technical skills. Learnerships afford less advantaged aspirant learners, who cannot necessarily afford higher education studies, an opportunity to come into the profession (Karlsson & Berger, 2006). Recent research also shows that learnerships contribute to learners' entrepreneurial success because of the practical outcome and flexibility of the programme (Koyana & Mason, 2017).

The benefits of the learnership programme are not one-sided, as the organisation also benefits in terms of an increased talent pool and increased productivity through upskilling. Organisations also receive a contribution towards Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) points as per skills development priority. Moreover, accommodating a learnership programme also provides a direct financial benefit to the hosting organisation. According to the notice in terms of section 14(1) of the *Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act, 2003* (Act no 53. of 2003), as amended by the *Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Amendment Act, 2013* (Act 46, of 2013), an organisation in South Africa receives B-BBEE points for skills development such as the learnership programme. According to SAQA, companies that contribute to the country's Skills Development Fund (SDF) through paying the mandatory skills development levy will find several important benefits if they include a learnership in their annual Workplace Skills Plan (WSP). These include contributing to the organisation's talent pool and positively impacting education. Employers who can submit their WSP and conduct the training receive from the state up to 70% of the money they invested in training the learners (Grewe et al., 2012). Fuller and Govender (2020) noted that a rebate of R30 000 per learner can be claimed upon registration and another R30 000 upon successful completion, an amount that can increase to R50 000 for disabled learners.

Employability as a learnership outcome

Mayombe (2020) noted that the strength of vocational training programmes, such as learnerships, is that they are used as tools to reduce youth unemployment due to lack of employability skills in South Africa. Therefore, as the overarching goal of learnerships in South Africa is to enhance the employability of the learners, and literature calls for a holistic view on employability (Donald et al., 2019), the unpacking of the conceptualisation of employability in this study is important.

According to Jackson (2015), employability differs from employment in that a person might be capable of assuming a job but not be currently employed. Rothwell and Arnold (2007) defined employability as an individual's ability to obtain a desired job or to maintain a current job. Here, one should bear in mind that the organisation hosting the learnership programme does not guarantee employment after its completion (Groener, 2013; Wildschut, 2012).

Research design

Research approach and strategy

This article reports on the analysis of qualitative interview data with three stakeholders that were involved in a specific learnership programme in 2020. The use of a specific learnership programme constitutes a case study.

Research method

The setting

The organisation at which the learnership is hosted is situated in the financial services industry. It employs more than 500 people in 30 offices country-wide, with its head office in Gauteng. The learners were appointed as 18.2 learners, indicating that they were contracted specifically to join this learnership and were unemployed prior to the contract. The learners worked in a call-centre environment in the debt-collection department at the organisation's head office at the time of the data collection. The organisation has been offering learnerships for more than 12 years, but this was the first time they are offering one in this specific department.

Entrée and establishing researcher roles

Approval for the study was obtained from the institutional ethics board (reference number EMS032/20) of the University of Pretoria. The human resources (HR) executive of the organisation where the research took place signed a permission letter for the organisation to be used as the research site for the duration of a year. Each respondent was invited by the learning manager of the organisation to attend an information session about the research.

Research participants and sampling methods

The three stakeholders (the manager of the learners, the learning coordinator at the organisation and the external training provider) worked closely with the learners, and they were responsible in some way in overseeing the programme. The manager of the learners is responsible for the output of the learners in terms of daily operational practices. The learning coordinator in the organisation oversees the learnership programme, and the training and development manager at the external organisation is contracted to provide and oversee the classroom training component of the learnership programme in the study.

All stakeholders are equally important for the learners to reach success in the learnership programme, although they

are not equally visible to the learners during the journey. The learners work closely with the manager and training provider and look to them for guidance, and it was found that they interact far less with the learning coordinator of the organisation.

Since the organisation is one of the few providing this learnership, and only three stakeholders are involved, their personal particulars are not revealed here to protect their identities and that of the company. A profile using a pseudonym is used here to give a short description of each stakeholder.

Manager of the learners: Nasira

Nasira has been working in the organisation for 19 years, but this is her first year working with learners in a learnership programme. Currently, she is a team leader in the Secured Lending Collections, Pre-Legal division. She has a certificate in credit management and described herself as passionate about her work and her work environment. Her responsibilities in the learnership programme included overseeing on-the-job learning for the workplace component of the learnership programme.

