

THE ROLE OF PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY IN SUPPORTING SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report focuses on an evaluation of one particular aspect of the NSDSIII, that is, its call for innovative partnerships that reflect original ways of working together to support skills development and its emphasis on community partnerships in planning and delivering local employment and skills support services. Two case studies have been identified and explored in order to show the role that was played by partnerships in skills development. It evaluates the role of partnerships in implementing NSDSIII, the emerging impact experienced at different levels of partnerships and the potential sustainability of partnership initiatives. The paper responds in particular to the following strategic goals of NSDS III:

Goal 4.3 Promoting the growth of a public FET college system that is responsive to sector, local, regional and national skills needs and priorities

Fasset 'Work-Based Experience' project, which is discussed in the report directly responds to the above mentioned goal. It is a partnership between SETAs, employers, private providers and public TVET Colleges which is aimed at resulting in increased capacity of students to meet industry needs throughout the country as students are equipped with skills needed on the job after concluding their theory at the college. The SETA identified TVET colleges with relevant programmes and put in place partnerships to offer vocational courses and work experience for college learners.

The second case study examined, the 'Amanzi for Food' project, responds to goal 4.3 stated below. It is a project which ensured that the agricultural college academic staff are able to offer relevant education and training of the required quality through the knowledge that they acquired from the Imvotho Bubomi learning network partnership.

4.6 Encouraging and supporting cooperatives, small enterprises, worker-initiated, NGO and community training initiatives.

Both the 'Amanzi for Food' and Fasset's 'Work-Based Experience' projects provided training and development support to small businesses and was supported by workers, NGOs and community-based education programmes. People were not only trained for employment, but also to empower them to create opportunities to make a living for themselves.

The Fasset Work-Based Experience (WEB) project

The Fasset Work-Based Experience (WEB) project was established in order to equip students with N6 Certificates with work based practical experience and also build the capacity of the TVET colleges so that they become preferred providers of occupational skills in South Africa. The students they enrolled lacked practical experience. The project was designed to help them get real, practical work experience and thereby finish their National Diploma – all acting to positively influence their employability. Without practical experience the student qualification does not make the student employable. Work integrated learning is required to enhance student employability. The SETAs play a paramount role in organising and leading the process of placing students in companies for them to gain experience. Employers and SETAs built good relationships during the process and through their engagements, the TVET Colleges became better equipped to determine the kinds of students employers were seeking. At the end of such an initiative, employers benefit from a pool of well-trained students who already have an idea of the working world.

106 students were tracked to provide feedback on the project by Fasset. It was found that 69% of the students were employed (with 58% employed by the employers where their work-based training was completed and 11% found employment on their own). The majority of the students (87%) indicated that they wanted to study further. Students did not only acquire financial skills but also gained communication skills and enhanced their basic computer skills.

Almost all of them indicated that they had learned ‘to a large extent’ how the work environment works. Of course, some of the students indicated that the work environments they were placed at were not always conducive to the full development of all technical skills. In those instances where the students were rotated between different units, the opportunity to improve a variety of technical skills was more probable.

Students faced challenges on Communication with employees and/or clients, Pressure / time management, Learning to apply theory in practice, Learning about the work environment in general, Low intern or TVET student status, Not enough opportunity to develop skills, Rotating between units, Busy mentors and supervisors, Self-confidence, Working independently, Transport, Stipend not being enough for the needs of students.

The ‘Amanzi for Food’ project

Another partnership under study in this report is the ‘Amanzi for Food’ programme and its learning network called the ‘Imvotho Bubomi Learning Network’. The Amanzi for Food programme is a Water Research Commission (WRC) funded project which was led by Rhodes University’s Environmental Learning Research Centre (ELRC) from 2013 to 2016 to undertake the task of developing an action oriented strategy for

knowledge dissemination and training skills development for water use in household gardening and rain water harvesting for cropland food production for smallholder farmers and food growers in South Africa. The project was meant to capacitate college lecturers and farmers on rain- water harvesting and conservation for teaching and farming purposes respectively.

As observed from the Imvotho Bubomi learning network, learning networks have a potential of positively influencing skills development. Members of the partnership confirmed benefits and impact attributed to learning together as partners who were university lectures, PHD and masters students, agricultural college lectures, extension workers and farmers. One significant element of the network was that members from diverse backgrounds and workplaces managed to learn together and from each other. It seems to have worked well for all the members as it allowed them to learn at their own pace from a wide range of experiences and knowledge from different partners which could hardly be achieved by formal or strict classroom learning or training. For members of the rainwater-harvesting network, techniques which they learnt in the partnership have enhanced food production. Some members have managed to produce more than they produced before joining the learning network and they have sold the surplus. Institutions of higher learning also acknowledged having learnt from the rich indigenous knowledge of farmers.

From the data collected it is evident that the curricula in agricultural colleges is inadequate and lacking in addressing the needs of small holder farmers and food growers in South Africa. The ordinary curricula is more focused on commercial farming. Extension Officers are trained in such a way that they are not relevant to smallholder farmers whom ironically they are meant to serve, as they cannot support the farmers within their levels of needs, affordability, capability, climatic context and techniques that are relevant to them. The curricula needs to be revised in such a way that it also caters for smallholder farmers.

Productive demonstration sites have been of great value to the network members as they mediated learning. They closed the theory practice gap that had been identified on project scoping. Theory brought to practicality became a reality for the members as they could see the practical results of the theory they had learnt. Through this partnership, learning was enhanced and experienced was gained.

Conclusion

In the future NSDS IV strategy, more resources should be allocated to SETAs so that they can collaborate with TVET Colleges and employers in order to produce students who are employable and experienced. The evaluation of the strategy should not only be limited to the SETA funded initiatives but should be extended to any other activity that is influenced by the strategy even if it is not funded by the SETA.

