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Department:
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REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

SUMMATIVE RESEARCH PUBLICATION

Welcome To The 2024/25 W&RSETA Summative Research Publication



The Wholesale and Retail SETA (W&RSETA) is proud to present this summative research publication, which consolidates twelve comprehensive studies concluded during the 2024/25 financial year. These reports provide critical insights into the evolving landscape of the wholesale and retail sector, highlighting emerging trends, persistent challenges, and transformative opportunities that shape workforce development, enterprise resilience, and sectoral competitiveness. Through rigorous analysis of themes including digital adoption, food safety, township retail

transformation, sustainable waste management, and youth empowerment, this publication affirms the indispensable role of research in guiding evidence-based policy, strategic decision-making, and practical interventions across the sector.

The 2025 Research Symposium, convened under the theme “Research for Sectoral Transformation: Evidence-Based Strategies for a Sustainable Wholesale and Retail Sector,” serves as a pivotal platform for presenting and interrogating these findings. By convening industry leaders, academics, policymakers, and stakeholders, the symposium fosters robust dialogue on pressing sectoral priorities such as workforce up-skilling for digital and hybrid business models, the empowerment of emerging entrepreneurs and SMMEs, and the formal integration of township retail. These engagements are instrumental in ensuring that enterprises of all sizes are equipped to navigate technological shifts, and contribute meaningfully to a competitive, inclusive sector.

This symposium also serves as a strategic precursor to the 2026 Research Conference, scheduled for October, which will deepen stakeholder engagement and advance the sector’s long-term transformation agenda. This continuity reflects the W&RSETA’s commitment to leveraging research as a catalyst for systemic change, anchored in empirical evidence, responsive to sectoral needs, and aligned with national priorities such as youth employment, skills development, and inclusive economic growth.

The research presented in this publication underscores the need to enhance the relevance, agility, and impact of training programmes across public training providers, higher education institutions, TVET colleges, and CET centres. It highlights the imperative for modular and stackable learning, work-based training, digital literacy, entrepreneurship development, and the reskilling of employees to meet evolving demands. Moreover, the studies reveal critical gaps among emerging, small, and informal enterprises, township retailers, and youth entrants, emphasising the urgency of targeted interventions that integrate

technical, digital, and entrepreneurial skills with access to finance, infrastructure, mentorship, and market opportunities.

This body of work affirms that research is not merely reflective but directive, empowering the sector to anticipate, respond, and adapt to disruption, particularly in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, rapid digitalisation, and evolving consumer behaviours. The insights contained herein are intended to inform strategic planning, policy formulation, and resource allocation while fostering a culture of continuous learning, innovation, and collaboration across the sector. By embedding these insights into practice, the W&RSETA aims to cultivate a skilled, agile, and responsive workforce, enhance enterprise resilience, and promote inclusive growth, positioning the wholesale and retail sector as a key driver of national economic development.

This publication represents both a milestone and a strategic tool for the sector. The W&RSETA acknowledges the invaluable contributions of researchers, stakeholders, and practitioners whose efforts have made this body of knowledge possible. Their work continues to illuminate pathways for sustainable growth, innovation, and transformation, ensuring that the sector remains adaptive, forward-looking, and prepared to meet the challenges and opportunities of the digital future.

Tom Mkhwanazi
Chief Executive Officer



Statement from the Executive Strategic Planning Performance & Evaluation

The 2024/25 financial year marks a significant milestone in W&RSETA's research journey, culminating in twelve comprehensive studies that collectively illuminate the evolving dynamics of the wholesale and retail sector. These research outputs extend far beyond academic enquiry, they serve as strategic instruments that provide actionable insights into workforce readiness, digital transformation, enterprise development, and emerging market trends. Through rigorous sectoral analysis, these studies reveal the critical levers for growth, expose structural gaps, and offer evidence-based pathways for strengthening human capital, particularly within small, medium, and micro-enterprises (SMMEs) which remain the backbone to economic recovery and inclusive development.

The 2025 Research Symposium is designed to translate these insights into meaningful dialogue and practical strategies. It serves as both a reflection on our research accomplishments and a springboard for forward-looking action. By convening sector stakeholders, policymakers, and academic partners, the symposium fosters collaborative problem-solving, ensuring that research is not just disseminated, but actively applied to advance sector priorities. Moreover, this event strategically positions the sector for the upcoming 2026 Research Conference, which will expand the scope of inquiry and introduce specialized research initiatives aimed at addressing critical questions in digital skills, workforce upskilling, and informal enterprise development. These future studies will explore innovative approaches to technological adoption, data-driven decision-making, and sustainable business models, enabling the sector to proactively respond to disruption and emerging opportunities.

Looking ahead, the SETA remains committed to deepening the sophistication of its research agenda. The focus will increasingly shift toward highly targeted studies that generate granular, actionable intelligence, policy-relevant insights capable of influencing programme design and sector-wide transformation. This includes examining the nuances of digitalization, artificial intelligence adoption, sectoral skills gaps, and the formalization of township and informal enterprises. By leveraging advanced methodologies and engaging stakeholders at multiple levels, these



studies will provide strategic guidance to equip the current and future workforce with the competencies required to thrive in a rapidly evolving, Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) economy.

The twelve studies presented in this publication exemplify the power of evidence-based decision-making. They offer a roadmap for innovation-led growth, inclusive development, and strategic sectoral partnerships that bridge the gap between research, practice, and policy. As the SETA continues to expand its research portfolio, the objective is clear: to foster a culture where knowledge drives action, insights catalyse transformation, and research becomes a cornerstone of sector resilience and competitiveness. This publication stands as both a reflection of past achievements and a catalyst for future inquiry, affirming our unwavering commitment to shaping a wholesale and retail sector that is adaptive, innovative, and strategically prepared for the challenges and opportunities ahead.

Dr Deborah Machard
Executive: Strategic Planning, Performance and Evaluation (W&RSETA)



Introduction and Background

The Wholesale and Retail SETA produces research publications as a strategic tool to fulfil its mandate of advancing evidence-based skills development, sectoral transformation, and inclusive economic growth. These publications are not merely academic outputs - they are designed to provide actionable insights that inform policy direction, guide programme design, and strengthen workforce readiness. By consolidating research outputs across thematic areas, the SETA ensures that knowledge is systematically documented, shared, and translated into sector-wide interventions.

The value of producing and disseminating these studies lies in their ability to capture both emerging opportunities and persistent challenges facing the sector. They reflect on the evolving dynamics of technology, consumer behaviour, entrepreneurship, workforce preparedness, and environmental sustainability issues that directly impact competitiveness and resilience. Furthermore, they enable the SETA and its stakeholders to anticipate disruptions, adapt training systems, and align strategies with national imperatives such as the National Skills Development Plan (NSDP) and the broader economic recovery agenda.

Fulfilling the planned research agenda is therefore central to accountability and strategic foresight. It ensures that the SETA remains responsive to its stakeholder needs by providing evidence-driven solutions to workforce and enterprise development. The summative publication, which synthesizes findings from multiple studies, is particularly significant in that it integrates diverse insights into a holistic sectoral narrative. This enables policymakers, training providers, enterprises, and other partners to see not only the specific outcomes of individual studies but also the interconnections that shape the broader transformation agenda. Ultimately, this publication serves as both a milestone of research achievement and a strategic roadmap for future action reinforcing the SETA's commitment to building a wholesale and retail sector that is adaptive, innovative, and inclusive.

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SUMMARY OF REPORT:

Post COVID-19 Technology Adoption in the
South African Wholesale and Retail Sector

Background & Purpose

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted global economies, with South Africa's wholesale and retail sector deeply affected. The crisis accelerated the adoption of technology as businesses were forced to adapt rapidly to survive amidst restrictions on physical trade, shifting consumer preferences, and the growing prominence of e-commerce platforms. This report seeks to contextualize the extent of technology adoption within the sector, highlighting the strategies that enabled firms to navigate post-pandemic realities. Beyond documenting short-term responses, the report critically reflects on how these adaptations have reshaped operational models, workforce dynamics, and long-term competitiveness. Central to this exploration is the recognition that the wholesale and retail sector, a key employer and driver of South Africa's GDP, faced both vulnerabilities and opportunities that required coordinated responses. The report therefore aims to provide insights into sectoral resilience, structural transformation, and the role of technology in bridging systemic gaps.

Key Insights

- **Digital Acceleration:** the pandemic acted as a catalyst for digital acceleration. Businesses previously hesitant to invest in technology embraced e-commerce, digital payment systems, and virtual customer engagement tools to remain viable.
- **Consumer Behavior Shift:** South Africans increasingly favored online shopping, contactless services, and digital platforms for product discovery and transactions. This necessitated a shift in value chain management, logistics, and last-mile delivery systems.
- **Uneven adoption:** Large, well-capitalized firms adapted more seamlessly, while small and informal retailers faced barriers such as lack of digital literacy, infrastructural challenges, and limited access to finance- widening inequality within the sector.
- **Workforce Dynamics:** Demand for digitally skilled workers increased significantly, reshaping both skills needs and training priorities across the sector. Collectively, these insights underscore how technology adoption has become both a survival strategy and a competitive differentiator in the post-pandemic retail landscape.

Main Outcomes & Findings

The report's findings highlight that technology adoption had tangible outcomes for businesses.

- Companies that leveraged digital platforms during the pandemic reported increased market reach, cost efficiencies, and better resilience against disruptions.
- E-commerce penetration grew markedly, supported by widespread use of mobile devices and fintech innovations that facilitated secure, convenient transactions. For consumers, this translated into expanded access to goods and services, though often at the expense of traditional brick-and-mortar stores that struggled to adapt.
- **Automation & Data Use:** Supply chains saw increased automation and data-driven decision-making, boosting efficiency but raising concerns around job displacement.

- **Persistent Barriers:** Challenges such as rural broadband, high data costs, and limited digital literacy, especially among informal traders, continue to hinder inclusive adoption.
- **Hybrid Retail Models:** The sector is increasingly blending physical and digital platforms, suggesting a future where in-person experiences coexist with digital convenience.

While transformative, the uneven pace of change presents policy and developmental challenges that demand urgent attention.

Recommendations

The report concludes with several strategic recommendations to ensure that technology adoption strengthens the wholesale and retail sector inclusively and sustainably.

1. **Infrastructure Investment:** Prioritize digital infrastructure in underserved rural and township areas to close connectivity gap.
2. **Skills Development:** Launch targeted training programs focused on digital literacy, e-commerce, data analytics, and virtual customer engagement- aligned with sectoral needs through SETAs, universities, and industry bodies.
3. **Financial Support:** Design grants and low-interest loans to help SMMEs and informal traders adopt digital tools, preventing a widening digital divide.
4. **Collaborative Ecosystems:** Strengthen partnerships between government, private sector, and industry bodies to foster innovation, knowledge sharing, and inclusive growth.
5. **Continuous Monitoring and Research:** Continuously track digital transformation to ensure strategies remain responsive to emerging challenges and global trends.





FOOD SAFETY COMPETENCE RESEARCH: FS Pilot Project

Background & Purpose

This research was undertaken to examine food safety competence within South Africa's wholesale and retail sector, with a specific focus on contrasting franchised and independent businesses. Recognizing that food safety is fundamental to consumer protection, business sustainability, and sectoral growth, the study sought to evaluate knowledge, attitudes, and practices across multiple dimensions of food handling and management. The pilot study, conducted in the Free State, used twelve dimensions derived from internationally recognized Prerequisite Programmes (PRPs) as the basis for analysis. These dimensions included regulatory compliance, food receiving, storage, cooking temperature control, contamination, personal hygiene, allergen management, pest control, shelf readiness, customer education, emergency procedures, and leadership.

The primary purpose was to establish a foundational understanding of food safety practices, highlight key disparities between business models, and provide recommendations to strengthen competence across the sector. The findings offer both a diagnostic view of current practices and a roadmap for national level interventions- particularly as food safety risks rise and informal and small-scale traders become increasingly central to the retail landscape.

Key Insights

A critical insight from the study is the stark contrast between franchised and independent businesses in their approach to food safety. Franchised businesses consistently demonstrated structured, proactive, and deeply ingrained practices across all dimensions. Their commitment was reinforced through standardized training programs, clear Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), systematic audits, and leadership involvement. Food safety was not merely seen as compliance but as integral to brand reputation, customer trust, and operational efficiency. Independent businesses, however, exhibited significant gaps in knowledge and practice, with compliance often treated as a reactive measure rather than a cultural priority. While independent operators recognized the importance of food safety, their capacity to embed it into daily operations was hindered by limited resources, inconsistent training, and resistance among staff who often perceived food safety as an additional burden.

Another key insight was the centrality of leadership in shaping outcomes. In franchised businesses, leadership drove compliance, accountability, and cultural integration through visible commitment and structured initiatives. Independent businesses, by contrast, relied on managerial oversight and verbal reinforcement, often struggling to achieve buy-in across all staff levels. Furthermore, the research highlighted how independent businesses tended to adopt improvements only after external audits, incidents, or regulatory interventions, underscoring the reactive nature of their food safety management.

The study also underscored that education and culture are pivotal. While franchised businesses used innovative tools such as staff competitions, digital tracking, and specialized systems to reinforce knowledge and behaviour, independent businesses lacked consistent mechanisms to ensure retention and application of training. This created a cycle of weak enforcement, inconsistent practices, and heightened risks. The implications extend beyond individual businesses, raising public health concerns and threatening consumer trust in the wider sector.