Learning coordinator at the organisation: Zola

Zola holds an Honours degree in BA Information Science, an Advanced Diploma in Project Management and Human Resource Management and a Postgraduate Diploma in Development Finance. She started her career as a computer trainer and says that although she did not intend to be a teacher, she found herself in roles that make her one, whether as trainer, facilitator, consultant, coach or HR manager. Her responsibilities in the learnership programme included the oversight of the selection process, the induction of the learners and the coordination of the learning programme. She assisted with the learners' schedule and coordinated the process among the organisation, SETAs and the external training provider.

External training provider manager: Omari

Omari is the education, training and development manager (ETD manager) at the organisation, providing and overseeing the classroom training for the learners enrolled in the learnership. The organisation she works for is responsible for the content of all the learning modules in the learnership. She has been working in this organisation since September 2018 but previously worked with learnerships from March 2015 in another organisation. She has completed her BCom degree in Human Resource Management and a Postgraduate Diploma in Human Resource Development. In addition to that, she is also a skills development facilitator (SDF) and a registered assessor.

Data collection methods

Semistructured electronic interviews were conducted between 04 September 2020 and 20 December 2020. During the interviews, participants had the opportunity to

comment on what factors contributed to the success of the learnership programme in terms of learner performance and employability. The interviews were conducted in the middle of the learnership programme to enable the stakeholders to get to know the learners before they commented or reflected on the learners' performance and their intention to hire. The focus of the semistructured interviews differed slightly per stakeholder, as shown in Table 2, to accommodate their different roles in the learnership programme.

The key questions used during the interviews focused on the key role and responsibilities of the stakeholder in the learnership programme, their engagement with the learners during the programme, the content and structure of the learnership programme, the learners' performance in the programme, skills development as an outcome of the programme and the influence of the programme on learner employability.

Data recording

Data from the interviews were digitally recorded with the permission of the participants using Microsoft Teams (Microsoft Corporation, Redmond, Washington, United States) or Zoom's (Zoom Video Communications, Inc., San Jose, California, United States) recording capability as well as using Apple's Voice Memo voice recorder (Apple Inc., Cupertino, California, United States) for backup and sent for transcription after the transcriber had signed the nondisclosure agreement. The transcriptions were checked for accuracy before the analysis.

Data analysis

The narrative data were coded in ATLAS.ti™ 8.1 (Scientific Software Development GmbH, Berlin, Germany) and analysed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2016, 2020; Clarke & Braun, 2018). Because of its clearly structured nature, Braun and Clarke (2013) favoured using thematic analysis for presenting and clustering themes. This process is illustrated in Figure 1.

TABLE 2: Interview focus per stakeholder.

Stakeholder	Interview focus
Manager	Learner performance Skills development The organisation's intention to hire
Learnership coordinator	Employability The success of the learnership in the organisation
External training service provider	Understanding their own responsibility in the process Employability Learner performance Skills development

The transcriptions documented the conversations of the interviews verbatim. The transcripts were read multiple times to explore the text for themes before the initial codes were ascribed in ATLAS.ti™. Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 88) explained that 'codes identify a feature of the data (semantic content or latent) that appears interesting'. In this study, codes represent the initial idea tagged in the transcribed interviews as seeming relevant to the topic at hand. Coding aided in organising the data as it served as a platform to assign a label to a phrase or sentence related to the research question. After the initial groups were finalised and the codes grouped and regrouped into similar categories, it was re-labelled. From this point onwards, the codes and attached data excerpts were saved and organised in Microsoft Excel (Microsoft Corporation, Redmond, Washington, United States).

Reporting style

Based on the data, the themes identified were grouped into one of the three categories of benefits: benefits to the individual learner, the organisation and the larger community. Each category is introduced with its description, followed by support in the form of verbatim quotations from the semistructured interviews. Finally, literature is included to re-contextualise the findings in existing scholarship to demonstrate the usefulness and implications of the findings from a stakeholder point of view.

Ethical considerations

The Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences at the University of Pretoria has given ethical approval for the study from which this article was written (ref. no. EMS032/20).

Results

From the interview data, several aspects emerged that show value of the learnership, which were grouped under the following themes: individual-level benefits, organisational-level benefits and benefits to the larger community. Most of the data revolved around the individual-level benefits, specifically skills development of the learners.

Individual-level benefits

The individual-level benefits were applicable to the individual learner. The benefits to the learner as perceived by the stakeholders included increased learning and development and increased performance levels.