1. Introduction and background

INTRODUCTION

This case study evaluates one aspect of the NSDSIII, that is, its call for innovative partnerships that reflect original ways of working together to support skills development and its emphasis on community partnerships in planning and delivering local employment and skills support services. This case study seeks to showcase the role that can be played by partnerships in skills development and gives a picture of how partnerships can contribute significantly to the country's skills development initiatives

BACKGROUND

The case study presented in this report intends to indicate how the following goals and outcomes of the NSDSIII were achieved through partnerships. The relevant NSDS III goals are listed in detail below:

4.3 Promoting the growth of a public TVET college system that is responsive to sector, local, regional and national skills needs and priorities

NSDS Outcome 4.3.2: Partnerships between DHET, SETAs, employers, private providers and public TVET colleges are resulting in increased capacity to meet industry needs throughout the country

Output 4.3.2.1: The capacity of TVET colleges to provide quality vocational training is reviewed. Each college has a strategic plan in place to build capacity and engage in skills development programmes, including programmes offered in partnership with employers.

Output 4.3.2.2: SETAs identify TVET colleges with relevant programmes and put in place partnerships to offer vocational courses and work experience for college learners.

NSDS Outcome 4.3.3: The academic staff at colleges are able to offer relevant education and training of the required quality

Output 4.3.3.1: The capacity of college educators to deliver programmes is reviewed. Skills development programmes, including work placement opportunities, are devised to meet the needs of the college educators.

And

4.6 Encouraging and supporting cooperatives, small enterprises, worker-initiated, NGO and community training initiatives

Outcome 4.6.1: Cooperatives supported with skills training and development expand and contribute to sector economic and employment growth

Outcome 4.6.2: Partnership projects to provide training and development support to small businesses are established in all sectors and their impact reported on

Outcome 4.6.3: Worker, NGO and community-based education programmes are supported and their impact measured and reported on

Output 4.6.3.1: SETAs engage with trade unions, NGOs and community-based organisations in their sector and identify skills needs and strategies to address needs.

Output 4.6.3.2: SETAs establish quality pilot projects.

Output 4.6.3.3: Stakeholders expand successful projects with support from the NSF.

The current TVET College challenge that the NSDSIII identifies is the issue of lecturers who have educational qualifications yet lack occupational qualifications, relevant work experience in order to align programs with needs. The NSDSIII calls for the need to upgrade college lecturers in order to improve their pedagogical, vocational and technical skills and enhance the practical application of their skills.

It points out that the public TVET college system need to transform in order to respond to the skills needs of the country and offer education that is relevant to national and local needs. Partnership with Universities and universities of technology are recommended in the NSDSIII in order to build the capacity of TVET lecturers enabling them to deliver skills that meet the needs of industry. This transformation of skills development according to the NSDSIII, is dependent on innovative partnerships.

NSDSIII acknowledges that skills development is not only a right or a need of the employed or those intending to be employed. It also has the mandate of skilling and empowering people for sustainable livelihoods. There is a need for empowerment programmes, accredited training to enable people to develop their own opportunities through skills development programmes within partnerships. These programmes such as capacity building programs for workers, NGOs, cooperatives, and local communities can be implemented through partnership programs.

Partnerships between employers, public education institutions (TVET colleges, universities, universities of technology), private training providers and SETAs were promoted in this strategy so that the integration of education and training becomes a reality experienced by all South Africans. Priority was given to strengthening the relationship between public colleges and universities and the SETAs, as well as with employers. In other words, partnerships are critical to the NSDS III.

The NSDSIII encourages the need to find innovative ways of working together to improve the efficiency, quality and crucially the impact of education, skills development and training interventions. It also calls for community partnerships in planning and delivering local employment and skills support services.

The NSDSIII Notes that:

A partnership and collective responsibility between stakeholders - government, business organisations, trade unions, constituency bodies – and our delivery agents – SETAs, public bodies, employers, trade and professional bodies, public and private training providers, community-based organisations, cooperatives and NGOs – is critical to achieving our aspirations of higher economic growth and development, higher productivity and a skilled and capable workforce to support a skills revolution in our country. We need to find innovative ways of working together to improve the efficiency, quality and, crucially, the impact of education, skills development and training.

The partnership requires that we improve the linkages between universities, colleges, SETAs and employers, particularly at a national and local level. This includes promoting training to meet the needs of both public and private sector employers and increased university research collaboration with industry. Partnerships should also be extended to building international links as well as supporting the role of community partnerships in planning and delivering local employment and skills support services. The higher education, TVET and skills summits have laid a very strong foundation for building strong partnerships for skills development for an inclusive growth path (NSDS III, 2011: 25-26).

The Minister of Higher Education and Training Dr. BE Ndzimande released the National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS III) in January 2011. The intention was to employ the strategy in responding to the main challenges that South Africa is facing, largely to do with unemployment, poverty and inequality. These challenges are ascribed to the shortage of essential skills that are needed to enhance economic growth and better employment opportunities.

1. The 8 main challenges

The eight challenges listed by the Minister of DHET are:

- Inadequate skills levels and poor work readiness of young people leaving formal secondary and tertiary education and entering the labour market
- The unemployed who lack basic numeracy and literacy, and without entry-level skills and work experience are in need of work-based training for employability
- skills shortages in the artisanal, technical and professional fields that are fundamental to the development and growth of our economy
- Over-emphasis on lower-level NQF level 1-3 learnerships, with insufficient progression towards skills required for growth sectors in a knowledge economy
- Failure of businesses in many sectors of the economy to equip their workforce to adapt to change as the economy becomes more knowledge-based
- Systemic blockages such as: a lack of synergy between the various post-school sub-systems
- Absence of coherent strategies within economic and industrial sectors, lack of systematic skills development to support and sustain growth and development
- Urban bias of economic development and therefore the urban bias in our skills development initiatives, resulting in skills for rural development being neglected

In order to deal with the above mentioned challenges the NSDSIII 's plea is towards the use of innovative partnerships.