- **Business Model Disparities:** Franchised businesses consistently demonstrated structured, proactive, and embedded food safety practices. These were supported by standardised training, clear SOPs, regular audits, and strong leadership. In contrast, independent businesses exhibited fragmented and reactive approaches, often constrained by limited resources, inconsistent training, and staff resistance.

- **Leadership as a Driver:** Leadership emerged as a decisive factor. In franchised settings, leadership actively drove compliance and cultural integration. Independent businesses relied more on managerial oversight and verbal reinforcement, often struggling to secure staff buy-in.
- **Reactive Compliance:** Independent operators tended to implement improvements only after external audits or incidents, underscoring a reactive compliance culture.
- **Education & Culture Gaps:** Franchised businesses used innovative tools—such as competitions, digital tracking, and specialized systems—to reinforce food safety knowledge and behaviour. Independent businesses lacked consistent mechanisms for training retention and application, increasing operational risk.
- **Public Health Implications:** These disparities raise broader concerns around consumer safety and trust, particularly in informal and small-scale retail environments.

Main Outcomes & Findings

Across all twelve dimensions, franchised businesses consistently outperformed independent businesses. In regulatory compliance, franchised businesses exhibited a deeply embedded culture of adherence, supported by clear policies, brand-driven reputation management, and financial incentives or penalties. Independent businesses, however, only improved compliance under external pressure, often struggling to integrate practices into daily routines.

In food receiving and storage, franchised businesses used rigorous cold chain management systems, SOPs, and detailed monitoring tools. Independent businesses, in contrast, relied on basic packaging checks or ad hoc inspections, with limited understanding of broader compliance requirements. Similar disparities were observed in cooking temperature control, where franchised businesses employed structured monitoring systems and thermometers, while independent operators relied on staff experience and lacked systematic oversight.

In contamination prevention, allergens, and personal hygiene, franchised models once again demonstrated systematic approaches using colour-coded systems, SOPs, and continuous staff engagement while independent businesses revealed knowledge gaps and reactive attitudes. Independent businesses frequently regarded compliance as an externally imposed requirement rather than a shared organizational responsibility.

In pest control, shelf readiness, customer education, and emergency procedures, franchised businesses integrated structured audits, training, and proactive monitoring, while independent businesses depended on external contractors, management interventions, or ad hoc practices. This inconsistency left them vulnerable to lapses in safety and regulatory breaches. Leadership emerged as the most decisive factor. Franchised businesses presented leadership commitment as operationalized through weekly meetings, food safety champions, and systematic communication. Similarly, in independent businesses, leadership was acknowledged but not consistently translated into cultural integration or staff discipline.

The cumulative finding is that franchised businesses have succeeded in embedding food safety as part of their culture and operational DNA. In contrast, independent businesses continue to struggle with fragmented, resource-constrained, and reactive approaches. Notably, the study also revealed parallels with the informal trader segment, where similar gaps are expected to be more pronounced given even lower access to resources, training, and regulatory support.

Recommendations

The research identified four overarching themes as critical to advancing food safety competence: Education, Compliance Support, Collaboration, and Food Safety Culture.

1. Education should be prioritized through the development of standardized training programmes aligned to the twelve dimensions of the PRPs. Training must be accessible, affordable, and adapted to the realities of small and independent businesses. Leveraging digital platforms, such as e-learning and digital tracking systems, can reduce costs and widen reach. Leadership development programs should be introduced to strengthen management's role in fostering accountability and embedding food safety as a shared responsibility. At the same time, public and customer education campaigns can complement business efforts, ensuring consumer awareness around issues such as allergens and storage.
2. Compliance Support is essential to bridge resource gaps, particularly for independent businesses. User-friendly SOPs, checklists, and templates should be developed and widely disseminated. Strengthened traceability tools and affordable incident management systems can help businesses prepare for and respond to emergencies. This support must be practical, reducing administrative burdens and enabling smaller operators to integrate compliance into their daily operations.
3. Collaboration across the sector offers an opportunity to accelerate improvements. Knowledge-sharing platforms between franchised and independent businesses can foster peer learning and mentorship. Partnerships with government, academia, and industry associations can produce common training frameworks, subsidized audits, and affordable pest control or traceability solutions. Policy advocacy is also critical, particularly in securing financial support and reducing barriers for smaller businesses and informal traders.
4. Building a Food Safety Culture is fundamental. This requires leadership modelling, staff engagement, and the integration of food safety into everyday routines. Organisations should invest in food safety culture assessments to identify gaps and design tailored interventions. Incentive programmes, recognition schemes, and participatory training can help foster ownership among employees, ensuring that food safety is no longer perceived as a burden but as an integral part of organizational success. Consistent audits, clear communication, and reinforcement of shared values will further embed food safety into organizational identity.

The recommendations also extend to the informal trader challenge, a vital yet vulnerable part of the sector. Moreover, given the absence of structured systems in this segment, interventions must be practical, low-cost, and accessible, including community-level training and simplified compliance tools. Addressing this gap is essential not only for protecting public health but also for supporting equitable growth across the food value chain.



TRANSFORMING THE TOWNSHIP RETAIL MARKET

Background & Purpose

The township retail market represents a vital segment of South Africa's economy, serving millions of households and contributing significantly to employment and income generation. Despite its significance, this market has historically been marginalized, facing structural constraints such as limited access to finance, underdeveloped infrastructure, and lack of integration into formal supply chains. The report aims to critically examine how the township retail economy can be transformed into a more dynamic, competitive, and sustainable sector. It seeks to unpack both the historical and contemporary factors that shape the sector, highlighting the ways in which informal and formal dynamics intersect to either constrain or advance growth. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed vulnerabilities in township retail, while simultaneously creating a renewed urgency for transformation, digital adoption, and innovative business models. The report positions township retail transformation not only as an economic imperative, but also as a developmental necessity, central to addressing unemployment, poverty, and inequality. Its purpose is therefore twofold: to generate evidence-based insights on the challenges and opportunities in township retail, and to propose strategies that can align this sector with national economic recovery, inclusive growth, and skills development agendas.

Key Insights

Several key insights emerge from the analysis of township retail.

- The sector is highly diverse, encompassing informal spaza shops, small-scale traders, street vendors, and increasingly, hybrid models that combine digital and physical retail practices. This diversity reflects resilience and adaptability, but also reveals the fragmented nature of the sector.
- Despite its significance, township retail is characterized by persistent exclusion from mainstream supply chains, with large wholesalers and retailers often dominating access to goods, thereby limiting margins for small operators.
- Infrastructure gaps such as inadequate storage facilities, poor transport systems, and unreliable utilities continue to undermine competitiveness and growth potential.
- The lack of affordable financing mechanisms prevents many township retailers from scaling operations or investing in new technologies.
- The report also highlights the growing importance of technology adoption, as digital payment systems, online platforms, and e-commerce are increasingly becoming avenues for expansion and efficiency. However, a digital divide remains, with many traders lacking the literacy, tools, or infrastructure to fully leverage these opportunities.
- The report further underscores the centrality of skills development. Township retailers often operate with limited business, financial, and managerial skills, constraining their ability to adapt to changing consumer patterns, engage with formal supply chains, or comply with regulatory frameworks.

Main Outcomes & Findings

The findings of the report reveal that township retail holds immense potential for transformation, however, requires targeted interventions to unlock this value. One major outcome is the identification of systemic barriers, such as unfair competition from large retailers who often penetrate township spaces

without creating meaningful partnerships with local traders. This perpetuates a cycle of dependency and marginalization.

Another outcome is the recognition that township retailers, when supported, can act as critical nodes of local economic activity, fostering job creation, local ownership, and community development.

The findings also stress that technology adoption is not a luxury but a necessity for competitiveness. Traders who have adopted digital payments and e-commerce platforms have seen improvements in efficiency, customer loyalty, and revenue growth. However, many remain excluded due to infrastructural and financial barriers.

The report further highlights that skills shortages, particularly in financial literacy, inventory management, and marketing, limit the ability of township retailers to expand.

Notably, the study emphasizes the role of collaborative models, where partnerships between government, corporates, financial institutions, and skills development bodies can generate inclusive ecosystems for growth. A hybrid approach that integrates informal and formal practices emerges as a key finding, pointing to a future where township retail evolves as part of the mainstream economy without losing its unique community-oriented character.

Recommendations

The report concludes with comprehensive recommendations aimed at driving the transformation of township retail into a sustainable, competitive, and inclusive sector. First, there is a pressing need to improve infrastructure in townships, particularly in relation to storage, transport, utilities, and digital connectivity. This would reduce operational inefficiencies and enable retailers to compete on better terms.

Second, access to affordable finance must be prioritized. Tailored financial products, micro-loans, and grants should be designed for township retailers, complemented by capacity-building programmes that enhance financial literacy and management skills.

Third, supply chain integration should be strengthened through deliberate policy and private-sector interventions that promote inclusive procurement, joint ventures, and cooperative models between large retailers and township traders.

Fourth, the digital divide must be bridged by expanding access to affordable data, devices, and digital literacy training, thereby enabling township retailers to harness the opportunities of e-commerce and digital payments.

Fifth, skills development must be at the center of transformation. Targeted programs focusing on entrepreneurship, financial management, customer service, and digital competencies are necessary to professionalize the sector.

Finally, institutional collaboration is critical. Government, industry stakeholders, SETAs, and development agencies should create coordinated support frameworks to monitor progress, foster innovation, and ensure that township retail transformation aligns with broader national priorities of job creation, poverty reduction, and economic inclusion.



WASTE MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES AND PRACTICES IN THE WHOLESALE AND RETAIL SECTOR IN SOUTH AFRICA:

Lessons from Global Best Practices

Background & Purpose

The investigation into waste management strategies within South Africa's Wholesale and Retail (W&R) sector has been driven by the growing global imperative for environmental sustainability, cost efficiency, and socio-economic development. Central to this investigation is the concept of green retailing, which seeks to integrate environmental protection with business profitability through careful management of supply chains, logistics, facilities, and post-consumer behaviours. The impetus for such approaches arises from multiple drivers, including global and national environmental policies, stakeholder pressures, and economic incentives.

Wastage, especially in packaging and food, represents a significant barrier to achieving green retail objectives, affecting environmental outcomes, socio-economic conditions, and food security. The retail sector plays a crucial role in generating packaging waste, with multinational corporations such as Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, and Nestlé highlighted among the highest polluters. Packaging and food waste contribute substantially to South Africa's GDP and employment rate, yet inefficient handling, inadequate recycling infrastructure, and limited policy alignment exacerbate environmental and economic challenges.

This report seeks to critically examine existing practices, identify gaps, and recommend sustainable interventions tailored to the W&R sector, drawing on global best practices and local insights.

Key Insights

The analysis reveals that waste management challenges in South Africa's W&R sector are complex and multifaceted. Major obstacles include inconsistent stakeholder alignment, insufficient data, poor measurement frameworks, and lack of unified waste reduction targets.

Food waste, in particular, is influenced by inefficiencies in distribution, outdated labelling practices, over-ordering, and inadequate staff training.

Packaging waste faces similar hurdles, with rising disposal costs, limited recycling alternatives, and misaligned incentives obstructing progress toward circular economy adoption. Regulatory frameworks such as the National Waste Management Strategy (NWMSS) and the National Environmental Management: Waste Act (NEMWA), provide mandates for Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) and industry waste management plans, yet compliance remains inconsistent.

The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed vulnerabilities in supply chains, cold chain management, and consumer behaviour, intensifying food loss and wastage. Despite these challenges, opportunities exist for retailers to implement sustainable supply chain practices prioritising local suppliers, improving demand forecasting, optimising cold-chain logistics, and adopting seasonal sourcing which can reduce environmental impact while enhancing operational efficiency.

Global comparisons demonstrate that countries such as the USA, Canada, Germany, the UK, and Australia have successfully integrated circular economy principles, innovative packaging, and technology-enabled food recovery programmes, offering valuable lessons for South Africa

Main Outcomes & Findings

The study underscores the critical roles of stakeholders, retailers, wholesalers, producers, waste management companies, NGOs, and government agencies, in driving sustainable waste management. Effective interventions are shown to require a combination of stakeholder collaboration, technological innovation, and policy alignment.

South African initiatives, such as the Food Forward SA programme and Pick n' Pay's Food Waste Reduction Programme, illustrate how redistribution, inventory optimisation, and consumer education can significantly mitigate food wastage and contribute to food security. However, persistent gaps exist between local and international practices, particularly regarding infrastructure, regulatory support, funding, and public engagement. Evaluation of SA's Waste Management Act reveals strengths in its legislative framework but highlights limitations in enforcement, stakeholder compliance, and capacity.

Key indicators such as food waste generation rates, diversion rates, recovery rates, and financial impact metrics, are essential tools for monitoring progress and guiding continuous improvement. The report finds that successful waste management not only enhances environmental stewardship but also generates economic benefits through cost savings, operational efficiencies, and brand reputation enhancement.

Recommendations

Leveraging global best practices, survey insights, and local analysis, this report presents targeted recommendations for retailers, government institutions, and stakeholders within the Wholesale and Retail (W&R) sector.

To effectively address Food Loss and Waste (FLW), large-scale data collection and analysis are essential to quantify volumes, types, and sources across the supply chain. This should be complemented by robust stakeholder engagement to inform practical, evidence-based interventions.

