

...
“Learnerships can be complicated” was the spot-on headline to a story in the Workplace supplement in The Star over three years ago. They still are.

Last time I wrote for the *Rhodes Journalism Review* (No 22, 2003) I urged that we give the Learnership, our Mappp-Seta and the National Qualifications Framework a chance despite the bureaucracy involved and the dysfunctional relationship between them.

I’m now debating whether to propose we give up trying.

Workplace training providers are into the second year of offering the journalism learnership at Level 5 and things are still not any easier on the administration side where we grapple with the bureaucratic demands of the Mappp-Seta and their mechanistic interpretation of NQF standards.

It has been made much worse by the battle between the former Mappp-Seta CEO and the exco of the Accounting Authority, the board ostensibly representing the Seta’s labour and employer constituents. That battle has ended up before a parliamentary portfolio committee and the Seta could find itself under administration by the Minister of Labour.

The spirit of the skills development strategy cannot be faulted. It is the structure, legislation, regulations and implementation that is so problematic. Instead of developing vocational, workplace training it is holding it hostage.

Let’s look at the money side first. This was the big incentive designed to encourage us to “standardise” our training, to get accredited and to take on many more learners and prepare them to be employable in our industry.

For a discretionary grant to be paid out you must fill in mounds of forms written in opaque project management-speak and submit equally dense narrative and financial quarterly reports for every skills programme, bursary or learnership that has been granted funds. As the Public Finance Management Act is the uber-legislation in this maze of intersecting legislation and regulation we must, perhaps, expect to suffer for our grant disbursements.

But it is in the realm of assessment and moderation that the bureaucratic madness morphs into farce.

Firstly there is the newly-spawned industry of providers of training in assessment and modera-

tion. These trainers take on groups of people, some of whom have never done any training before, and drill them in the art of providing compliant paper trails for technocratic audits. All in the name of “quality of education and training”.

It is six months since I submitted the paperwork on the assessment and moderation of our first 12 journalism learners to the LETQA of the Seta – the body which has to verify the validity of our judgments of individual learner competency and evaluate the assessment procedure.

At the end of June I was informed that the LETQA had farmed the job out to a private provider of assessment and moderation. This provider wants sight of some 23 separate documents, including proof of stipend payments to the learners, in order to verify the outcome of our assessment process.

Like the Bible, assessment and moderation can be interpreted in a number of ways and we do not know which interpretation these particular providers were drilled in.

The level of the qualification complicates matters. Few people appear to have experience of assessment at this level, the last level before Council for Higher Education validation kicks in, and above the lower levels, from 1 to 4 which are the usual territory for SAQA ETQA’s and Umalusi.

What’s more this external validation process will begin in July and August just a few months before we are scheduled to begin the summative assessments of our next batch of learners.

Surely such a laborious system chain of checks was never conceived of when the SDA was first mooted as a means of accelerating skills development? By contrast, universities get audited once in a six-year cycle.

As an assessor and moderator, I believe that assessments, in which each person’s competency is assessed in an integrated fashion, and holistically, against the specified outcomes of the qualification, are in fact the way to go. The learners appear to appreciate them as well. They get personal attention and feedback, they are judged on real evidence in a real working situation and they develop the art of self assessment and reflection. Most importantly for most of them, they are now employed as journalists.

But assessment of this kind takes several days even for just a dozen people. The situation is even more onerous for my opposite number at Media 24, Dolf Els, who deals with double that number of learners, across the country. It is a demanding and expensive process for those of us who have tried it.

It is also costly for the Seta which first had to pay for our training as assessors and moderators and now has to pay another set of people to check we’re doing it correctly. All these checks and the learners still do not know if they’ve “passed go” and will get a certificate.

So would it be any better for our purposes if, instead of offering the full gamut of modules in a learnership, we opted to offer only one or two skills programmes? With each learnership divided into several learning areas, or skills programmes, which learners can do as stand alones, this would seem, at first glance, the more manageable route to go.

In the case of the National Certificate Level 5 there are 11 different skills programmes each carrying a specific number of credits. Instead of offering all the necessary modules in a learnership and assessing a whole qualification, time, staff and resources constrained workplace trainers could offer only one or two of the skills programmes most relevant to their needs, like the writing process, the reporting process or sub-editing.

If our grant applications were successful we would be paid R250 per credit per learner going this route. That’s not exactly an incentive but it would cover the cost of an average four- or five-day short course.

The drawback is we’d still have to assess and moderate each learner for them to get those credits, and for us to get any funding support.

Is this what it has all come down to – jumping through hoops to satisfy the demand for bureaucratic evidence instead of focusing on what works and what doesn’t work from an education and training point of view and making sure our learners are competent? A workshop to consider our future skills development approach route is long overdue.

Will anyone lose out if we change to skills programmes rather than learnerships or abandon formal assessment entirely? The learners seem more concerned about employment than getting the qualification or any credits.

Employers may miss out on the funds obtainable, as well as some points to add to their black economic empowerment scorecards, if we opt out of learnerships. The Seta may fall short on the learnership targets promised to government. But will training and development suffer?

An evaluation of the past few years needs to determine whether new providers have been encouraged to provide what the industry needs, whether workplaces that were never doing this kind of training started doing it as a direct result of the SDA, and whether the CHE, FET sector and private providers are now really partnering with industry to produce a better quality of entry-level journalist?

Maybe the revelation will be that the Seta and NQF and all our efforts at compliance of the past several years have only succeeded in complicating, in the most extraordinary way, and with the best will in the world, what many of us were doing very well anyway – helping develop new, working journalists with real, relevant skills.

...
by Paddi Clay

The spirit of the skills development strategy cannot be faulted. It is the structure, legislation, regulations and implementation that is so problematic. Instead of developing vocational, workplace training it is holding it hostage.

Jumping through hoops