THE MACRO CONTEXT: SUPPORTING POLICIES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

The NSDSIII is a new outcome driven strategy that was developed after NSDSI and NSDSII, which were target driven strategies. It is an improvement of NSDSI and II which laid an important foundation for skills development. It is a subcomponent of the Human Resource Development strategy (HRDSSA) and it operates concurrently with and in support of the strategy. Activities under the NSDSIII are informed and guided by other government programmes like: The New Growth Path, The National Development Plan, The Industrial Policy Action Plan, The Medium-Term Strategic Framework, The Rural Development Strategy, and The Environment Strategy amongst others.

Cooperation and coordination from key stakeholders such as government, the SETAs, employers is crucial for the realisation of the NSDS III goals. The key supporting institutions are:

- DHET, The SETAs and the NSF who are the key drivers of the NSDS III
- SETAs -The core responsibility of SETAs is to develop sector skills plans (SSPs)
- SETAs must be able to coordinate the skills needs of the employers – both levy-paying and non-levy paying
- The SSPs are also a critical instrument for building a connected labour market information system across all the sectors

The supporting structures for implementation depend on significant levels of each partnership. For example, the one case study described below – ‘Amanzi for Food’ - entails a partnership between the universities, agricultural colleges, the Water Research Commission (WRC) and the municipality.

THE MICRO AND MEZZO CONTEXTS: TWO SETA FUNDED CASE STUDIES

This paper focusses on two case studies. The first is an example of a good SETA-funded project. It focusses on work-based learning. This project was established in order to equip students with college N6 certificates with work based practical experience and also build the capacity of the TVET colleges so that they become the preferred providers of occupational skills in South Africa .It was spearheaded by the Finance and Accounting Services Sector Education and Training Authority (FASSET).

The second case study to be examined is the ‘Amanzi for Food’ programme. It is a best practice partnership which exists within the skill system, but is not funded by any SETA or the NSF. It is included here because it represents best practice in the field of partnerships - it won the ‘Women in Climate Change’ Award at the Mail and Guardian annual competition on sustainability initiatives. Unlike many programmes that use “Research-Develop-Disseminate-Adopt” strategies to produce knowledge without continual in-the-field integration, Amanzi for Food is a collaborative project involving farmers, extension officers, agricultural educators and trainers. There are also local economic development facilitators, agricultural nongovernmental organisations and researchers from the Rhodes University Environmental Learning Research Centre involved.

A key focus of the programme has been the creation of demonstration sites in communities and agricultural colleges. This allows people to see for themselves that the ideas work. Four different sites were set up using a collaborative model: one in a college, one on a communal plot involving 20 elderly women farmers in Lloyd Village, Alice, and two on individual farmers’ plots. Amanzi has also increased the reach of these demonstration projects by getting people to talk about them on local radio.

FASSET’s WORK-BASED EXPERIENCE (WBE) PROJECT

According to Fasset, this work-based experience project was established in order to equip students with N6 Certificates with work based practical experience and also build the capacity of the TVET colleges so that they become preferred providers of

occupational skills in South Africa. It was spearheaded by FASSET which historically had limited interaction and collaboration with the public TVET Colleges due to the general professional nature and high level of skill and knowledge requirements of the finance sector. Despite this limited interaction and collaboration, Fasset is bound to a responsibility of ensuring high and relevant skills development that are appropriate for the finance and accounting 'worlds of work'.

The project was meant for learners who had completed their N6 certificate qualification but who lack practical experience. It was designed to help them get real, practical experience and earn their National Diploma. This practical competition is a critical component of their overall employability. Fasset commissioned the first intake for 18 months at the beginning of 2014. Fasset's actions were in line with the DHET call for Setas to find work place experience for learners to practically implement the theory they accumulated in class.

THE OBJECTIVE OF THE FASSET WORK-BASED EXPERIENCE PROJECT

The objectives were to empower N6 Qualification holders with experience in order for them to get a national diploma in financial management at NQF Level 5. Another objective was to conduct a longitudinal study of TVET's student perceptions, experience of the world of work as well as employer's expectations and experiences regarding TVET students who are entering the world of work. The following format was followed:

1. Recruiting N6 students from TVET Colleges
2. Induction session
3. Placing the students with employers
4. Fasset developed a log book for each student to use until completion.

SELECTION OF TVET COLLEGES, STUDENTS AND EMPLOYERS

To qualify for the National Diploma, students needed to have completed N6 Certificate and complete 18 months of relevant work experience (it had to be work integrated learning). They were to get an opportunity to put theory into practice and get ready to enter the world of work. Students were enrolled in National Diplomas in a range of fields: Financial Management, Human Resources Management, Marketing Management and Business Management. The Financial Management course specifically provided students with the necessary knowledge and skills to work in the financial services field.

Students from 5 TVET colleges (Central Johannesburg EkuRhuleni West, South West, Tshwane North and West Colleges were selected). Colleges were selected on their good reputation and performance history as well as their proximity to the geographical areas where employers wanted to place them. Students completed forms through their colleges and there was phase 1 and 2 for recruitment. Phase 1

was for recruiting those students who had finished the N6 Certificate between 2002 to 2012 and phase 2 was for those that were close to finishing the N6 theoretical period and were writing exams.

Recruitment took place at roadshows where students completed questionnaires that were designed by Fasset. Thereafter, the employers were actively involved in selecting the students in order to choose those that were appropriate for their companies.