Benchmarking against international standards will help identify systemic gaps and catalyse innovative, locally adaptable solutions. Policy and regulatory reviews must address inconsistencies, introduce meaningful incentives, and promote alignment with sustainable practices.

Capacity building initiatives including training and awareness campaigns for staff, suppliers, and consumers are critical to driving behavioural change and operational improvements. Case studies from developed economies such as the USA, Canada, Germany, the UK, and Australia offer valuable lessons in effective strategies, technologies, and collaborative models that can be tailored to the South African context.

Government institutions are urged to enhance infrastructure, strengthen regulatory oversight, and expand public education efforts. Support for circular economy initiatives should be reinforced through incentives, technical assistance, and robust monitoring frameworks.

Sustainable waste management goals must prioritise source reduction, efficient recycling, resource recovery, and energy-conscious practices. These efforts should be underpinned by collaborative programmes involving retailers, NGOs, and industry associations.

Finally, ongoing evaluation of interventions and successful programme models such as Food Forward SA, FareShare, and OzHarvest underscores the importance of innovation, community partnerships, and cross-sector knowledge exchange in reducing waste and advancing food security.



NAVIGATING THE MERCHANTISER'S DILEMMA

strategies to mitigate role-related challenges

Background & Purpose

Merchandising plays a pivotal role in South Africa's Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) retail sector, yet the experiences, contributions, and challenges of merchandisers remain underexplored. Merchandisers occupy a unique position, reporting simultaneously to their employer, store management, and suppliers, which introduce operational complexities and often conflicting expectations. The purpose of this study is to explore the contributions of merchandisers to customer satisfaction and store performance, examine the challenges they face, and identify strategies to enhance their effectiveness and engagement within the retail environment. Using a qualitative approach, semi-structured online interviews were conducted with fifteen merchandisers and fourteen managers overseeing merchandising activities. A thematic analysis, combining deductive and inductive approaches, was applied, with iterative review of transcripts to ensure accurate coding, theme refinement, and interpretation. Rigorous quality control measures and ethical protocols, including voluntary participation, confidentiality, and informed consent, were observed throughout the study. By examining perspectives from both merchandisers and managers, the study aims to illuminate the integral role of merchandisers, while offering actionable insights to address persistent challenges in the FMCG retail context.

Key Insights

The study highlights the central role of merchandisers in driving customer satisfaction and overall store success.

Merchandisers perform a wide range of essential tasks, including replenishing shelves, setting up promotions and displays, rotating stock, maintaining neat and clean shelves, updating product labels, assisting customers in locating items, and coordinating stock orders.

These actions ensure consistent stock availability and enhance the customer experience. Managers acknowledged that merchandisers' specialised knowledge, on-floor presence, and engagement with customers significantly contribute to store performance, sales, and operational efficiency.

Despite their critical contributions, merchandisers experience numerous challenges. Role conflict and ambiguity arise as they balance expectations from multiple supervisors, often leading to confusion about priorities and operational responsibilities. Role overload is common, with merchandisers frequently asked to perform duties outside their formal scope, sometimes under tight time constraints.

A sense of exclusion and limited collaboration with store employees further undermines their sense of belonging, engagement, and morale. Communication gaps, insufficient recognition, and the lack of consultation on operational decisions exacerbate these challenges, leaving merchandisers feeling undervalued despite their frontline contributions.

These findings align with prior research emphasizing the importance of employee empowerment, recognition, and inclusion in mitigating job stress and enhancing performance in retail contexts.

Main Outcomes & Findings

The research reveals that when retail stores actively address merchandisers' challenges, both operational outcomes and employee satisfaction improve.

Positive practices include soliciting merchandisers' input on stock management, promotions, and customer service; assisting with tasks during busy periods; providing recognition and appreciation; and fostering inclusive team environments.

Projects demonstrating structured collaboration between stores and merchandising companies such as aligned shifts, performance monitoring, and regular feedback resulted in enhanced loyalty, operational efficiency, and job satisfaction. Nonetheless, these initiatives are inconsistently implemented across the sector.

Interviews highlighted that effective communication, inclusion, and recognition are key determinants of merchandiser engagement and performance. Conversely, environments lacking these elements contribute to role stress, disengagement, and diminished contributions to customer service and store performance. Overall, the study underscores the dual importance of technical competence and interpersonal inclusion for merchandisers to fully realize their potential and positively impact retail outcomes.

Recommendations

Based on findings from the interviews and supported by prior literature, several actionable recommendations for retail stores emerge, centering on communication, inclusion, and recognition:

Firstly, regular meetings should be facilitated to promote open communication and collaboration between merchandising companies, retail stores, suppliers, and merchandisers. These sessions should aim to align goals, clarify responsibilities, and address challenges collaboratively.

Clear role definitions, job descriptions, and expectations should be reinforced to reduce role conflict and ambiguity, ensuring merchandisers understand their duties and reporting lines.

Recognition and appreciation of merchandisers' contributions are essential. Managers should acknowledge efforts, offer verbal or tangible rewards, and cultivate personal engagement to affirm the merchandisers' importance to customer satisfaction, profitability, and store success.

Open communication channels should be encouraged, allowing both formal and informal dialogue where merchandisers can share challenges, ideas, and feedback without fear of reprisal.

Inclusion should be fostered through active participation in store activities such as floor walks, training sessions, team-building events, and strategy meetings, ensuring merchandisers are integrated as equal team members.

Providing the same induction and access to store knowledge as permanent staff can reinforce a sense of belonging and collaborative engagement.

Implementing these recommendations is mutually beneficial, as merchandisers gain a sense of value, ownership, and belonging, while stores benefit from increased efficiency, improved customer satisfaction, and enhanced overall success. By addressing role-related challenges systematically and fostering a culture of communication, inclusion, and recognition, FMCG retail stores can strengthen the contributions of merchandisers, resulting in more sustainable and high-performing retail operations across South Africa.



UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL OF LOWER-LEVEL EMPLOYEES:

a collaborative approach for upliftment and
empowerment in South Africa's FMCG retail sector

Background & Purpose

Upliftment and empowerment are critical yet underexplored constructs within South Africa's fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) retail sector, particularly in relation to lower-level employees whose contributions are often overlooked. These employees, encompassing roles such as merchandisers, cashiers, and floor staff, are the backbone of retail operations, directly influencing customer satisfaction, operational efficiency, and overall store performance.

The present study aims to investigate current initiatives aimed at uplifting and empowering lower-level employees in FMCG retail stores, examining how these employees perceive upliftment and empowerment, the benefits derived from these practices, and the degree to which employees experience empowerment within their work environment.

The study further seeks to gather insights from managerial perspectives to understand how organizational policies and practices facilitate or impede these outcomes. Using a qualitative, interpretivist, and exploratory approach, the research team conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 15 employees and 13 managers from FMCG retail stores. Thematic analysis, employing both inductive and deductive techniques, was applied to capture key themes, and quality checks were implemented to ensure trustworthiness and rigor throughout the study.

The overarching purpose was to provide evidence-based recommendations for fostering sustainable upliftment and empowerment practices that benefit employees, retail stores, customers, and the broader community.

Key Insights

Participants articulated diverse interpretations of upliftment and empowerment, with employees emphasizing opportunities to learn, gain knowledge, acquire new skills, receive recognition, and pursue career advancement.

Motivation, goal-setting, and improved quality of life were also central to employees' definitions. Managers echoed these sentiments and further highlighted mentorship, participation in decision-making, and providing the necessary resources as integral to empowerment.

Both groups emphasized the fundamental importance of acknowledging the contributions of lower-level employees, who are pivotal in ensuring operational excellence, customer satisfaction, and store profitability.

The benefits of empowerment were consistently linked to increased productivity, higher job satisfaction, improved staff retention, stronger customer relations, and positive community impact.

These findings align with prior research, indicating that empowered frontline employees demonstrate enhanced performance, engagement, and organisational commitment. Furthermore the study uncovered mixed experiences among employees, with some feeling valued and supported, while others reported exclusion, limited recognition, role ambiguity, and low engagement, reflecting inconsistencies in managerial practices and organisational culture.

Main Outcomes & Findings

The analysis revealed that while FMCG retail stores have initiated measures to uplift and empower employees, these efforts are unevenly implemented. Employees reported that feedback mechanisms often exist but are inadequately valued or actioned, resulting in scepticism about their impact.

Communication was highlighted as a key area of concern, with information sharing being inconsistent, selectively distributed, and often limited to operational or negative feedback contexts.

Training programmes were available in most stores but were frequently constrained by limited coverage, irregularity, and a focus on induction rather than continuous development.

Career advancement pathways were similarly inconsistent, with opportunities varying by manager discretion and individual relationships rather than structured organisational processes.

Recognition and appreciation were identified as vital motivators; however, participants reported that positive contributions often went unnoticed, undermining engagement and morale.

The role of management emerged as pivotal in shaping the experiences of lower-level employees. Managers who were visible, approachable, supportive, and actively engaged on the shop floor were associated with higher employee motivation, better performance, and enhanced empowerment outcomes. Conversely, senior managers were often perceived as distant, lacking a nuanced understanding of frontline challenges, which further compounded role ambiguity and disengagement.

Employees' suggestions emphasized mentorship, structured training, career progression transparency, and managerial visibility as mechanisms to strengthen empowerment. Additionally, the need for inclusivity, recognition, and constructive feedback was recurrently stressed as fundamental to fostering a sense of belonging and purpose among employees.

Recommendations

The study's findings underscore the need for a collaborative, people centered approach to upliftment and empowerment, emphasizing the inclusion of lower-level employees in decision-making to avoid top-down or patronising practices.

Retailers are encouraged to consider the following comprehensive recommendations:

- Engage in open dialogue about expectations, interpretations, and needs of both managers and employees.
- Recognise, respect, and value each employee's strengths and contributions;
- Actively solicit input and provide constructive feedback on suggestions;
- Offer ongoing practical and theoretical learning opportunities, covering both job-specific and soft skills;
- Introduce clear and transparent career progression pathways aligned with employees' ambitions and organisational requirements;
- cultivate supportive work relationships that demonstrate genuine interest in individual growth and well-being;
- encourage ownership by gradually delegating responsibilities while avoiding undue pressures;
- promote transparency regarding business matters and how employees' contributions impact outcomes and;
- embrace mistakes as learning opportunities in an ongoing process of empowerment.

These measures extend beyond organisational policy to managerial practices, emphasising visible leadership, one-on-one engagement, mentorship, and leading by example. Collectively, these recommendations aim to create a work environment where employees are recognised, empowered, and engaged, fostering enhanced productivity, staff retention, customer satisfaction, and broader community impact.



A META-ANALYSIS OF W&RSETA INPUT STATISTICS IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION, TECHNICAL & VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING SECTORS, IN THE FREE STATE.

Background & Purpose

The purpose of this study was to critically analyse W&RSETA input statistics within the Higher Education and, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sectors in the Free State. The research situates itself within the broader mandate of W&RSETA to facilitate skills development and workforce entry, particularly for entry-level participants. Over recent years, the W&RSETA has implemented a range of interventions to promote workforce participation, including bursary schemes, graduate placement programmes, internships, and targeted skills development initiatives.

These programmes are designed to address both unemployment and under-skilling within the retail sector, ensuring that the labour force is equipped with relevant competencies while simultaneously supporting economic development objectives.

This study employed a qualitative case study methodology, integrating insights from a comprehensive literature review on SETA interventions and guiding policies with a meta-analysis of W&RSETA input statistics. By analysing existing interventions and assessing their impact on workforce development, the study seeks to provide actionable recommendations for optimising skills development strategies for both unemployed and employed individuals in South Africa.

The overarching goal is to support adaptive, evidence-based approaches to skills training that align with sector-specific needs, emerging industry trends, and broader national socio-economic imperatives.

Key Insights

The meta-analysis revealed that W&RSETA-funded interventions have contributed significantly to the skills development ecosystem in the Free State, particularly in creating pathways for entry-level participation in the workforce.

Key insights indicate that while unemployed youth benefit from structured bursaries, internships, and bridging programmes, employed individuals have comparatively fewer opportunities for upskilling and continuous professional development.

Participants highlighted that the sector's evolving technological and operational requirements, particularly the rise of digital commerce and supply chain innovations, necessitate a greater emphasis on digital literacy and emerging industry trends.

Furthermore, collaboration between SETAs, training providers, and retail companies emerged as a critical factor in ensuring programme relevance and sustainability.

Effective alignment of interventions with high-demand retail skills was identified as a key determinant of both employability outcomes and sectoral productivity.

Insights also underscored the need for comprehensive monitoring and evaluation, including robust longitudinal studies to capture the long-term impact of funding interventions on employment outcomes and socio-economic mobility.

Main Outcomes & Findings

The study found that while the SETA interventions are largely effective in promoting skills acquisition, several gaps limit their overall impact.

- Multi-year funding and contingency planning are inconsistent, which introduces volatility and affects the sustainability of programmes.
- Skills development initiatives, while targeted in certain areas such as vocational training and internships,

often lack sufficient alignment with emerging industry requirements, including digital skills, supply chain management, and retail technology applications.

- Upskilling opportunities for employed beneficiaries remain limited, highlighting a need for flexible learning models that accommodate work schedules and diverse learner profiles.
- Evaluation of programme outcomes, including employment placement, participant satisfaction, and skills retention, is not consistently applied, reducing the capacity for adaptive programme improvements.
- Outreach and awareness campaigns targeting underserved communities are not uniformly implemented, limiting equitable access to learnerships, bursaries, and skills programmes.