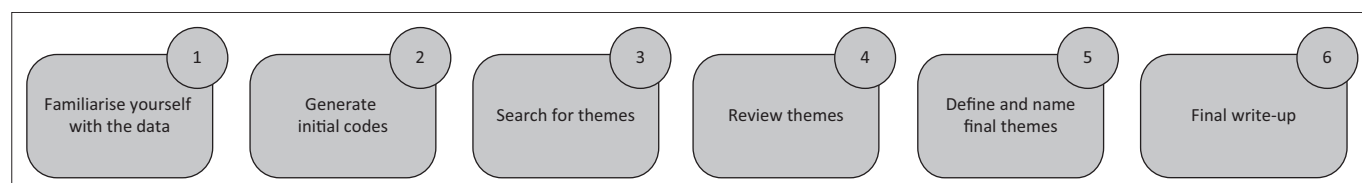


FIGURE 1: The data analysis process.

According to the NSDS, skills development is the driving force of learnership programmes. The focus on technical skills in the curriculum was clear from the interviews. Omari noted:

'For the sake of the learnership I would say they are covering more functional aspects. So the more technical things. There are no soft skills that are really covered if you look at this qualification over here [*referring to the curriculum*]. We are not covering things like communication and things like that. There is a workplace literacy module, which speaks to communication and things like that, but ... that module you would compare to languages that you did at school.' (Omari, external training provider, semistructured interview).

All the stakeholders agreed that by the end of the learnership, the learners had gained a variety of skills which included not only the skills gained through formal training, but also those gained through informal learning in the workplace. Informal learning refers to learning in the workplace which is implicit, unintended and unstructured (Eraut, 2004). Skills that were noted by the participants included technical skills, basic workplace skills, workplace ethics, basic computer skills and communication and decision-making skills.

Although the development of technical skills is expected in such a programme (Swartz & Soudien, 2015), all the three stakeholders agreed that unintended skills, soft skills, that allow one to effectively perform in the workplace are visibly developed during the learnership and are of great value to the learner:

'... [I]t is basically children from school that you have to coach in terms of being on time for work, what is work ethics, you know, and all that type of things; what works, what doesn't work in a work environment. So yes, it wasn't only teaching people how to do a credit control job ... [*it also included*] how to properly use a telephone, what do you say and what don't you say when it comes to members in general ... how to talk to other people in a work environment.' (Nasira, manager, semistructured interview)

Especially for the 18.2 learner who was previously unemployed, the development of basic workplace skills is crucial. This was pointed out by the stakeholders. For example, Omari noted:

'When you have 18.2 learners join the workforce it's not easy because they come straight out of school most of the time. They don't really have a work ethic; it's something that they're still developing. So they test their boundaries like anybody does and at the same time they are working, and they are doing this qualification – it's not easy.' (Omari, external training provider, semistructured interview)

The development of basic workplace skills as an unintended consequence of the programme is an important observation. Swartz and Soudien (2015) noted that the fostering of meaningful change in unemployed youth is a complex and layered problem that can only be solved when skills other than work-related technical skills are also addressed. A learnership in which there is a synergy between workplace exposure and theoretical training creates an effective platform for the development of a professional identity,

which includes proper workplace communication and interpersonal skills (Plack, 2006). Through the engagement in a realistic work environment, people grow to fully understand what professional conduct, such as workplace communication, looks like.

Grewe et al. (2012) recommended that an organisation which offers a learnership to an 18.2 learner should also conduct additional training programmes at the onset of the learnership programme to address important intrapersonal skills such as self-awareness and resilience in addition to interpersonal skills such as communication and conflict resolution. From our results showing that these skills were acquired when the learners engaged with peers, managers and training providers, this recommendation is not supported. Additional training may overburden learners who are already struggling to cope with the work and study demands of the learnership (Davel, 2022). The learnership programme, according to the stakeholders, allows learners to learn from each other as well as from the experienced workers in the workplace. Nasira mentioned:

'Yes, they [*the learners*] do [*learn*] from their groups, you can see when they ask questions, and when they go and then the other one will stand by close as well and hear what they are saying.' (Nasira, manager, semistructured interview)

For learnerships specifically, the participants recognised the importance of workplace inclusion as prerequisite for effective learning and development. Nasira noted that the learners were not to be called *learners* at work and should be treated as full employees, with the implication that they could put questions to other employees in the organisation. In addition to that, open communication and an 'open-door policy at the end of the day' (Nasira, manager, semistructured interview) guided the interactions between the manager and the learners in this particular learnership.