Employers in the finance and accounting sector who had a history of investing in skills development in general and had collaborated with Fasset in the past, were approached. The following companies partnered in the project: Deloitte consulting, Ernst and Young, the Industrial Development Corporation (IDC), KPMG, Outsourcing Experts (Outex) and Pricewater House Coopers (PWC). The employers were asked what motivated them to participate in the work experience project conducted by Fasset. The reasons why these employers were willing to participate are as follows:

- Employers want to support skills development interventions in South Africa and wish to contribute to enhancing the employability of graduates, especially in the financial services field.
- Employers get access to extra human resources at minimal cost and are able to grow their businesses and create employment opportunities.
- Employers believe that their businesses are good learning environments – they have the infrastructure to accommodate students and qualified staff that can mentor and oversee students.
- Employers value their good relationship with Fasset and want to maintain it by making such a contribution.

TRANSFORMATIONAL IMPERATIVES

Some of the NSDS's key transformation goals were accomplished, for example:

- 61% of students involved in WBE are women
- 91% of the students were between the ages of 22-28
- One student was disabled.

INDUCTION

The students that were selected were inducted before they commenced their 18-months' work-based training with the different employers. They were asked to provide

their views on the value of the induction sessions by using a three-point scale on which 1 signified 'not sufficient', 2 'sufficient' and 3 'very sufficient'.

On average, the students indicated that the details they had received about the work-based training process were all 'very sufficient'. Hence their overall rating of the induction session(s) in terms of information received was highly favourable.

MENTORS AND USE OF LOGBOOKS

Of the 118 students who completed the midway research questionnaire 9 students indicated that they did not have a mentor. During the midway questionnaire students were asked how satisfied they were with the mentors (they had to use a five-point scale on which 1 signified poor and 5 signified excellent). On average, the students indicated that the availability of the mentors, the skill of the mentors to teach technical and soft skills to the students, the regular assessment of the students by the mentors, and the provision of sufficient feedback regarding the gaps in knowledge and skills were good. Fasset, in collaboration with PwC, developed a logbook for the students based on the Swiss-South African Co-operation on College Improvement (SSACI) logbook for vocational training. The Fasset-PwC logbook contains the following sections:

- Part 1: Understanding WBE, Introduction to WBE, Instructions for WBE, Overview of WBE, WBE objectives and learning outcomes, WBE themes, Curriculum knowledge and skills checklist
- Part 2: WBE placement activities and assignments, Workplace induction checklist, WBE-structured questions and activities, Monthly journal, Performance appraisals, WBE report
- Part 3: WBE evaluation, Student evaluation of WBE, College mentor comment, Employer evaluation of student, Employer letter to confirm the provision of student work experience
- Part 4: WBE documentation, Employer and college contact information, Student profile, Student learning agreement, Certified copy of ID

FINDINGS

At the end of 18 months:

- 106 students were tracked to provide feedback on the project
- After completion of their 18-months' work-based training, the current employment status of the students is as follows: 69% of the students are employed; 58% are employed by the employers where their work-based training was completed and 11% found employment on their own. In terms of

the employment conditions of the employed students, 64% are in full-time employment, 35% have fixed-terms contracts, while one student is volunteering, working as a junior lecturer at a TVET college. He is lecturing Accounting to N6 students and is already enrolled for a B.Com Accounting degree at UNISA (commencing in 2016). His career plan is to become a full-time lecturer after completion of his degree.

- Close to half (46%) of the contracts offered to students are for 12 months, 23% are for 6 months, 12% for 4 months and 8% for 3 months.
- Employed students were asked to provide their gross income per month before any deductions. The figure below shows that 72% of them earn a monthly gross salary between R5 000 and R 10 000. Another 15% earn a salary between R10 001 and R 12 000 per month, and 3% a salary between R 12 001 and R 15 000. One student indicated that she earns more than R 15 000 per month.
- The majority (87%) of the students indicated that they want to study further. Altogether 42% would like to continue with studies in the Accounting field, 26% in Financial Management, and 14% in Human Resources Management. In the financial and business field, some of the students are also thinking of pursuing studies specifically in Cost and Management Accounting, Business Management, Taxation, Internal Auditing, and Supply Chain Management
- A quarter (25%) of the beneficiaries said that they still need to develop their communication skills .
- Students were asked to what extent their technical skills had been enhanced during the 18-month work-based training phase. Altogether 81% of the students indicated that their general or basic computer skills were enhanced to a large extent, while those of 18% improved only to some extent. Employers reported that generally, most of the students lacked basic computer skills when they started with their work-based learning phase and that a substantial amount of time was allocated to developing students' skills in this regard.
- The Financial Management students (Close to two thirds [64%] of the cohort) said that their skills of accounting software programmes enhanced to a large extent, while those for 30%, these improved only to some extent. Regarding enhancement of their computational skills in general, 60% said that their general computational skills were enhanced to a large extent while 38% said only to some extent. Employers also emphasised that competent use of MS Excel was crucial in their organisations and that they made an effort to develop such skills. It is therefore positive to note that 72% of the students were of the view that their skills using MS Excel improved to a large extent.
- In terms of other technical office skills, 64% of the students felt that these improved to a large extent and 37% felt they improved only to some extent. Some of the students indicated that the work environments where they were placed were not always conducive to the full development of all technical skills. In those instances where the students were rotated between different units, the opportunity to improve a variety of technical skills was more probable.
- Almost all of them indicated that they had learned 'to a large extent' how an organisation or the work environment works (95%). When asked whether the knowledge and skills they gained during the work-based learning opportunity

enhanced their employability, 88% affirmed that this was the case 'to a large extent'. On the question whether they were now able to apply the theoretical knowledge in their fields of study in the workplace; 82% answered 'to a large extent'

CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY EMPLOYERS

Fasset's monitoring and evaluation exercise after the 18 months indicated that the challenges facing employers included