Overall, findings indicate that the SETA interventions positively influence workforce readiness, however, greater coordination, strategic funding allocation, and stakeholder engagement are essential to maximise impact across both unemployed and employed populations.

Recommendations

Building on the meta-analysis and key findings, the study proposes a multi-pronged set of recommendations aimed at enhancing the effectiveness, inclusivity, and sustainability of the W&RSETA's skills development initiatives.

First, establishing stable funding frameworks through multi-year funding plans and contingency measures will ensure consistent programme delivery, even amid economic fluctuations.

Second, targeted skills development programmes should prioritise identified gaps in the retail sector, including digital literacy, supply chain management, and emerging technologies, while continuously evaluating programme outcomes using key performance indicators such as employment rates and participant satisfaction.

Third, strengthening stakeholder partnerships, including collaborations with retail companies, training providers, and public-private initiatives will improve programme relevance, resource efficiency, and co-funding opportunities.

Fourth, upskilling initiatives for employed individuals should be expanded, using flexible and modular learning models, including online and part-time courses, to ensure workforce adaptability and career growth.

Fifth, increasing awareness and engagement among diverse communities is essential to ensure equitable access to bursaries, internships, and learnerships.

Sixth, robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks should be implemented, including longitudinal studies, to track long-term outcomes and inform adaptive strategies.

Furthermore, integrating innovative training approaches such as gamification, blended learning, and industry-aligned content, will enhance learner engagement and skills retention.

Expanding bridging programmes for unemployed youth that combine theoretical training with practical experience will increase employability and workforce readiness.

The SETA should continuously evaluate and adjust funding allocations based on outcomes, directing resources toward initiatives demonstrating the highest impact for both unemployed and employed beneficiaries.

Collectively, these recommendations aim to create a more agile, responsive, and impactful skills development ecosystem that addresses current workforce gaps, supports career progression, and strengthens sectoral productivity and sustainable economic growth.



UNEMPLOYED W&R SETA-FUNDED BENEFICIARIES

Background & Purpose

The Wholesale and Retail Sector Education and Training Authority (W&RSETA) plays a pivotal role in bridging the gap between education and employment for the unemployed youth, while simultaneously enhancing the skills and competencies of workers within the retail sector. Its interventions are strategically designed to create an enabling environment for beneficiaries to secure employment, upskill for career advancement, or acquire the necessary skills to establish and grow their own enterprises.

Through a suite of programmes including learnerships, graduate placements, bursaries, internships, workshops, and skills development initiatives, The SETA aims to cultivate a workforce that is knowledgeable, competent, and professional, ultimately contributing to the transformation and sustainability of the wholesale and retail sector.

This research project sought to track and trace beneficiaries who participated in W&RSETA-funded interventions to determine their employment, entrepreneurial, or continued training outcomes. Additionally, the study evaluated the effectiveness of these interventions in reducing youth unemployment, promoting entrepreneurship, and enhancing employability.

By examining the outcomes of these programmes, the study aimed to provide actionable recommendations for maximising the return on investment from W&RSETA funding and improving the overall impact of skills development interventions.

Key Insights

The study reveals that W&RSETA-funded interventions have had a measurable impact on beneficiary employment and entrepreneurial activity, although the outcomes are uneven and highlight areas for improvement.

Most beneficiaries reported positive experiences, indicating that participation in learnerships, bursaries, internships, and graduate placement programmes enhanced their employment status or entrepreneurial journey.

Satisfaction data revealed that while a majority expressed contentment with the funding and skills programmes, a notable proportion of beneficiaries indicated neutrality or dissatisfaction, highlighting the need for further refinement of programme delivery and alignment with industry requirements.

Respondents overwhelmingly supported improvements to programme content to address technological advancements within the sector, emphasising the need for interventions that keep pace with evolving market demands. Similarly, beneficiaries advocated for strengthened learnerships and graduate placement opportunities, more formal mentorship training, and securing industry commitment to facilitate employment, demonstrating a clear demand for programmes that provide practical work experience, career guidance, and long-term industry engagement.

The insights suggest that while The SETA has made significant strides in workforce development, the sector requires continuous recalibration of interventions to align with evolving industry standards, technology trends, and entrepreneurial need.

Main Outcomes & Findings

The research identified several critical outcomes and challenges in the current skills development framework.

Firstly, a substantial proportion of unemployed beneficiaries faced challenges in securing sustainable employment due to limited job opportunities, skills mismatches, and a competitive labour market.

Secondly, while funded programmes improved employment outcomes for many, there were clear gaps in curriculum alignment, practical work experience, and mentorship support. Beneficiaries noted that learnerships and skills programmes, while valuable, often lacked exposure to real-world industry practices and entrepreneurial development.

Data from satisfaction surveys indicated that most beneficiaries agreed that the SETA interventions positively impacted their employability, yet a notable percentage remained neutral or dissatisfied, suggesting areas for programme enhancement.

Furthermore, respondents strongly supported the integration of mentorship, career guidance, soft skills development, and formalised pathways from learning to work, highlighting the necessity for holistic interventions that address both technical and professional competencies.

These findings underscore the importance of industry-academic partnerships, adaptive curricula, and structured work-integrated learning to enhance employability, retention, and entrepreneurial outcomes.

Recommendations

The study recommends a comprehensive, multi-dimensional approach to optimise W&R SETA interventions. Key recommendations include:

- Aligning curricula with technological and sectoral advancements to ensure beneficiaries acquire relevant, up-to-date skills.
- Partnerships between academic institutions, retail businesses, and industry experts should be strengthened to inform curriculum design and facilitate work-integrated learning, mentorship, and career guidance.
- Work readiness programmes, internships, and graduate placements must be expanded and closely monitored to provide practical experience that enhances employability.
- Funding strategies should prioritise programmes that address scarce and critical skills, ensuring resources are selectively allocated to interventions with the greatest potential impact.
- Mentorship support should be formalised, incorporating industry-based mentors to guide beneficiaries and enhance practical learning outcomes.
- Entrepreneurship education must be embedded across all programmes to foster an entrepreneurial mindset and promote self-employment opportunities, addressing youth unemployment sustainably.
- Regular qualitative evaluation and monitoring of interventions, including cost-benefit analysis and feedback from beneficiaries and employers, should guide programme improvements and ensure accountability.
- Contractual obligations with participating institutions and industry partners must be enforced to safeguard programme quality, promote beneficiary retention, and prevent exploitation, such as the use of students as “sponsored labour.”
- The SETA marketing and outreach initiatives should be strengthened to inform beneficiaries of available opportunities and enhance participation rates.

Collectively, these recommendations aim to ensure that interventions are relevant, practical, and responsive to the evolving needs of the retail sector, thereby maximising employment, upskilling, and entrepreneurial outcomes.



YOUTH EMPOWERMENT REPORT 2024

Background & Purpose

The Youth Empowerment Project (YEP) was conceived in response to South Africa's persistent socio-economic challenges, particularly high youth unemployment, limited access to skills development opportunities, and systemic inequalities that continue to marginalise young people. Recognising the urgent need to integrate youth into the mainstream economy, the project sought to create pathways for empowerment through education, training, and employment opportunities. Its purpose extended beyond short-term interventions, aiming instead to build sustainable solutions that would enhance employability, promote entrepreneurship, and strengthen social cohesion. At the core of the initiative was the recognition that young people are not only vulnerable to exclusion but also hold immense potential as agents of innovation, growth, and transformation. The project thus set out to equip youth with relevant skills, expand access to information and resources, and foster an enabling environment where they could actively participate in economic and community development. By aligning with national priorities, such as the National Development Plan (NDP) and youth employment strategies, YEP was designed to address both immediate socio-economic gaps and long-term developmental objectives.

Key Insights

The project revealed critical insights into the barriers and opportunities surrounding youth empowerment. Structural challenges such as poor quality education, mismatched skills, limited exposure to work environments, and weak institutional support were identified as persistent obstacles.

Gender disparities further compounded these issues, with young women often facing heightened barriers to economic participation due to cultural norms and limited access to opportunities.

The project highlighted the importance of integrated support systems that combine training, mentorship, and practical work experience, noting that isolated interventions often fail to produce lasting impact.

A major insight was the need to align training programmes with market demands to ensure employability and sustainability, rather than focusing solely on theoretical education.

Furthermore, the project underscored the importance of partnerships between government, private sector, civil society, and educational institutions, as collaborative efforts significantly increase the scope, quality, and sustainability of youth empowerment initiatives.

The study further reveals that youth require more than technical skills, they need soft skills, entrepreneurial competencies, and resilience to navigate a competitive labour market.

Additionally, the project found that digital inclusion and access to technology are critical enablers of youth participation in modern economies, highlighting the risks of digital exclusion in a rapidly evolving labour market.

Main Outcomes & Findings

The Youth Empowerment Project achieved notable progress in creating opportunities for youth, while identifying systemic weaknesses that require continued attention.

Among the main outcomes was the successful rollout of targeted training and skills development programmes, which enhanced participants' employability and entrepreneurial potential. Many young people reported increased confidence, improved work readiness, and greater awareness of career opportunities.

The project also facilitated internships, job placements, and business development support, enabling participants to transition from training to practical application. Notably, the initiative fostered youth-led enterprises, which contributed not only to income generation but also to community upliftment. Findings, in contrast, also revealed significant challenges.

While training improved individual prospects, structural barriers such as limited job availability, slow economic growth, and bureaucratic inefficiencies hindered broader impact.

Geographic disparities were evident, with rural youth facing more severe challenges compared to their urban counterparts due to limited infrastructure and fewer economic opportunities.

Another finding was that although the project enhanced youth employability, sustained outcomes require long-term investment, continuous mentorship, and institutional support beyond project timelines.

Overall, the evidence suggests that empowerment initiatives can create meaningful change, but they must be embedded within broader systemic reforms to fully address youth unemployment and socio-economic exclusion.

Recommendations

The report underscores the need for multi-stakeholder collaboration, long-term investment, and alignment with broader national development goals.

Firstly, government must strengthen policy frameworks to ensure youth empowerment initiatives are coordinated, adequately funded, and monitored for impact. This includes parliamentary evaluation of youth development policies to identify gaps and ensure accountability.

Government institutions should prioritise sustainable support programmes that provide skills development, job placement services, and access to finance for youth entrepreneurs.

The private sector is urged to expand its role in creating youth employment through internships, apprenticeships, and enterprise development initiatives, leveraging corporate social investment to scale impactful programmes.

For retailers and other industry actors, aligning training programmes with actual labour market needs and investing in technology-driven solutions is key to building future-ready youth.

Furthermore, capacity building and awareness campaigns must be expanded to address gender disparities, challenge cultural barriers, and promote inclusivity. Successful global practices in youth employment should be adapted locally, with particular emphasis on integrating digital literacy, entrepreneurship, and innovation into training curricula.

Finally, systematic data collection and continuous evaluation should be institutionalised to inform evidence-based policy reforms and track progress.

These recommendations collectively highlight the urgency of not only creating opportunities but also ensuring the sustainability of empowerment interventions, positioning youth as central actors in South Africa's socio-economic transformation.



A COMPREHENSIVE IMPACT EVALUATION OF W&RSETA STRATEGIC PROGRAMMES:

Towards addressing the imbalance (or not)
between skills supply and demand

Background & Purpose

This report was developed in response to growing concerns about the persistent misalignment between the country's education and training outputs and the evolving needs of its labour market. South Africa continues to face entrenched challenges of unemployment, underemployment, and mismatched qualifications, particularly among young people who form the majority of the labour force. Concurrently, employers across multiple sectors report difficulties in recruiting appropriately skilled workers, pointing to systemic inefficiencies in the alignment of supply-side training systems and demand-side industry requirements.

The primary objective of this report is to critically assess the extent and causes of these imbalances, highlight sectoral variations, and provide evidence-based recommendations for addressing the skills mismatch. Central to the investigation is the recognition that education and training institutions are often supply-driven, producing qualifications that do not sufficiently match the competencies required in the workplace. By analysing patterns of skills production and absorption, the report seeks to inform policy reforms, improve coordination between education systems and industry, and propose strategies to enhance South Africa's human capital in ways that promote economic growth, social inclusion, and resilience in a rapidly changing global economy.

Key Insights

Several critical insights emerged from the analysis:

First, South Africa's labour market reveals deep structural distortions, where an oversupply of low- and semi-skilled labour coincides with shortages in high-demand occupations such as artisans, engineers, ICT specialists, health professionals, and management roles. This mismatch is exacerbated by high dropout rates in secondary and tertiary education, poor quality schooling in disadvantaged areas, and weak career guidance systems that channel learners into oversubscribed fields with limited labour market absorption.

Second, the country's training and higher education systems often operate in silos, with weak linkages to industry, resulting in graduates who lack the practical skills and workplace exposure required for employability.

The report further highlights spatial disparities, where rural and township youth have limited access to quality training institutions and employment opportunities, reinforcing patterns of inequality.

While policy frameworks such as the National Development Plan, the National Skills Development Plan, and Sector Skills Plans acknowledge the importance of alignment, implementation remains inconsistent, fragmented, and inadequately monitored.