Omari focused on the systems they had put in place to offer the learners a platform where they could interact with each other and with the provider. Nasira commented on the importance of coworkers and managers who are willing to share their experience and knowledge:

'... [W]hatever I did share really made a difference. Yes, they will always be people who come back with questions, because it is a total new thing – So I just believe that – when I learn something new I give it to the team and I say, listen here, this is what you do, did you know about this. Because it doesn't help keeping information for yourself. The more [*information*] they have got, the more empowered they are'. (Nasira, manager, semistructured interview)

Since the learners were in a call-centre environment where they could not take calls throughout the working day, the provider made use of WhatsApp as a platform where questions could be addressed in a group setting:

'[*The provider*] has a WhatsApp group with them and on the WhatsApp group it's her and the learners and it's [*name of facilitator*] who is their facilitator and assessor. So, the learners

ask any questions they have. He touches base with them on WhatsApp because they can't take phone calls in the workplace and she touches base and she says they are very responsive.' (Omari, external training provider, semistructured interview)

Organisational-level benefits

On an organisational level, the learnership holds several benefits, including capacity building, the benefit of B-BBEE in employing a cheaper workforce, reduced recruitment costs and simplified onboarding and training. The stakeholders agree with the benefit of B-BBEE: the fact that learnerships provide aspirant learners who are less advantaged and cannot necessarily afford higher education studies with an opportunity to enter the profession (Karlsson & Berger, 2006; Mayombe, 2020) is recognised and affirmed by the stakeholders in this study.

Capacity building includes a robust recruitment pipeline that understands the culture of the organisation. The benefits of capacity building and BBEE are clear in Zola's interview:

'I think for six months paying someone, I would say an allowance rather than a salary, there is a benefit in having those extra hands ... taking unemployed learners for a year, and then after that we tried to place them on permanent employment which is a recruitment pipeline for us.' (Zola, learnership coordinator, semistructured interview)

'[...] Other benefits as well, like any other employer in terms of BBEE and in terms of the reduced costs and recruitment, and also in terms of – really the reduced costs in terms of – if you are already a learner of 12 months, when you get permanent employment all the costs that you would have incurred in say the first three months.' (Zola, learnership coordinator, semistructured interview)

Capacity building is not only the appointment of new staff, but also having a short-term 'back-up plan' for employees who go on extended leave (i.e. sick leave or maternity leave) in that the learner is a person experienced in the organisation who can be utilised, even it is in a different department.

Organisational performance hinges on individual performance, and therefore learner performance is added here to the organisational benefits. The organisation in this case study did not include formal performance management measures in the learnership programme, and the interviews focused on the subjective perception of the learners' performance.

All three stakeholders noted learner performance in their observations, albeit from different perspectives. The direct manager of the learners, Nasira, focused on determining increases in an individual's performance level in terms of confidence and added value. What stood out in Nasira's observations on learner performance is the way she measured it, which is not against an HR performance scorecard or metric but by the contribution and value the learners are adding to the teams they are assigned to:

'When you take into consideration what they knew a few months ago and what they know now in a short period of time, I really do think it is a great benefit. And then they get a little compensation for it as well, but they have their full value and they mean something where they are now. You can see that definitely – you can see every month there is really progress in terms of their contribution towards the bigger team, yes.' (Nasira, manager, semistructured interview)

The external training provider, Omari, had a systems-focused response centred on the formal structure of how the assessments are rolled out and marked. She observed that from the onset, the learners knew exactly what criteria they would be measured against and how to make uploads of the evidence of their work. A learner was granted three submissions in total to be rated competent in an area. The assessments were designed to be practical and to speak to the 'live environment' in which the learners found themselves in the workplace. In this case, the assessment criteria were built around practical content questions about the specific module covered. Most of the learners were found competent with the first submission.

The learning coordinator (Zola) offered an outsider's perspective on how she would define progress and performance in the individuals, saying that it took time for the learners to find their feet, usually by looking at what others did, and that she measured performance by the amount of responsibility a learner took:

'At the beginning there is a lot of shadowing other employees, but usually by month three or four we find that they have found this space, or managers have found a space where the learner can actually take full responsibility for. So for the rest of the year, they just work in those environments.' (Zola, learnership coordinator, semistructured interview)

Rankin et al. (2014) reasoned that learner performance is of the utmost importance and that the success of a learnership programme hinges on providing a higher skills level and improving learner performance in the workplace. The data in this study showed that although all external stakeholders had some measures of performance in place, only the external training provider measured performance objectively. The objective measures are related to the theoretical learning, and feedback in this regard also gives the learners an indication of their own performance (Mathenjwa, 2011). From an organisational point of view, the value added to the work teams and the practical performance is crucial to the organisation's performance.