- Aligning their programmes with Fasset's processes and timelines
- Providing personnel to mentor and oversee the students
- Making resources available to accommodate the students
- Establishing relationships with TVET colleges in order to select the appropriate students
- Establishing robust recruitment and selection frameworks
- Overcoming the negative attitude of students towards work
- Transport problems – students struggling to get to work on time
- Managing students expectations
- Communication problems between the employer and the students
- Gauging the technical knowledge and skills of students throughout the work experience period
- Overseeing students sufficiently so that they can gain optimal work experience

Similarly, the challenges experienced by students were:

- Communication with employees and/or clients
- Pressure / time management
- Learning to apply theory in practice
- Learning about the work environment in general
- Dealing with the low status of being an intern
- Not enough opportunity to develop skills
- Rotating between units not done sufficiently
- Busy mentors and supervisors
- Developing self-confidence
- Working independently
- Finding and affording transport

- Stipend not enough

From the WBE Project it can be concluded that without practical experience the student qualification from a TVET College does not make the student employable. Work integrated learning is required to enhance student employability. The SETAs play a paramount role in organising and leading the process of placing students in companies for them to gain experience. The challenges that students face when they join the working world as part of their Diploma strengthen them and makes them ready for the real world of work. Employers and SETAs build good relationships during the process and through their engagements the TVET Colleges are better equipped to understand what kind of students to produce who will be suitable and employable by relevant companies. At the end of such initiatives, employers benefit from a pool of well trained students who already have an idea of the working world, TVET Colleges gain experience of the kind of students to produce for the world of work and students benefit experience and employability.

CASE STUDY TWO: THE 'AMANZI FOR FOOD' PROGRAMME

The 'Amanzi for Food' project is not a SETA or NSF funded project. It however outlines the key characteristics of an excellent partnership operating within the wider skills system in South Africa, and SETA initiatives can learn a lot about how to establish an excellent partnership from examining this case study. 'Amanzi for Food' was launched as a joint partnership between the Water Research Commission (WRC) and Rhodes University's Environmental Learning Research Centre (ELRC) between 2013 to 2016. The Water Research Commission commissioned the ELRC to undertake the task of developing an action oriented strategy for knowledge dissemination and training skills development for water use in home stead gardening and rain water harvesting for cropland food production for small holder farmers and food growers in South Africa.

The Project was based on WRC curriculum material which was developed in response to the water crisis and food security challenge faced by most rural populations. The material was made available to Agricultural colleges which were keen to use the WRC materials in training their students but they had limited capacity to embed them within their curricula. Part of the content in the material was unfamiliar to the lecturers (Denison et al., 2011).

The knowledge dissemination challenge led to the establishment and adoption of a learning network/partnership approach which resulted in a partnership called the 'Imvotho Bubomi Learning Network' which exists within the 'Amanzi for Food' project. In order to develop the action oriented strategy the project used the "strategy as practice approach" which emphasizes bringing human actors and their actions and interactions to the centre stage of a strategy. The Imvotho Bubomi learning network made use of a 'Training the Trainer' course in order to engage the subject of rainwater harvesting and conservation which was informed and guided by learning material

produced and supplied by Water Research Commission (WRC). The two specific materials that provided knowledge and content for the training course were: (1) Water harvesting and conservation; and (2) Agricultural water use in homestead gardening systems. These are the two WRC materials which informed the core focus of the Training the Trainer course. Based on these two inputs, a Rhodes accredited course was designed and rolled out, in which partners in the learning network were supported to:

1. Review their current agricultural water management practice engagements;
2. Identify potentially new practices they would like to engage in from the range of options associated with the three main practices outlined above;
3. Make use of research-based knowledge (WRC materials) to inform their decisions;
4. Plan the practical development of productive demonstrations of improved agricultural water management;
5. Work together to develop one or more productive demonstrations;
6. Evaluate and reflect on this collaborative work; and
7. Extend knowledge of their practices to others via use of local media channels and ongoing meetings of their learning network.

All partners were free to participate in the Training of Trainers course, and chose a certification route (in which they completed a 'Change Project' relevant to their role and responsibility in their organisation) or a participation route in which they join the ToT sessions, but do not complete the written part of the Change Project - they can still implement a practical change project or support others to do the same, as was found to be the case in this project. This allowed for flexibility of participation in the ToT course process. (Lotz-Sisitka et al; 2013/2015). Respondent 6, in the interviews pointed out that she liked the course because she was learning with lecturers and farmers who had different kinds of information that she benefited from, (Respondent 6, Personal communication)

The course was designed to be offered in two streams, using the same core content but different assignments, developed at different national qualification framework (NQF) levels. The certificates offered by the Train the Trainer course were:

- *Certificate of Competence in Curriculum Innovation and Changing Practice* (12 credits at NQF level 6), and
- *Certificate of Competence in Environmental Learning and Changing Practice* (12 credits at NQF level 5)

The Course, although run as a single training process, thus had two streams; one for the formal educators, and the other for the informal trainers. Both groups were able to share the learning experiences in the contact sessions and apply these to their own areas of work. In this way they were also able to share their own experiences and ideas with each other. In order to achieve these, participants were required to

successfully complete tasks/ assignments appropriate to their context and the level of certification. ((Lotz-Sisitka et al, 2013/2015)

The 'Train the Trainer' course was designed to mediate the use of the WRC materials, combined with the additional materials that were produced to assist with accessing and using the WRC materials placed on the specially designed 'amanziforfood.co.za' website, providing various forms of access to these materials. The key objective of the course was met by training the trainers on how to use the WRC materials to:

- a) Enrich their own knowledge of Rain Water Harvesting and Conservation (RWH&C) practices, and be able to see the validity and value of this knowledge for supporting household level and small scale farmers to enhance food production;
- b) Use the materials to strengthen the links between theory and practice by applying them to the co-development of productive demonstration sites;
- c) Use the materials as a basis for curriculum development and innovation, and thus; and
- d) Successfully integrate the use of the materials into their teaching and learning programmes (Lotz-Sisitka et al.; 2013/2015).