Employers, in turn, report low levels of trust in training systems, citing concerns about the relevance of curricula and the readiness of graduates. Furthermore, globalisation, technological change, and the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) are reshaping skills demand, creating new occupations while rendering others obsolete. Yet, South Africa's skills planning mechanisms are not sufficiently agile to anticipate and respond to these shifts, leaving the workforce vulnerable to both structural unemployment and skills obsolescence.

Main Outcomes & Findings

The report finds that the imbalance between skills supply and demand has significant socio-economic implications, contributing directly to high unemployment rates, low productivity, and limited competitiveness of the South African economy.

Among the major outcomes is the identification of critical skills shortages in sectors such as manufacturing, wholesale and retail, construction, ICT, and health, which constrain sectoral growth and the ability to meet national development targets.

Another key finding is the oversupply of qualifications in humanities and social sciences, which do not match the demand patterns of a labour market increasingly shaped by technical, digital, and vocational competencies. The evidence also shows that Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs), while mandated to bridge the gap, face governance and capacity challenges that limit their impact. Poor alignment of occupational qualifications with industry standards further weakens their ability to create demand-responsive interventions.

The report also highlights the negative impact of underinvestment in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges, which remain under-resourced, stigmatized, and disconnected from industry. Furthermore, employers frequently indicate that even when graduates possess theoretical knowledge, they lack problem-solving, communication, digital literacy, and adaptability skills essential for workplace integration.

The research underscores that addressing skills mismatches requires a systemic and coordinated approach, as piecemeal interventions are insufficient to resolve the scale of the problem. The persistence of these imbalances not only undermines economic growth but also entrenches social inequality, as large numbers of educated yet unemployed youth face barriers to participation in productive economic activities.

Programmes, which enhanced participants' employability and entrepreneurial potential. Many young people reported increased confidence, improved work readiness, and greater awareness of career opportunities.

Recommendations

The report provides a series of recommendations aimed at addressing systemic weaknesses and promoting better alignment between skills supply and demand.

Firstly, it advocates for stronger partnerships between education institutions, SETAs, industry bodies, and government to ensure curricula are responsive to evolving labour market needs and that training incorporates practical, work-based learning. This should be complemented by enhanced labour market intelligence systems that generate accurate, up-to-date data on skills demand and feed directly into policy and planning processes.

The report continues to recommend targeted investments in TVET colleges, focusing on infrastructure, lecturer development, and curriculum reform, to reposition them as credible providers of technical and vocational skills aligned with industry requirements.

The findings further call for a reorientation of higher education enrolments, with greater incentives for students to enter scarce-skills fields such as engineering, ICT, health sciences, and artisanal trades, supported by bursaries, mentorship, and career guidance.

Employers are urged to expand workplace-based learning opportunities, including internships, apprenticeships, and graduate placements, as these provide vital exposure and bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Additionally, the report highlights the need for greater policy coherence and coordination across government departments to avoid duplication and fragmentation of skills development initiatives. Emphasis is also placed on promoting adaptability, entrepreneurship, and digital skills among young people to prepare them for the 4IR and future labour markets.

Lastly, it recommends continuous monitoring and evaluation of skills planning mechanisms, with accountability frameworks that ensure interventions are evidence-based and result-driven.

Collectively, these recommendations stress the urgency of aligning education and training systems with the realities of the labour market, not only to address unemployment but also to unlock South Africa's developmental potential and create a more inclusive economy.



EVALUATION OF THE IMPACT OF THE W&RSETA'S ITAMED PROGRAMME IN CREATING SUSTAINABLE FORMAL SMALL BUSINESSES

Background & Purpose

The ITAMED (Informal Traders and Micro-Enterprise Development) programme, implemented by the Wholesale and Retail SETA, was conceived against the backdrop of South Africa's pressing challenge of high unemployment, widespread informality, and limited entrepreneurial support structures. Informal traders and micro-enterprises form a crucial part of the South African economy, particularly as avenues of survivalist employment in marginalised communities. However, these enterprises often remain small, vulnerable, and excluded from mainstream economic opportunities. The purpose of the ITAMED programme was therefore twofold: to equip informal and micro-entrepreneurs with relevant business skills and to facilitate pathways for them to transition into sustainable, formalised enterprises that could create employment, contribute to local economies, and support sectoral transformation. The evaluation aimed to measure whether ITAMED achieved its intended objectives, assessing its design, implementation, and ultimate impact on participants' business growth, sustainability, and formalisation. It further sought to identify lessons and provide recommendations to strengthen future initiatives targeting the informal economy.

The evaluation is rooted in national imperatives such as the National Development Plan (NDP) and the National Skills Development Plan (NSDP), both of which highlight the role of SMMEs and informal traders in driving inclusive economic growth and employment. By focusing on the wholesale and retail sector, one of the largest employers in the country, the programme aimed to link micro-enterprises to broader economic opportunities, formal markets, and value chains.

This context reinforces the rationale for interventions that extend beyond skills training to include mentorship, access to finance, compliance assistance, and sustained support mechanisms.

The purpose of the evaluation was not only to review progress but to critically reflect on structural barriers, sector-specific challenges, and the broader policy environment shaping micro-enterprise development.

Key Insights

Several key insights emerged from the evaluation, highlighting both the strengths and limitations of the ITAMED programme. Notably, the programme successfully engaged a diverse group of participants—many of whom were previously excluded from formal training opportunities. It created an avenue for informal traders to gain critical business knowledge, including financial management, marketing, customer service, and compliance with regulatory requirements. This transfer of knowledge was an important step in bridging the gap between survivalist operations and entrepreneurial growth. However, the evaluation revealed that skills' training alone is insufficient to ensure long-term sustainability. While many participants expressed improved confidence and business awareness, structural challenges such as limited access to finance, lack of market linkages, and bureaucratic hurdles in formalisation continued to undermine impact.

A key insight was the differentiated impact between participants who received ongoing mentorship and those who only completed training modules. Participants who benefitted from mentorship and post-training support demonstrated higher levels of business improvement, greater resilience, and stronger prospects of formalisation. These findings affirm that continuous support structures, rather than once-off interventions, are critical in driving sustainable outcomes. Moreover, the evaluation found that while ITAMED emphasised compliance and registration, many participants struggled with municipal red tape, licensing delays, and costs associated with transitioning to the formal sector. These obstacles highlight systemic constraints that training interventions cannot address in isolation.

Finally, the programme underscored the importance of localised, context-specific approaches. Entrepreneurs operating in rural areas, townships, or informal settlements face distinct challenges compared to their in urban counterparts. The evaluation cautioned against a “one-size-fits-all” model, emphasizing that targeted strategies such as infrastructure support, sector-specific partnerships, and access to supply chains are more likely to produce transformative and inclusive results.

Main Outcomes & Findings

The evaluation revealed mixed but valuable outcomes regarding ITAMED’s effectiveness. On the positive side, the programme enhanced participants’ knowledge base, instilled greater business confidence, and improved practices in areas such as bookkeeping, customer service, and compliance awareness. A proportion of participants were able to register their businesses, access formal banking services, and expand their operations. This demonstrates that ITAMED contributed meaningfully to laying the foundation for enterprise growth and formalisation. Furthermore, the programme played an important socio-economic role by fostering entrepreneurship among historically disadvantaged groups, particularly women and youth, thereby advancing transformation in the sector.

However, findings also showed that the pathway from informality to formality remains fraught with difficulties. Many participants reported limited progress beyond training due to inadequate follow-up support, lack of capital, and weak integration into supply chains. The formalisation process, while inspirational, was often unattainable given the high costs, regulatory complexities, and infrastructural barriers. As a result, the programme’s broader impact on creating sustainable formal businesses was less pronounced than anticipated.

The evaluation also identified gaps in monitoring and evaluation systems, with insufficient tracking of long-term business performance post-training. This limited the ability to measure whether improvements were sustained or translated into broader sectoral growth.

Importantly, the evaluation highlighted the catalytic role of mentorship, networks, and partnerships in driving meaningful impact. Where participants had access to mentors, financial institutions, or retail value chain linkages, outcomes were far more positive. Conversely, isolated interventions lacking integration into broader ecosystems yielded limited results.

While ITAMED was successful in raising awareness and building entrepreneurial skills, its long-term impact on business sustainability and formalisation was constrained by systemic barriers and insufficient post-training support.

Recommendations

Drawing on the evaluation findings, several strategic actions are proposed to strengthen future iterations of ITAMED and similar programmes.

1. Transition to Ecosystem-Based Support Models

A fundamental shift is required from short-term training interventions to comprehensive, ecosystem-based support frameworks. This entails integrating skills development with access to finance, infrastructure, and market opportunities addressing the multifaceted factors that influence enterprise sustainability. Strengthening partnerships with municipalities, financial institutions, and large retailers will be essential to creating practical pathways for participants to enter the formal economy.

2. Institutionalise Mentorship and Post-Training Support

Mentorship and ongoing support must be embedded as core components of the programme, rather than treated as optional enhancements. Sustained mentorship, business coaching, and peer-to-peer networks have been shown to significantly improve business performance, resilience, and prospects for formalisation. The programme should also adopt differentiated approaches tailored to local contexts, recognising that entrepreneurs in rural, peri-urban, and township areas face distinct challenges that require customised solutions.

3. Reform the Regulatory and Compliance Environment

Collaborative efforts with government stakeholders are needed to address regulatory barriers. Simplifying business registration processes, reducing associated costs, and streamlining municipal requirements would lower the threshold for formalisation and improve programme effectiveness. Additionally, ITAMED should implement robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks to track long-term outcomes such as business survival rates, employment creation, and contributions to sectoral transformation.

4. Reposition ITAMED as a Strategic Sectoral Platform

Finally, the evaluation recommends repositioning ITAMED as a catalytic platform within the broader Wholesale and Retail sector strategy for supporting SMMEs and informal traders. By embedding the programme within sectoral value chains, aligning it with national policy priorities, and leveraging strategic partnerships, ITAMED can evolve from a training-focused initiative into a driver of inclusive economic growth. In doing so, it will more effectively contribute to the development of sustainable formal enterprises, advance transformation, and support national objectives for job creation and poverty alleviation.





INSIGHTS INTO THE CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES, AND IMPLICATIONS FACED BY W&RSETA BURSARY PROGRAMMES:

A Stakeholder Perspective

Background & Purpose

The Wholesale and Retail Sector Education and Training Authority (W&R SETA) bursary programme was established to expand access to higher education, address skills shortages, and strengthen workforce readiness within the wholesale and retail (W&R) sector in South Africa. It was designed not only as a financial support mechanism but also as a vehicle to empower youth, address inequalities in education access, and contribute to national skills development objectives. The programme's purpose extends beyond enabling individual students to pursue qualifications; it also seeks to align educational outcomes with sectoral transformation priorities, industry labour market demands, and broader socioeconomic imperatives such as youth employment and entrepreneurship. This evaluation of the bursary programme was undertaken to assess its effectiveness, explore the demographic and academic outcomes of beneficiaries, identify systemic barriers that hinder its full impact, and make recommendations to strengthen the programme's design and delivery. The study employed a mixed-methods, two-phased approach. Phase 1 analysed bursary recipient data between 2021 and 2024 to identify demographic and funding patterns, qualification preferences, institutional performance, and completion rates. Phase 2 explored deeper insights through online surveys and virtual focus groups with bursary recipients, employers, and education providers, focusing on the adequacy of financial and academic support, alignment of funded qualifications with industry needs, and barriers to workforce readiness. Collectively, these approaches provided a holistic view of the bursary programme, combining statistical analysis with lived experiences.

Key Insights

The findings reveal both achievements and critical shortcomings of the bursary programme. On one hand, the bursary has succeeded in broadening educational access, particularly for women and youth in underrepresented provinces. Approximately two-thirds of recipients were female, and most fell within the 20–23 age bracket.

The Limpopo and the Western Cape Provinces received the highest bursary allocations, showing targeted attention to geographic disparities. The programme also demonstrated inclusivity in language representation, with IsiXhosa, Sepedi, and isiZulu being the most common home languages among recipients. These trends illustrate the programme's reach and contribution to addressing inequities in access to education.

However, deeper analysis revealed systemic weaknesses. Funding allocations were concentrated in traditional qualifications such as accounting, business management, and office administration. While these areas remain important, they do not fully capture the shifting skills demands of the modern W&R sector. Critical fields such as e-commerce, digital marketing, data analytics, and supply chain management skills, central to the digital transformation of retail, were underfunded or largely overlooked. Employers voiced concern that graduates lack digital, analytical, and customer engagement competencies, which are increasingly critical for competitiveness and innovation in the sector.

The programme's struggle with academic success and completion rates was exposed by the study. Out of 5 806 unemployed bursary recipients analysed, only 297 completed their qualifications between 2023 and 2024. This translates to a worrying completion rate of just over 5%, reflecting not only challenges with academic support but also systemic issues such as delayed funding disbursements, insufficient mentorship, and inadequate institutional support structures. While some institutions such as Sol Plaatje University and the Vaal University of Technology recorded relatively better completion rates, the overall picture suggests that most bursary recipients are not translating financial support into formal qualifications.

Phase 2 further highlighted challenges of financial insufficiency, delays in disbursements, and the absence of holistic support mechanisms such as internships, mentorship programmes, and career counselling. Students often struggled with living costs, which bursaries did not fully cover, and this financial pressure undermined academic performance. Additionally, the lack of practical exposure limited graduates' employability. Both employers and students emphasised the need for entrepreneurship education as an avenue to foster innovation and create employment opportunities within the sector. Collectively, these insights indicate that while the bursary programme has expanded access, its design and implementation are not adequately preparing graduates for the realities of the job market or the future of work.