An interesting observation by the stakeholders was that a learner's attitude had an impact on their performance. The manager of the learners (Nasira) commented that those who took responsibility for their learning were set apart from others:

'I would say the best performers – it is just people that are actually standing out in a bigger team. That's taking responsibility, that's going with [*taking initiative*] the thing that you give them ... Others will wait for commands ... [*those who* ...

take initiative] will ask you more frequent questions, you can see they are more interested ...' (Nasira, manager, semistructured interview)

Zola acknowledged that she was receiving positive feedback, and she added that the criterion for differentiation was how seriously the learners took the programme and that the reasons for attrition in the programme are learner attitude and willingness to take responsibility and commit to the learnership.

Benefits to the larger community

In their interviews, the participants also recognised the value that the learnership has for the larger community context. For the organisation involved in this study, the aim was to get the immediate community involved:

'Our intention like – ... to recruit within the communities we work in.' (Zola, learnership coordinator, semistructured interview)

The benefit of learnerships to the larger community was also found by Koyana and Mason (2017), who noted that learnerships can foster social transformation in rural communities.

The possibility of employing members of the community through the learnerships was also recognised. Zola noticed that '[w]e always aim for 60% employment after the project'. Even if employment cannot be offered after the learnership, it provides exposure to the formal work environment, which may impact future employability of the community members.

Notwithstanding that coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) had an impact on the employment of new labour in any organisation, Nasira and Zola agreed that the original intention when the learners were recruited was to employ them if a vacancy allowed:

'Yes, that was the intention ... if there are positions available, we will definitely consider if they apply for those positions.' (Nasira, manager, semistructured interview)

Zola added that if a permanent position was not available, the learners would be considered for temporary positions, for example when someone went on maternity leave:

'So you see that is sometimes our limitation when learners finish, then maybe there is no actual vacancy ... often if they can't get into permanent employment, because there is no vacancy, then they can help out sometimes on a contract basis ... often the first point of call is to look for learners.' (Zola, learnership coordinator, semistructured interview)

Even if learnerships offer employment only for the duration of the programme (Potgieter, 2003), a key ambition for individuals is to improve their appeal in the labour market (Rothwell & Arnold, 2007). Wildschut (2012), however, noted that even if a significant majority of learners remained employed after the completion of a learnership programme,

the skills development qualification has not intervened sufficiently to promote greater equality in South Africa. The data from our study showed that even if the external economic and social climate of the country might upset the organisation's intention to hire, the intention to hire does exist.

Discussion

The greatest selling point for learnership programmes in South Africa is the fact that it leads to skills development and employment opportunities (Grewe et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2005; Visser & Kruss, 2009). Literature on skills development suggests that the South African experience exemplifies how difficult it is to develop robust and coherent skills development in the context of inadequate social security, high levels of job insecurity and high levels of inequalities. Allais (2012) held that the dominant view in South African media and policy circles is that a skills shortage coupled with an inflexible labour market is the leading cause of unemployment. The skills of a workforce are a critical determinant of global competitiveness (Kruss et al., 2012). Therefore, the aim of learnership programmes in South Africa cannot be discussed without referring to the avenue they create for skills development. The aim of the learnership system is to serve the implementation of the *Skills Development Act* (Geminiani & Van Wyk, 2002). This includes providing workplace training to create skills, getting youth into jobs more quickly, ensuring a link between structured and unstructured work experience, accumulating training in a nationally recognised qualification, targeting the employed and unemployed in South Africa and combating unemployment (Groener, 2014; Smith et al., 2005; Rankin et al., 2014).

From our results, it was evident that from the stakeholder perspective, the skills development of the individual learner was the main benefit of the learnership. This is in line with the main intention of the NSDS. The NSDS (Department of Labour, 1997) was the implementation of a:

[D]emand-led skills development system, which is flexible and responsive to the economic and social needs of the country at the same time as it promotes development of new skills demands. (p. 4.2)

Although the focus of any learnership is on the development of technical skills (Swartz & Soudien, 2015), which according to the stakeholders in this study was met, the learnership has greater value than the development of these specific skills. It was evident from this study that in the case of this learnership, informal learning led to learners acquiring many other skills such as basic work skills. It was evident, therefore, that the participation in the learnership contributed not only to developing the technical and vocational skills but also several essential employability skills that were developed informally during the programme.