WHAT ISSUES DID THE PARTNERSHIP RESPOND TO?

According to (Lotz-Sisitka et al.; 2013/2015) the learning network was responding to the following:

- Water scarcity: in the marginal areas of the Eastern Cape,
- Absence of irrigation facilities,
- Climate change and variability,
- A curriculum that does not respond to the actual water crisis in a rural set up

TRANSFORMATIONAL IMPERATIVES

The project entailed a number of transformation imperatives, including:

Race - Most of the participants in the partnership were black hence addressing the issue of giving more opportunities to those that are less privileged.

Class – The farmers involved in the partnership are within the poverty range and their participation helped in a small way to reduce the social inequalities that define the wider economy and society;

Gender – Both Males and females were represented in the partnership.

Geography –The partnership gave attention to the production of skills for rural development as it was based in the rural Eastern Cape

Age –The partnership had both the young and the old.

Disability – there were no disabled people in the partnership

What were the roles of the participants in the network?

The following Table summarises the role of the differing partners in the project:

PARTNER NAME	PARTNER ROLES
Rhodes University (RU), ELRC	The Rhodes University (RU) Environmental Learning Research Centre (ELRC) was appointed by the Water Research Commission (WRC) to undertake development work focussing on an action oriented strategy for knowledge dissemination and training for skills development of water use in homestead gardening and rain water harvesting for cropland food production for small holder farmers and food growers in South Africa, focussing on two sets of WRC materials. Hence its role is to lead and coordinate the network and test the initiative within a learning network.
Fort Cox Agricultural College	Their role in the network is to conduct research, contribute agricultural knowledge to partners and be the hub for practical productive demonstration sites Fort Cox provides quality agricultural education and training, community outreach, agricultural research, community engagement and rural agricultural development The College aims to provide quality education and training in agriculture and forestry by engaging in research and community outreach. The students are aspiring farmers and entrepreneurs. The College has a Rural Development Centre which is involved in rural outreach and agricultural practices training in the form of short courses.
University of Fort Hare	The University has a lot of history and aims to provide high quality education contributing to the advancement of knowledge and applying it to the scientific, technological and social economic development of the country. The Faculty of Science and Agriculture is involved in community engagement and rural development in agriculture. In the network it carries out research, contributes agricultural expertise to partners
The Department of Rural Development and Agrarian Reform (DRDAR)	Its role in the network is to support farmers and other partners to gain new knowledge and information about different and efficient agriculture practices. The DRDAR programme promotes, support and coordinate rural development and agrarian reform interventions. The aim is to reduce poverty and underdevelopment through job creation, food security programmes and participation in development by all rural

	communities. The Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries has national extension support services where extension and advisory services are available for the rural farmers.
<i>Nkonkobe Economic Development Agency (NEDA)</i>	The agency's purpose is to support local economic development in the Nkonkobe municipal area through supporting and managing viable economic projects. One of the sectors NEDA focuses on is agriculture and so they are a partner in the learning network. In the network NEDA gives agricultural projects advise and knowledge and support agricultural SMMEs.
<i>Dohne Agriculture Developmental Institute</i>	Dohne is an agricultural research institute situated in Stutterheim. It is the only agricultural research institute in the Eastern Cape. It is a research and developmental institute that is inter-governmental, with four agricultural research sections, namely: analytical research, animal research, crop research and pasture research. They conduct research and share knowledge to other partners.
<i>Farmers</i>	They are the implementers of the project, The farmers in the area range from commercial to homestead food producers and everything in between. Their crops range from dairy to vegetable production. They have many interesting stories and experiences to share with the rest of the group.
<i>Government departments & Municipality:</i>	promoting, supporting and coordinating rural development and agrarian reform interventions to learn about rainwater harvesting and conservation, knowledge sharing,
<i>NGOs</i>	NGO have direct contact with farmers on the ground, share knowledge with farmers, and support them in their farming practices.

((Lotz-Sisitka et al.; 2013/2015)

The project's 'learning network 'aimed at:

- Connecting people so that they can learn together, share experiences and develop knowledge together.
- Making rainwater harvesting and conservation (RWH&C) information accessible to everyone
- Encouraging the use of RWH&C practices for food production
- Establishing and using demonstration sites for learning purposes and skills development.

HOW WERE THE POTENTIAL PARTNERS FOR THE LEARNING NETWORK IDENTIFIED?

The project targeted stakeholders that have a role to play in responding to the national policy imperatives for greater participation of small holder farmers (especially women farmers) in agricultural production and food security enhancement, whilst also taking the country's contextual realities i.e. of water scarcity into account. It had to be partners in the Eastern Cape Province who had an interest in agriculture and who also have an interest in supporting better agricultural water management practices in local small scale and household food production sites.

The process also involved the analyses of what the existing knowledge of partners was with regard to water use and management practices. Not many in the Agricultural Learning System appeared to be familiar with Rain Water Harvesting & Conservation knowledge that is available for smallholder farmers and home food producers, due to this not being present in existing agricultural training programmes in colleges. This was noted even from a response of a farmer from the Nkonkobe Farmers Association who said:

"I was already a farmer but with little knowledge, Since it was starting I got there and learnt, it was the place where I started hearing about rainwater harvesting."

A college lecturer commented: "before I joined the network I used to have not much information on rain water harvesting techniques, I think I was concentrating on only teaching about rooftop and tanks which everyone knows and I did not know about rainwater harvesting and conservation"

The programme processes involved assessing what information the potential partners had on rainwater harvesting or agricultural activities, their current and future knowledge needs, and their training and skills development needs.