Key Main Outcomes & Findings

The evaluation produced a set of concrete findings across demographic, institutional, financial, and sectoral dimensions.

The findings confirmed the programme's ability to target new entrants into the higher education system, with most bursaries awarded to first-time students at higher education and training (HET) institutions and TVET colleges.

Significant disparities in funding levels, with allocations ranging from as little as R10 000 to over R140 000 were revealed, suggesting inconsistent financial planning and inequities in the distribution of support. From an institutional perspective, bursary awards were concentrated in a small set of institutions, notably Bakhoana Management and Business College, and the University of Limpopo. While this indicates targeted efforts to strengthen specific institutions, it also raises concerns about limited diversity in institutional partnerships and the risk of over-concentration in certain regions or providers. Qualification funding was similarly skewed, with over 700 bursaries directed toward accounting qualifications alone, followed by business management-related diplomas and certificates. By contrast, qualifications aligned to the future of retail such as digital commerce and supply chain management were underrepresented.

The most striking outcome is the low completion rate, which represents the programme's greatest vulnerability. With only 297 completions recorded out of thousands of bursary awards, the data indicates that access to education is not translating into tangible outcomes for the majority of students. This undermines both the efficiency and impact of the bursary programme and limits its contribution to skills development and labour market readiness. The reasons for these poor outcomes are multifaceted: insufficient financial coverage, delayed disbursements, weak academic support structures, inadequate mentorship, lack of exposure to practical learning, and misalignment between funded qualifications and industry demand.

Employers underscored a growing gap between graduate skills and workplace requirements. The industry increasingly requires digital fluency, customer experience management, data literacy, and problem-solving skills. Yet the programme continues to prioritise traditional academic qualifications. The lack of integration between educational institutions, industry stakeholders, and the bursary programme exacerbates this misalignment. Furthermore, entrepreneurship widely recognised as a vital avenue for employment creation remains peripheral in the bursary framework.

Collectively, these outcomes highlight the urgent need for the bursary programme to be recalibrated towards a demand-driven, future-focused approach.

Recommendations

To address the challenges identified, several recommendations emerge from the report.

Firstly, the W&R SETA bursary programme should diversify its funding focus by supporting qualifications in emerging fields such as digital marketing, e-commerce, supply chain management, and data analytics. These areas are central to the evolving retail sector and essential for equipping graduates with future-ready skills. Curriculum alignment should be enhanced through closer collaboration between educational institutions and employers, ensuring that funded programmes reflect industry needs and technological shifts.

Secondly, the programme must strengthen academic and financial support systems. This includes ensuring timely and predictable disbursement of bursary funds, expanding financial coverage to include living expenses, and offering continuous support for students progressing to advanced qualifications. Complementary academic support mechanisms such as tutoring, mentorship, mental health services, and career counselling should be institutionalised to address non-financial barriers to success.

Thirdly, the programme should integrate practical learning and industry exposure. Structured internships, job shadowing, and mentorship opportunities must form a central part of the bursary offering. Stronger partnerships between SETA, employers, and higher education institutions are essential to provide students with real-world skills, networks, and pathways to employment. Similarly, entrepreneurship education and support should be embedded within bursary-funded programmes, equipping students not only as job seekers but also as job creators.

Finally, the SETA must establish a system of continuous monitoring and evaluation. Regular reviews of bursary outcomes, informed by stakeholder feedback and industry intelligence, will enable adaptive decision-making. Best practices from high-performing institutions should be scaled, while weak-performing institutions should be held accountable for low completion rates. By creating a more responsive, evidence-driven bursary programme, the SETA can ensure its funding delivers meaningful returns for both students and the broader W&R sector.





THEMATIC OVERVIEW OF THE FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Theme: Digital Future – Wholesale and Retail Sector

The study demonstrates that the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated technology adoption across the wholesale and retail sector, making digital tools and platforms central to business survival and competitiveness. E-commerce, digital payment systems, virtual customer engagement, and data-driven supply chains became essential, while hybrid operating models combining physical and digital channels emerged as the new norm. The research also highlights disparities in adoption: large, well-capitalised firms adapted quickly, whereas SMMEs and informal traders faced barriers such as limited digital literacy, connectivity challenges, and constrained access to finance. These dynamics have permanently reshaped workforce demands, training priorities, and the sector's competitive landscape, underscoring the urgent need for strategic interventions to build a digitally capable, resilient workforce and inclusive business environment.

Identified outcomes

The findings align primarily with:

- **Outcome 3:** Growth-focused programmes for public Training Providers, HEIs, TVETs, and CETs are essential to ensure curricula remain responsive to the rapidly evolving digital requirements of the sector. The study highlights the need for providers to integrate e-commerce, data analytics, and digital customer service into programmes.
- **Outcome 5:** Increased opportunities to access W&R occupationally directed programmes are required, especially for digital roles such as online retail operations, last-mile logistics, and inventory analytics. Work-based learning and modular, stackable credentials can enable access for both new entrants and incumbent workers.
- **Outcome 6:** Skills development and entrepreneurship support for emerging, small, medium, and informal businesses are critical to prevent the digital divide from widening. Training combined with access to affordable tools and financing empowers smaller operators to adopt digital solutions.
- **Outcome 8:** An appropriately skilled, agile, and responsive workforce is needed to meet current and emerging sectoral digital skills requirements. Up-skilling and re-skilling initiatives are critical to ensure workforce readiness for hybrid, technology-enabled business models.

Recommendations

The findings align primarily with:

- **Digital Skills Framework:** Define sector-wide digital competencies covering e-commerce, digital payments, analytics, inventory management, customer experience, and basic automation/AI awareness.
- **Modular & Stackable Training:** Develop short, flexible modules allowing up-skilling without disrupting employment; stackable towards full qualifications.
- **Work-Based Digital Learning:** Introduce apprenticeships and practical placements in online retail, logistics, and digital merchandising.

- **SMME & Informal Trader Support:** Combine grants/loans with digital skills training, POS upgrades, online storefront access, and marketplace integration.
- **Connectivity & Infrastructure:** Partner with ISPs to provide affordable data, shared digital hubs, and Wi-Fi access in underserved townships/rural areas.
- **Provider Capacity Uplift:** Support TVETs, HEIs, and CETs to embed digital retail labs, e-commerce sandboxes, and instructor training on emerging tools.
- **Entry-Level On-Ramps:** Target youth and informal traders with foundational digital literacy, online commerce, and customer service skills.
- **Automation Transition Support:** Re-skill roles at risk due to automation, combining technical and soft skills (adaptability, problem-solving).
- **Career Guidance Updates:** Update the Career Guidance Toolkit with new digital retail role profiles and pathways.
- **Monitoring & Research:** Continuously track digital adoption, skills gaps, SMME impact, and workforce outcomes to inform ongoing interventions

Theme: Enhancing Food Safety Competence in Wholesale and Retail

The research underscores that food safety is a critical determinant of consumer trust, public health, and business sustainability in the wholesale and retail sector. It reveals significant disparities between franchised and independent businesses, with franchised outlets demonstrating structured, proactive compliance supported by leadership, training, and monitoring, while independent and informal operators often struggle with reactive approaches, limited resources, and fragmented training. The study highlights the centrality of leadership, education, and culture in embedding consistent food safety practices. Moreover, it emphasizes the importance of standardized training, digital tools, collaboration, and the development of a food safety culture as critical interventions to strengthen sector-wide competence and resilience.

Identified outcomes

The findings primarily align with:

- **Outcome 6:** Growth-focused skills development and entrepreneurship development support for emerging, small, medium, and informal business enterprises. The study demonstrates that independent and informal businesses require targeted, accessible training and compliance support to operate safely and sustainably, which enhances their participation in the mainstream economy.
- **Outcome 3:** Growth-focused programmes for public Training Providers, HEIs, TVETs, and CETs can support curriculum development and standardized training frameworks for food safety, ensuring providers are responsive to sectoral needs and regulatory requirements.
- **Outcome 8:** An appropriately skilled, agile, and responsive workforce is reinforced by embedding food safety competencies, leadership, and accountability into the workforce, which is essential for sectoral compliance and consumer protection.

Recommendations

- **Standardized Training Programmes:** Develop accessible, affordable, and tailored training aligned with the twelve PRP dimensions, including digital learning modules for independent and informal businesses.
- **Leadership Development:** Implement programs to strengthen management accountability and foster a culture of compliance throughout all staff levels.
- **Compliance Support Tools:** Create user-friendly SOPs, checklists, templates, and affordable traceability/incident management systems to support smaller operators in daily operations.
- **Sector Collaboration:** Facilitate peer-learning platforms and partnerships with government, academia, and industry bodies to share best practices, provide subsidized audits, and deliver affordable technical solutions.
- **Food Safety Culture:** Embed food safety into organisational identity through continuous staff engagement, incentive programs, recognition schemes, participatory training, and regular audits.
- **Community-Level Interventions:** Develop practical, low-cost solutions for informal traders, including local training, simplified compliance tools, and mentorship programmes.
- **Public Awareness:** Complement business efforts with customer education campaigns focusing on allergen awareness, storage practices, and safe food handling.
- **Continuous Monitoring and Research:** Track improvements in compliance, workforce competence, and food safety culture to inform ongoing sector interventions and adapt strategies to emerging risks

Theme: Transforming Township Retail for Inclusive Growth

The township retail market is a critical driver of local economic activity, employment, and household access to goods, yet remains historically marginalized. The study highlights systemic challenges including limited access to finance, weak infrastructure, exclusion from mainstream supply chains, and fragmented skills development. Despite these constraints, township retailers display resilience and adaptability, increasingly experimenting with hybrid business models that combine digital and physical retail practices. COVID-19 further exposed vulnerabilities but also accelerated the urgency for transformation, highlighting technology adoption, entrepreneurial support, and capacity building as central levers for inclusive sector growth. The research underscores that targeted interventions are essential to professionalize township retail, integrate it into formal economic circuits, and ensure sustainable competitiveness while preserving its community-oriented character.

Identified outcomes

The findings primarily align with:

- **Outcome 6:** Growth-focused skills development and entrepreneurship support for emerging entrepreneurs, and small, medium, and informal business enterprises. The study emphasizes that township retailers require targeted training in business management, financial literacy, marketing, and digital competencies to participate effectively in the mainstream economy.
- **Outcome 5:** Increased opportunities to access W&R occupationally directed programmes. Training and development interventions for township traders, including short courses and modular programmes, are vital to strengthen operational capacity, digital adoption, and entrepreneurial acumen.
- **Outcome 3:** Growth-focused programmes for public training providers, HEIs, TVETs, and CETs are implicated, as these institutions can develop and deliver contextually relevant programmes to bridge skills gaps within township retail.

Recommendations

- **Infrastructure Improvement:** Upgrade storage, transport, utilities, and digital connectivity to reduce operational inefficiencies.
- **Access to Finance:** Introduce tailored financial products, micro-loans, and grants for township retailers, complemented by financial literacy and management training.
- **Supply Chain Integration:** Promote inclusive procurement, joint ventures, and cooperative models linking township traders with large wholesalers and retailers.
- **Digital Inclusion:** Expand access to affordable data, devices, e-commerce platforms, and digital literacy programmes.
- **Targeted Skills Development:** Implement training programs in entrepreneurship, financial management, customer service, inventory management, and digital competencies.
- **Collaborative Support Frameworks:** Strengthen partnerships between government, corporate, financial institutions, and SETAs to create coordinated support ecosystems.
- **Hybrid Business Models:** Encourage adoption of integrated informal-formal models that combine community-oriented practices with scalable, formalized operations.
- **Monitoring & Evaluation:** Establish mechanisms to track the impact of interventions on business performance, skills uptake, and sectoral competitiveness.

Theme: Sustainable Waste Management and Circular Economy in Wholesale & Retail.

The research underscores that food safety is a critical determinant of consumer trust, public health, and business sustainability in the wholesale and retail sector. It reveals significant disparities between franchised and independent businesses, with franchised outlets demonstrating structured, proactive compliance supported by leadership, training, and monitoring, while independent and informal operators often struggle with reactive approaches, limited resources, and fragmented training. The study highlights the centrality of leadership, education, and culture in embedding consistent food safety practices. Moreover, it emphasizes the importance of standardized training, digital tools, collaboration, and the development of a food safety culture as critical interventions to strengthen sector-wide competence and resilience.

Identified outcomes

The findings are closely aligned with:

- **Outcome 6:** Growth-focused skills development and entrepreneurship development support for emerging, small, medium, and informal enterprises. The study identifies that these businesses often lack access to knowledge, resources, and training in sustainable waste management, which limits their operational efficiency, competitiveness, and integration into the mainstream economy. Skills interventions and entrepreneurship support can empower these operators to adopt circular economy practices, optimize resource use, and reduce waste costs.
- **Outcome 3:** Growth-focused programmes for public Training Providers, HEIs, TVETs, and CETs. Capacity building across the sector is critical to embed best practices in waste reduction, sustainability, and circular economy principles, ensuring that future workforce entrants and existing staff are equipped with relevant competencies.
- **Outcome 8:** An appropriately skilled, agile, and responsive workforce. Training in sustainable practices, regulatory compliance, and operational innovation ensures that employees can respond to emerging environmental, technological, and regulatory requirements effectively.