Instead of additional formal training, these informal learning opportunities should be viewed and used as part of the

comprehensive development opportunities included in the programme. As noted by Cross (2007), 70% – 80% of workplace learning is highly integrated into every work activity. One should therefore rather focus on optimising the learnership so that it deliberately includes informal learning opportunities. These may include, for example, aspects such as collaborative projects, involvement in new tasks, job shadowing, job rotation, active reflection on action, creating an environment that is open to questions and new ideas (Clarke, 2004; Crouse et al., 2011; Lohman, 2006).

In the South African context, where the unemployment rate indicates that almost one in every two young people does not have a job (Statistics South Africa, 2021), there is a drive towards employability and skills development (Pitan & Muller, 2020). Therefore, the development of these employability skills adds to the value of learnerships, albeit as a product of informal learning during the programme. Work-based learning and employability literature suggests that employability skills, such as communication, problem-solving, planning and organising, self-management and learning technology, most mentioned by the learners, are imperative in thriving in business (Huq & Gilbert, 2013). Konstantinou and Miller (2021) added that the COVID-19 pandemic added resilience to the list of employability skills needed. However, what is evident is that teamwork (Komariah, 2015), critical reflection (Helyer, 2015) and interpersonal skills are essential in the development of employability skills. It is therefore our ability to respond to suggestions and criticism from others that add to the meaning-making of the theory, showcasing the inter-relationship between teamwork and the development of employability skills (Komariah, 2015; Subekti, 2019). It is precisely the work community and interaction with this community that develop these employability skills in a WBL programme, as one tends to create meaning and makes sense of theory through interaction with others.

The learnership creates a community of practice (CoP). Accordingly, knowledge is generated as people in the CoP interact with one another and share information, experience, advice and insight (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2014). Nasira's comments about how the learners ask questions and answer them collectively show how these learners engage in the CoP and participate in learning as a social process. Smith et al. (2005) noted that over time, the combination of action and discourse represents communal approaches to understanding and solving problems. This process transforms shared knowledge into the tools that embody CoP's regime of competence and therefore the enacted knowledge of the organisation (Marais et al., 2021). Furthermore, the learnership can be managed as to include many rich informal learning opportunities that can enhance the skills development and learning of the individual learner. Skills development is not only important to the individual learner, but also it is directly related to team success as well as the larger organisation's bottom-line.

Practical implications

Social learning through interaction with the CoP during the learnership programme aided in the development of employability skills. As one tends to create meaning and make sense of theory through interaction with others, other skills are developed in the repertoire of a young professional. Therefore, WBL, such as learnerships, at the heart of the NSDS, can be leveraged not only to develop critical basic workplace readiness skills but also to aid stakeholders in minimising recruitment cost and hiring employees who fit the culture of the organisation. Furthermore, instead of adding more theoretical training to the programme, organisations implementing learnerships should focus on creating learning contexts in which interaction with other employees is facilitated.

Limitations and recommendations

The findings cannot be generalised to other WBL or learnership programmes. Although WBL is a global concept and a well-researched field, the conceptualisation and definition of learnerships are unique to South Africa, limiting the body of knowledge relating to it to the context and the setting. Furthermore, the learnership included in this study was from a specific SETA and included the views of stakeholders involved in only one specific learnership programme. The goal was not to generalise the findings, however, but rather to provide an explorative and descriptive investigation of stakeholder views on the value of learnerships in South Africa. More research should be conducted with different learnership programmes from different provinces and in different SETAs.

Conclusion

The stakeholders in this study viewed the learnership valuable to the learners, the organisation as well as the larger community. Learnerships holds potential to equip learners with skills to enter the global market and in that, to offer opportunities to individuals and communities for self-advancement and to enable them to play a productive role in their community.

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Authors' contributions

N.J.D. conducted her PhD on learnerships in the South African context. This article is derived from her PhD data. S.O. was the main supervisor and N.H. the co-supervisor for the PhD. For the article, N.J.D. analysed the data and wrote up the results. S.O. conceptualised and drafted the article. N.H. contributed to the literature review section, reviewed and edited the article. All the authors reviewed the content before submission and agreed on the content.

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Data availability

De-identified data used for the analysis of this specific article will be made available via the University of Pretoria data repository on Figshare.

Disclaimer

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