WHAT MOTIVATED THE MEMBERS TO DECIDE TO GO INTO THE PARTNERSHIP?

Partners joined the network for different reasons. They saw it as an important initiative to establish or to join. The following are some of the reasons that motivated them to be in the learning network:

Respondent 3: "it was because the network was discussing an issue that was affecting us as a community and as an agricultural school"

Respondent 5: "I was motivated by the fact that agriculture was relevant to the Eastern cape, it will be pointless for me to go on talk about business, rates of the rand etc and forget the agriculture content base which is so useful to the rural eastern cape"

Respondent 6: *"I joined the network because I teach subjects that are water related"*

Respondent 3: *"We all agreed that we are seeing a problem and it was affecting all of us therefore it means all of us must become part of the solution, it became more important to interact and establish the network."*

Respondent 4: *"One of the main things that motivated me was to do with my study, I found the network to be a place where I first saw myself getting information selfishly so, I saw it as a place where I could get information and gain knowledge for my study without really seeing myself as a person who the network can benefit from , it was more of me learning from them than them learning from me."*

WHAT DID EACH PARTNER DO?

Each partner came into the network with its own agricultural related expertise/skills, which they then shared with other partners in the network. Some partners contributed material on rainwater harvesting or venues for training. Others contributed transportation of members to and from the learning network's venues for meetings and activities.

Respondent 14: *"I brought my expertise on water conservation knowledge and practices which are sustainable and easy to practice. I was keen to share information with other professionals."*

Respondent 4: *"I think I brought into the network my media background and skills..."*

Ngeletshedzo: *"As a college of 'agriculture we brought in our agricultural skills and facilitations skills to explain information and make it easy to understand"*

Respondent 1: *"We told them that from the Rhodes University side we can run an NQF Level course if people are interested in it...."*

HOW DID THE PARTNERSHIP OPERATE?

The learning network operated by learning together through a range of interactions - the Training the Trainer course, the four productive demonstration sites, the holding of several progress meetings and various formative interventions. Some members also undertook research and wrote evaluative papers. A radio programme was also started by learning network members to disseminate information on rainwater harvesting and conservation.

Respondent 1: *".....we resolved to meet once a quarter.....and the rest of the time is spent on the ground doing practical work, for example people would meet at a certain farmer and do permaculture gardens..... Meetings were strategically located..."*

Respondent 3: *"We had courses like I said there was a NQF course where we had to do assignments and developed a portfolio of evidence then the other thing that I forgot to mention is that out of this there was some research work that was done ,we have publications awaiting and papers awaiting so we would work like that even after the network"*

WHAT RESOURCES DID THE PARTNERS ACCESS?

A number of resources were used in the course. Some of the materials were also translated into Xhosa to cater for the language challenge. Different kinds of resources were used to give a full picture of rainwater harvesting and conservation techniques and to enhance understanding amongst participants. Respondents shared the following information concerning resources:

Respondent 1: *We were basing our initial resources on the WRC who had two main text books which they wanted to be disseminated”*

Respondent 15: *“we accessed resources through meetings, WhatsApp group communication, emails, and hardcopies sharing”.*

Respondent 11: *There were pamphlets from the WRC with Rhodes material, when were conducting demonstration plots we used those materials, There is also the ‘Amanzi for food’ website as well as a Facebook page where information is spread.*

Respondent 13: *We had pamphlets that were distributed at the farmers office, and they explaining rainwater harvesting,*

WHAT WORKED WELL?

The main deliverable that was the most successful was ‘Learning together’. Many of the participants expressed that they learnt about new RWH&C practices, most of which they had never heard of before. Participants were grateful for the opportunity of getting together in the Learning Network and learning from each other”.

Respondent 11: *“Information sharing and demonstrations were excellent”*

Respondent 1: *Bringing stakeholders together to be able to learn together and gain from each other and to provide a forum for people to learn out of each other’s context was a success. They started to empathise each other, identifying each other’s contexts and I think that that’s what catalyzed the expansive learning.*

Respondent 3: *“Interactio, and the network has improved the lessons between partners – partners that need each other but we were not looking for each other. It didn’t matter whether one was educated or not or operating from the position one held”*

WHAT CHALLENGES DID THE PARTNERSHIP FACE?

The first challenge that the network faced was between the ELRC and the WRC on how rainwater harvesting and conservation information was to be disseminated.

A second challenge was the whole question of translating into Xhosa which was needed to accommodate farmers who do not understand English very well. Other challenges included:

Respondent 13: *Access to demonstration sites was difficult because of poor roads and the Mother Nature was not in our favour.*

Respondent 3: *“Without rain there is no harvest, we have been going to the radio to say rain water harvesting is the solution –so now there is no rain so its like the rain water harvesting is not a solution.”*

Respondent 4: *“Personally I think it was to do with the language issues, I felt quite disadvantaged because I couldn’t really interact with certain members of the network especially farmers due to the language barrier. They spoke in Xhosa and I was only really fluent in in the basics, the basics--- if there was someone who speaks the language fluently I think they would have reached greater depth”.*

THE BENEFITS

According to the responses from the interviews, most participants were grateful to have been part of the learning network as it helped them to gain knowledge and develop skills on rainwater harvesting techniques. Lecturers benefited enormously from the farmers indigenous knowledge while farmers also benefited from their expertise. It was a matter of understanding what is the material and benefiting from learning together as concepts were explained differently by different people to make it easy to understand for everyone. Most members were grateful about the productive demonstration sites as they understood better through practical application.