Recommendations

- **Skills Development & Training:** Develop programmes for staff, suppliers, and SMMEs on sustainable waste management, circular economy principles, and operational efficiency.
- **Entrepreneurship Support:** Provide targeted support to emerging and small enterprises to adopt waste-reducing innovations, recycling, and food recovery practices.
- **Stakeholder Collaboration:** Facilitate partnerships among retailers, NGOs, government, and industry associations to coordinate interventions and knowledge sharing.
- **Policy & Regulatory Alignment:** Review and harmonize regulations, incentivize compliance, and strengthen enforcement of sustainable practices.
- **Digital Monitoring & Data Management:** Implement data-driven frameworks to track food and packaging waste, diversion rates, and recovery metrics.
- **Infrastructure Support:** Strengthen local recycling, storage, and cold-chain infrastructure to enable effective waste reduction and recovery.
- **Behavioural Change Initiatives:** Launch awareness campaigns for staff, consumers, and suppliers to reinforce sustainability practices.
- **Benchmarking & Global Best Practices:** Utilize international case studies to inform locally adapted interventions, focusing on innovation and operational efficiency.
- **Continuous Evaluation:** Monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions, adjusting strategies to ensure measurable environmental, economic, and skills development impact.

Theme: Optimizing Merchandiser Impact in FMCG Retail

The study highlights the critical role of merchandisers in ensuring stock availability, product visibility, customer service, and overall store performance within the FMCG sector. Despite their centrality, merchandisers face persistent challenges including role conflict, ambiguity, overload, and limited inclusion in operational decision-making. These challenges negatively affect engagement, morale, and efficiency. Conversely, when stores implement structured communication, recognition, and inclusion practices, merchandisers demonstrate higher job satisfaction, stronger loyalty, and improved contributions to store success. The research underscores that addressing both technical competence and interpersonal dynamics is essential to unlock merchandisers' full potential and enhance operational outcomes across the sector.

Identified outcomes

The study aligns primarily with:

- **Outcome 8:** An appropriately skilled, agile, and responsive workforce is central to the findings. Ensuring merchandisers are engaged, recognized, and effectively trained equips them to meet current operational demands and adapt to evolving retail expectations.
- **Outcome 6:** Growth-focused skills development and entrepreneurship support indirectly applies, particularly for small-scale or informal retail operators who rely on merchandisers to execute business-critical tasks efficiently. Improving merchandiser capability contributes to business resilience and competitiveness.
- **Outcome 3:** Growth-focused programmes for training providers are relevant in terms of developing structured curricula that address both technical and soft skills (communication, collaboration, problem-solving) for merchandisers and frontline retail staff.

Recommendations

- **Structured Communication:** Facilitate regular meetings between merchandisers, store management, suppliers, and merchandising companies to clarify roles, align goals, and resolve operational conflicts.
- **Role Definition:** Clearly define job descriptions, reporting lines, and performance expectations to reduce ambiguity and overload.
- **Recognition & Reward:** Implement formal and informal mechanisms to acknowledge merchandisers' contributions, including verbal praise, incentives, and performance-based rewards.
- **Inclusion in Decision-Making:** Actively involve merchandisers in stock planning, promotions, and customer service initiatives to enhance engagement and ownership.
- **Training & Skills Development:** Develop modular training programmes addressing both technical competencies (inventory management, product knowledge) and interpersonal skills (communication, teamwork, problem-solving).
- **Team Integration:** Ensure merchandisers participate fully in store activities such as floor walks, training sessions, and strategy meetings to foster belonging and collaboration.
- **Monitoring & Feedback Loops:** Implement mechanisms for continuous feedback and performance monitoring to adapt interventions and track merchandiser engagement and productivity.
- **Support for Small Retail Operators:** Provide guidance and tools to smaller businesses to optimise merchandiser deployment, enhancing operational efficiency and customer service.

Theme: Empowering Frontline Talent in FMCG Retail

The study highlights the critical role of lower-level employees such as cashiers, merchandisers, and floor staff in driving operational efficiency, customer satisfaction, and overall store performance within South Africa's FMCG retail sector. It identifies empowerment and upliftment as central to enhancing employee engagement, motivation, and productivity, yet reveals that current practices are inconsistently applied. Key gaps include uneven training coverage, lack of structured career pathways, limited recognition, and inconsistent communication from management. The research emphasizes that a collaborative, people-centered approach where employees are included in decision-making, supported by visible management, and provided with opportunities for skill development is essential to foster sustainable empowerment and improve organisational performance.

Identified outcomes

The findings align primarily with:

- **Outcome 8:** An appropriately skilled, agile, and responsive workforce is directly supported through structured training, mentorship, and continuous development, equipping lower-level employees with both technical and soft skills to meet current and emerging sectoral needs.
- **Outcome 5:** Increased opportunities to access W&R occupationally directed programmes are highlighted through the need for transparent career pathways, training, and progression opportunities tailored to lower-level employees.
- **Outcome 6:** Growth-focused skills development and entrepreneurship support is indirectly supported, as empowerment initiatives can strengthen employees' capacity to participate meaningfully in entrepreneurial ventures or small business operations, particularly in the informal FMCG sector.

Recommendations

- **Structured Career Pathways:** Introduce clear, transparent progression routes that align individual ambitions with organisational requirements.
- **Continuous Skills Development:** Implement ongoing practical and theoretical training covering both job-specific skills and soft skills such as communication, leadership, and emotional intelligence.
- **Mentorship & Coaching:** Establish mentorship programmes linking lower-level employees with experienced staff and managers for guidance, feedback, and personal development.
- **Recognition & Feedback:** Develop systematic approaches to acknowledge achievements, provide constructive feedback, and reinforce positive contributions.
- **Visible and Supportive Management:** Encourage managers to actively engage on the shop floor, communicate openly, and demonstrate genuine interest in employee growth and well-being.
- **Collaborative Decision-Making:** Include employees in operational and strategic discussions where appropriate, fostering ownership, accountability, and engagement.
- **Empowerment Culture:** Promote an organisational culture where mistakes are embraced as learning opportunities, encouraging innovation, confidence, and adaptability.
- **Inclusivity and Equity:** Ensure all lower level employees have equitable access to learning, advancement, and participation opportunities, bridging disparities across stores or regions.

Theme: Optimizing Skills Development and Workforce Entry

The study underscores the importance of strategic evidence-based interventions to strengthen skills development and workforce participation in the wholesale and retail sector. By analysing W&RSETA-funded programmes, including bursaries, internships, and targeted skills initiatives, the research identifies successes in creating entry pathways for youth and unemployed individuals. At the same time, it reveals gaps in up-skilling for employed workers and alignment with emerging sectoral needs. The findings emphasize the need for flexible, modular learning approaches integration of digital and supply chain skills, and stronger collaboration between SETAs, training providers, and retail companies. This ensures that skills interventions are both responsive to technological advances and capable of supporting long-term employability and sectoral productivity.

Identified outcomes

The findings align primarily with:

- **Outcome 3:** Growth-focused programmes for Public Training Providers, HEIs, TVETs, and CETs are critical to ensure that curricula remain relevant to emerging retail technologies, digital commerce, and supply chain innovations. Strengthening provider capacity and embedding flexible, modular learning is essential for responsiveness.
- **Outcome 5:** Increased opportunities to access W&R occupationally directed programmes are necessary, particularly for unemployed youth and early-career entrants, to bridge the gap between education and work readiness.
- **Outcome 6:** Growth-focused skills development and entrepreneurship support is key for emerging entrepreneurs and small or informal businesses, as targeted training and access to resources improve sector inclusion and participation in the mainstream economy.
- **Outcome 8:** An appropriately skilled, agile, and responsive workforce is needed to meet the sector's evolving digital and operational requirements. Continuous upskilling of employed individuals ensures workforce adaptability and career progression.

Recommendations

- **Stable Funding Frameworks:** Implement multi-year funding plans and contingency measures to ensure consistency of bursaries, internships, and skills programmes.
- **Targeted Skills Development:** Prioritise gaps in digital literacy, supply chain management, and retail technology applications; continuously evaluate programme relevance and outcomes.
- **Flexible Learning Models:** Expand modular, online, and part-time courses to accommodate employed learners and diverse learner profiles.
- **Enhanced Stakeholder Partnerships:** Strengthen collaboration with retail companies, HEIs, TVETs, CETs, and public-private initiatives to improve resource efficiency, co-funding, and programme alignment with industry needs.
- **Inclusive Access:** Increase outreach and awareness campaigns targeting underserved communities to promote equitable access to bursaries, internships, and learnerships.
- **Robust Monitoring & Evaluation:** Establish longitudinal studies and KPI based tracking to measure employment outcomes, learner satisfaction, and skills retention for adaptive programme improvements.
- **Innovative Training Approaches:** Integrate gamification, blended learning, and industry-aligned content to enhance engagement and retention.
- **Expanded Bridging Programmes:** Combine theoretical training with practical work experience for unemployed youth to improve employability and workforce readiness.
- **Strategic Resource Allocation:** Continuously adjust funding towards programmes demonstrating the highest impact for both unemployed and employed participants.

Theme: Enhancing Employment and Entrepreneurial Outcomes for Unemployed Beneficiaries.

This study highlights the role of W&R SETA-funded interventions in bridging the gap between education and meaningful employment for unemployed youth. The research underscores how learnerships, bursaries, internships, graduate placements, and skills development programmes equip beneficiaries with both technical and soft skills necessary to succeed in the wholesale and retail sector. It identifies the ongoing challenges of skills mismatches, limited practical exposure, and barriers to entrepreneurial engagement, while emphasizing the critical need for work-integrated learning, mentorship, and adaptive curriculum design. The findings reveal that when interventions are structured, industry-aligned, and supported with guidance and resources, they significantly improve employability, entrepreneurial capacity, and sectoral engagement, contributing to a more skilled, agile, and industry-ready workforce.

Identified outcomes

The research aligns primarily with:

- **Outcome 2:** Increased access to informed career choices through structured career guidance, mentorship, and work-integrated learning. Beneficiaries expressed a need for formalised career support, practical exposure, and guidance to navigate employment pathways effectively.
- **Outcome 5:** Increased opportunities to access W&R occupationally directed programmes, including learnerships, internships, and graduate placements that equip youth with sector-specific competencies and work experience.
- **Outcome 6:** Growth-focused skills development and entrepreneurship support for emerging and small business operators. The study highlights the importance of embedding entrepreneurial education across programmes to empower beneficiaries to create self-employment opportunities.
- **Outcome 8:** An appropriately skilled, agile, and responsive workforce capable of meeting the sector's current and emerging skills needs. Upskilling and mentorship initiatives were shown to enhance both technical and professional competencies, improving employability and workforce readiness.

Recommendations

- **Curriculum Alignment:** Regularly update programme content to reflect technological and sectoral advancements, ensuring beneficiaries acquire relevant, future-fit skills.
- **Work-Integrated Learning:** Expand internships, learnerships, and graduate placements with structured practical exposure to improve employability and sectoral familiarity.
- **Mentorship Programmes:** Formalise mentorship with industry based mentors to guide beneficiaries, foster soft skills, and provide career navigation support.
- **Entrepreneurship Integration:** Embed entrepreneurship training across all programmes to foster self-employment and small business creation.
- **Partnerships for Industry Alignment:** Strengthen collaboration between academic institutions, employers, and sector experts to ensure curricula and learning experiences align with realworld industry demands.
- **Targeted Funding for Critical Skills:** Prioritise interventions addressing scarce and in demand skills to maximise return on investment and sectoral impact.
- **Monitoring & Evaluation:** Implement continuous qualitative and quantitative evaluation to track beneficiary outcomes, improve programme delivery, and maintain accountability.
- **Enforce Contractual Quality Measures:** Ensure institutions and partners comply with obligations to safeguard programme quality and prevent exploitation.
- **Marketing & Outreach:** Enhance communication to raise awareness of available programmes and increase participation rates among unemployed youth.

Theme: Youth Empowerment and Skills Integration in the Wholesale & Retail Sector

The Youth Empowerment Project (YEP) underscores the critical need to address youth unemployment and socio-economic exclusion through targeted skills development, work experience, and entrepreneurship support. The study highlights both structural barriers, such as limited job availability, inadequate infrastructure, and gender disparities while exposing opportunities for youth inclusion, particularly through aligned training, mentorship, and technology access. By linking education and training with real market demands, the initiative demonstrates how strategic interventions can enhance employability, foster entrepreneurship, and build sustainable pathways into the mainstream economy. The findings further emphasise that youth empowerment must combine technical, soft, and entrepreneurial skills while promoting digital inclusion to equip young people for the rapidly evolving wholesale and retail sector.

Identified outcomes

The findings of the Youth Empowerment Report primarily align with:

- **Outcome 5:** Increased opportunities to access W&R occupationally directed programmes are essential for youth to transition from training to practical application, including internships, apprenticeships, and job placements within the sector.
- **Outcome 6:** Growth-focused skills development and entrepreneurship support are central, particularly for youth-led enterprises and small-scale entrepreneurial initiatives that enable participation in the mainstream economy.
- **Outcome 8:** An appropriately skilled, agile, and responsive workforce is cultivated by equipping youth with a combination of technical, soft, and digital skills, ensuring their readiness for current and emerging sector needs.