IMPACT

The impact of the project is multiple: knowledge creation; knowledge dissemination; productive demonstration sites for teaching purposes; integration of rainwater harvesting and conservation into curricula in the Agricultural Colleges; integration of course knowledge and indigenous knowledge, greater implementation of rainwater harvesting and conservation practices, leading to enhanced food security and increased collaboration. The intention was to develop an action-oriented strategy for knowledge dissemination but at the end farmer production was increased, some farmers even sold surplus. Those that were farming for entrepreneurship gained more and accessed more markets. Rain water harvesting was not the only topic discussed in the learning network, as members felt the need to also address other challenges like food sovereignty. Respondents also added the following data in interviews:

Respondent 13: *“It contributed to the production capacity of farmers in communities using sustainable and cheaper methods especially where water is not easily accessible”*

Respondent 1: A Fort Cox college a team of 3 lectures started integrating rain water harvesting into their teaching, ”

Respondent 1: ”When I look at KieskamMahoek they were struggling with water ;and when they were introduced to this water harvesting they found that they could maintain their vegetable production and actually expand it because they were now able to convey water in the Amathole basin.”

Respondent 1: “They formed a cooperative with youth, this has come out of our intervention because they did that on their own with this particular farmer teamed up with four youth and came up with a coop.... the Amathole farmer is selling her produce, she discovered a market within the network from one person whom they teamed up with”

Respondent 3: “Everyone who is graduating here is coming out and going home should be able to practice and produce for their own for food sovereignty other than buying food in the shop”

Respondent 3: “There are papers that are in line to be published. It is the mandate of the college to do community engagement, to publish, to do research but I don’t think on our own we could do this We even have people who have enrolled for masters at Rhodes out of this network,..... At Fort Cox we are able to take our students to the farmers and instead of only going to learn about these techniques they see how the farmer produces in a short space of time and it gives them hope.”

Respondent 4: Intended “.....impact will be an extension of the network itself not only in number but also in terms of the topics they are now talking about because now they are talking about things like food sovereignty and some agro-ecological practices”.

IS THE LEARNING NETWORK SUSTAINABLE?

Respondents seem to be positive about the sustainability of the learning network and its practices. Sustainability is a possibility due to the water challenge faced by the province and localities while food production remains an essential issue in people’s lives. This situation is looked at as a reason or motive for sustaining the learning network. Members indicated that the learning network is addressing an important aspect of people’s lives hence the activities of the network, the lessons learnt and the knowledge gained will always be used by the members because own food production will always be a need for them.

Respondent 4: “I don’t think people are going to drop it and the reason why I say it is because within the network itself there are lecturers who want to incorporate rain water harvesting into their curriculum. It means that every student that goes Fort Cox to learn agriculture will always learn about it and for me that will be a way of sustaining it, even if the initial learning network decides not to continue practicing.”

CONCLUSION

As indicative of the Imvotho Bubomi learning network, partnerships in learning networks have a potential of positively influencing skills development. The Imvotho Bubomi learning network has displayed good results as members have confirmed benefits and impact attributed to learning together as partners. One significant element of the network is members from diverse backgrounds and workplaces learning together and from each other. It seems to have worked well for all the members as it allowed them to learn at their own pace from a wide range of experiences and knowledge from different partners. They commended the concept of different people with different levels of expertise and experience sharing their knowledge and experience. They also acknowledge that everyone has something they know and if that is brought together, the impact is huge and even potentially greater in formative intervention processes. Rainwater-harvesting techniques have enhanced food production though it could display better results if more rains were received. Some members have managed to produce more than they produced before joining the learning network and they have sold their produce. Institutions of higher learning also acknowledged having learnt from the rich indigenous knowledge of farmers who they should not be looking down. Some old ways of farming seem to be beneficial and need to be revisited.

From the data collected it is evident that the curricula in agricultural colleges is inadequate and lacking in addressing needs of small holder farmers and food growers in South Africa. The ordinary curricula is more focused on commercial farming. Extension Officers are trained in such a way that they are not relevant to smallholder farmers whom ironically they are meant to serve, as they cannot support the farmers within their levels of needs, affordability, capability, climatic context and techniques that are relevant to them. The curricula needs to be revised in such a way that it also caters for smallholder farmers by teaching concepts that are at the contextual level of smallholder farmers. Students should leave the college ready to start their own agricultural entrepreneurship as farmers using the resources available to them rather than them having to wait for resources that may never come in order to undertake commercial farming or get employment.

Productive demonstration sites have been of great value to the network members as they emerged from solutions they modeled together and subsequently and catalytically mediated learning. They closed the theory practice gap that had been identified. Theory brought to practicality became a reality for the members as they could see the practical results of the theory they had learnt. Demonstrations also helped in terms of learning to collaborate as they were done in groups. Members learnt to work together and interact effectively and meaningfully towards one common goal which they achieved. The productive demonstration sites are a good example for schools, that understanding is better enhanced with putting theory into practice.

Of note is the learning set up in the network, the highly educated and the formally uneducated learning together effectively. They acknowledge that learning was made easy by the fact that it was comprised of different individuals with different levels of knowledge which was shared and understood. The farmers' indigenous knowledge should be upheld and promoted as it is a source of knowledge and transformation if well applied. The learning space in the network was not a formal classroom set up. Hence it contributed to enhanced learning as no one was intimidated by a classroom setup. Different activities were undertaken including theory, group discussions, assignments, research papers and practical demonstrations which presented different learning spaces and enhanced learning.

The learning network approach is an initiative worth adopting; it presents a platform for networking and learning from each other in the same sector. It allows for better knowledge dissemination and flow than depending exclusively on a formal training setup. It brings social cohesion and reliance on each other as stakeholders in the same sector and allows hard work and accountability when working with other partners. It is quite a reliable knowledge hub. 'upscaling' such an initiative nationally not only in the agricultural sector is a worthy consideration. Other sectors can benefit from this tried and tested approach of innovative partnerships in learning networks for skills development. However the approach to 'scaling up' that was demonstrated in this project was more generative than using pre-set goals in normative developmental work.