Recommendations

- **Expand Youth-Focused Occupational Programmes:** Develop internships, apprenticeships, and work-integrated learning opportunities within W&R businesses, aligned to sectoral skills demands.
- **Entrepreneurship Development Support:** Offer business development training, mentoring, and financial support for youth-led micro, small, and informal enterprises.
- **Digital Literacy & Inclusion:** Provide access to digital tools, online learning platforms, and technology-enabled business solutions for youth participants.
- **Soft Skills & Resilience Training:** Incorporate communication, leadership, problem-solving, and adaptability modules into youth programmes to enhance workforce agility.
- **Gender & Inclusivity Interventions:** Target programmes to address gender disparities, challenge cultural barriers, and promote equal participation in W&R occupations.
- **Market-Aligned Training:** Ensure all skills development and training curricula are aligned with current and projected sectoral labour market needs.
- **Mentorship & Long-Term Support:** Establish sustained mentoring, coaching, and follow up mechanisms to support youth beyond initial training and placements.
- **Collaborative Multi-Stakeholder Approach:** Engage government, industry, civil society, and training providers in coordinated programmes to maximise reach, effectiveness, and sustainability.
- **Monitoring & Evaluation Systems:** Collect systematic data and track youth programme outcomes to inform policy, refine interventions, and ensure accountability.

Theme: Bridging the Skills Supply–Demand Gap in the W&R Sector

The research highlights systemic imbalances between the skills produced by South Africa's education and training institutions and the evolving needs of the wholesale and retail sector. The post-COVID and 4IR environment has accelerated skills demand for technical, digital, and adaptable competencies, while the labour market simultaneously experiences oversupply in low-demand fields. Weak linkages between training providers and employers, limited practical exposure, and inconsistent career guidance exacerbate structural unemployment and constrain sectoral growth. The study underscores the urgency of aligning education outputs with labour market needs through coordinated interventions, work-based learning, and responsive training programmes, particularly targeting youth, township learners, and underserved communities.

Identified outcomes

The study aligns with the following outcomes:

- **Outcome 2:** Increased access to informed career choices through the Career Guidance Toolkit. The findings emphasize the critical role of career guidance in directing learners toward scarce-skills fields and high-demand W&R occupations, preventing oversupply in irrelevant disciplines.
- **Outcome 3:** Growth-focused programmes for training providers, HEIs, TVETs, and CETs. The research highlights the need for provider capacity-building, updated curricula, and integration of practical, work-based learning to align supply with evolving sector requirements.
- **Outcome 5:** Increased opportunities to access W&R occupationally directed programmes. Workplace-based learning initiatives, apprenticeships, and internships are critical to ensure learners gain exposure to sector-relevant competencies.
- **Outcome 8:** An appropriately skilled, agile, and responsive workforce able to meet current and emerging sectoral needs. Upskilling in problem-solving, digital literacy, adaptability, and entrepreneurial skills is essential to address the current gaps and anticipate future skills needs.

Recommendations

- **Career Guidance Enhancement:** Expand and modernize the Career Guidance Toolkit to reflect scarce-skills occupations in W&R, digital commerce, and 4IR-relevant roles.
- **Provider Capacity Building:** Support HEIs, TVETs, and CETs to update curricula, incorporate digital tools, and establish stronger industry linkages.
- **Work-Based Learning Expansion:** Scale up internships, apprenticeships, and practical placements across W&R enterprises to bridge the theory practice gap.
- **Targeted Incentives for Scarce-Skills Fields:** Provide bursaries, mentorship, and exposure to high-demand roles such as logistics, digital retail, and supply chain management.
- **Skills Agility & Upskilling:** Introduce programmes for adaptability, digital literacy, entrepreneurship, and problem solving to build a flexible, future-ready workforce.
- **Data-Driven Planning:** Strengthen labour market intelligence systems to inform curriculum planning, skills forecasting, and occupational demand monitoring.
- **TVET Investment:** Upgrade infrastructure, faculty development, and equipment to enable practical and relevant technical training.
- **Policy Coordination & Monitoring:** Ensure coherent implementation of skills development initiatives across government, SETAs, and industry partners, with accountability frameworks and continuous evaluation.
- **Inclusive Access Strategies:** Prioritize township and rural youth for targeted interventions, ensuring equitable access to W&R occupational programmes.
- **Entrepreneurship Integration:** Embed entrepreneurial skills in W&R training programmes to prepare learners for self-employment and small business participation within the sector.

Theme: Sustainability and Impact

The ITAMED programme demonstrates the critical role of structured skills development combined with ecosystem support in enabling informal traders and micro-enterprises to transition into sustainable formal businesses. While the programme successfully delivered training in financial management, customer service, marketing, and compliance, the evaluation reveals that standalone training is insufficient to achieve long-term sustainability. Mentorship, ongoing support, access to finance, and integration into supply chains are crucial enablers. The programme also highlighted systemic barriers such as regulatory red tape, infrastructure limitations, and market access challenges, particularly in rural, township, and peri-urban contexts. Importantly, ITAMED underscores the need for differentiated, context-sensitive approaches that link skills development with structural support to foster inclusive growth, entrepreneurship, and sectoral transformation.

Identified outcomes

The study aligns primarily with:

- **Outcome 6:** Growth-focused skills development and entrepreneurship support for emerging entrepreneurs, and small, medium, and informal business enterprises to enhance their participation in the mainstream economy. The evaluation shows that ITAMED directly targeted this group, equipping them with entrepreneurial knowledge and facilitating pathways into formal economic participation.
- **Outcome 5:** Increased opportunities to access W&R occupationally directed programmes. The programme offered structured training modules and practical business guidance that created learning opportunities aligned with sectoral occupational needs.

Recommendations

- **Ecosystem-Based Support:** Integrate skills training with access to finance, infrastructure, markets, and value chains to enhance sustainability.
- **Mentorship & Post-Training Support:** Institutionalise mentorship, coaching, and peer-to-peer networks as core programme components.
- **Context-Specific Approaches:** Tailor interventions for rural, peri-urban, and township entrepreneurs to address unique local challenges.
- **Regulatory Engagement :** Collaborate with municipalities and government stakeholders to simplify registration, reduce costs, and streamline compliance processes.
- **Monitoring & Evaluation:** Strengthen frameworks to track long-term outcomes, including business survival, job creation, and contributions to sectoral growth.
- **Strategic Integration:** Embed ITAMED within broader sectoral initiatives to leverage partnerships, align with national policy priorities, and support inclusive economic development.
- **Access to Market Linkages:** Facilitate connections between informal/formal traders and established retail value chains to enhance competitiveness.
- **Capacity Building for Scale:** Offer advanced training modules and practical upskilling to enable growth from micro to small and medium enterprises.
- **Financial & Technological Support:** Provide access to low-cost finance, digital tools, and platforms to improve operational efficiency and market reach.

Theme: Enhancing Bursary Programmes for Sectoral Skills Alignment

The study highlights the critical role of bursary programmes in expanding access to higher education and addressing skills shortages in the wholesale and retail sector. While the programme has succeeded in improving demographic equity, particularly for youth and women in underserved provinces, it faces systemic weaknesses that limit its impact on workforce readiness and sectoral competitiveness. Key challenges include skewed funding towards traditional qualifications, low completion rates, inadequate academic and financial support, and weak integration with industry needs. The findings underscore the urgent need for a future-focused, demand-driven bursary framework that equips graduates with digital, analytical, and entrepreneurial skills aligned to evolving sectoral priorities.

Identified outcomes

The research links most strongly to:

- **Outcome 3:** Growth-focused programmes for public Training Providers, HEIs, TVETs, and CETs. The study highlights the need for bursary funding to align with emerging skills requirements and to strengthen institutional capacity to deliver relevant qualifications.
- **Outcome 5:** Increased opportunities to access W&R occupationally directed programmes. Bursaries should target skills gaps in digital commerce, supply chain management, and e-commerce, providing pathways to employment in high-demand roles.
- **Outcome 6:** Growth-focused skills development and entrepreneurship development support for emerging entrepreneurs, SMMEs, and informal business enterprises. Embedding entrepreneurship within bursary programmes can foster innovation, self-employment, and sectoral transformation.
- **Outcome 8:** An appropriately skilled, agile, and responsive workforce. The programme must ensure graduates are equipped with both technical and soft skills, including digital fluency, customer engagement, problem-solving, and workplace readiness, to meet evolving sectoral demands.

Recommendations

- **Diversify Qualification Funding:** Support emerging and high-demand fields such as digital marketing, e-commerce, data analytics, and supply chain management.
- **Align Curriculum with Industry Needs:** Strengthen collaboration between HEIs, TVETs, and employers to ensure bursary programmes reflect current and future sectoral skills demands.
- **Enhance Academic Support:** Introduce tutoring, mentorship, mental health support, and career counselling to improve student retention and completion rates.
- **Financial Adequacy & Timeliness:** Ensure bursary funds cover tuition, living expenses, and other incidental costs, with timely disbursement to prevent academic disruption.
- **Practical Exposure & Internships:** Integrate structured workplace learning, job shadowing, and industry placements to improve employability and work readiness.
- **Embed Entrepreneurship Education:** Include entrepreneurship modules, incubation support, and mentoring to empower students as job creators.
- **Institutional Capacity Building:** Support HEIs and TVETs to improve delivery in emerging skill areas and ensure scalability of best practices.
- **Monitoring & Evaluation:** Implement a continuous feedback loop and adaptive management system to track bursary impact, completion rates, and alignment with sectoral needs.
- **Targeted Outreach:** Ensure bursaries reach underrepresented provinces, women, and youth, addressing equity while promoting inclusivity in high-demand skill areas.
- **Accountability Framework:** Set performance benchmarks for institutions and bursary recipients to ensure effective programme delivery and meaningful outcomes.





THEMATIC OVERVIEW OF THE FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS: REFLECTIVE ANALYSIS AND WAY-FORWARD

The synthesis of the studies presented in this summative publication points to a sector in transition grappling with structural challenges while simultaneously unlocking pathways for innovation and growth. A reflective analysis of the findings underscores several cross-cutting themes. Firstly, digitalisation is no longer optional, but an imperative for competitiveness, yet the digital divide threatens to exclude SMMEs, informal traders, and township retailers unless deliberate support measures are embedded. Secondly, food safety, environmental sustainability, and workforce upliftment reveal that sectoral transformation must balance profitability with public health, social cohesion, and ecological responsibility. Thirdly, youth empowerment and bursary programmes highlight the need to align education with labour market realities, ensuring that access translates into employability and entrepreneurship.

Moving forward, the recommendations emphasise an implementation-oriented approach. For example, digital skills development must be operationalised through modular, stackable learning pathways, integrated directly into TVETs, HEIs, and workplace learning. Township retail transformation requires partnerships that blend infrastructure investment with supply chain integration and entrepreneurial support. Similarly, strengthening food safety competence necessitates leadership development, sector-wide culture change, and community-level interventions for informal traders.

Collectively, these recommendations signal that piecemeal initiatives will be insufficient; coordinated, multi-stakeholder action is required to produce sustainable outcomes.

Embedding Research into Practice

The successful implementation of outcomes depends on continuous engagement with sector stakeholders. Research findings are most impactful when move beyond static reports contextualised, and embedded into programmes and policies. This calls for regular dialogues between enterprises, policymakers, training institutions, and communities to ensure that evidence remains relevant and actionable.

The W&RSETA's Research Chairs and strategic partners have played a significant role in this regard, serving hubs of innovation and thought leadership that anchor academic rigour to practical application. Their contribution ensures that the research agenda is aligned to both global trends and local realities. Equally important is the regular review of the research agenda itself. The wholesale and retail sector is highly dynamic, shaped by shifts in technology, consumer patterns, and global supply chains. A static research agenda risks irrelevance, hence, the SETA's commitment to adaptive planning ensures that studies remain forward-looking, sector-responsive, and strategically aligned. This adaptability will allow the sector to anticipate and navigate disruptions such as automation, evolving consumer demands, and sustainability imperatives.

Concluding Remarks

This summative publication represents both a reflection and a call to action. It demonstrates how research can illuminate pathways for transformation, while also underscoring the responsibility of stakeholders to act on the evidence presented. Continuous engagement, collaborative implementation, and adaptive research planning will be critical to translating recommendations into measurable impact.

By leveraging the expertise of its Research Chairs, strategic partners, and sector stakeholders, the SETA can ensure that these studies do not merely describe challenges but actively contribute to building a digitally capable, inclusive, and sustainable wholesale and retail sector.

Acknowledgement

The Wholesale and Retail SETA extends its sincere appreciation to the Research Chairs and their teams of researchers at the Central University of Technology (CUT), Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), University of Johannesburg (UJ), and Durban University of Technology (DUT). Your dedication, intellectual rigour, and collaborative spirit have been instrumental in advancing the W&RSETA Research Agenda.

Through your contributions, the sector has gained deeper insights into critical areas such as digitalisation, youth empowerment, township and informal retail transformation, food safety, sustainability, and workforce development. These studies have not only enriched our collective knowledge but have also provided actionable recommendations that will shape policies, programmes, and interventions across the sector.

We also acknowledge the valuable support of strategic partners and collaborators who worked alongside our Research Chairs. Your expertise and commitment ensured that the research outputs remain both globally informed and locally relevant, bridging the gap between evidence and practice.

The W&RSETA is proud to partner with such dedicated institutions and researchers whose efforts continue to drive innovation, inclusivity, and transformation in the wholesale and retail sector.

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