RESEARCH CONFERENCE 2026

Conference Outcomes and Implementation Action Plan

Wholesale and Retail Re-imagined: Next Generation Skills, Innovation and Entrepreneurship

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Implementation period: November 2026 - October 2028

Implementation platform: W&RSETA Learning Session and Strategic Partnerships

Reporting milestone: Research Conference 2028

Prepared for W&RSETA Strategic Consideration

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1. Executive Summary

The W&RSETA Research Conference 2026 brought together government, employers, organised labour, academia, researchers, post-school education and training institutions, small businesses and other strategic partners to consider how the wholesale and retail sector must respond to technological, economic and labour-market change. Discussions reinforced that the value of research lies not only in generating knowledge, but in translating evidence into relevant skills interventions, stronger partnerships and measurable improvements in employment, productivity and enterprise performance.

The conference highlighted six connected priorities: preparing the workforce for digital transformation and artificial intelligence; strengthening education-industry alignment; supporting SMMEs, township businesses and traders; improving labour market intelligence and research utilisation; strengthening sustainable and ethical supply chains; and supporting worker transitions and pathways into employment.

This report converts those themes into a proposed 24-month implementation framework, running from November 2026 to October 2028. The W&RSETA Learning Session is proposed as the coordinating platform through which strategic partners can agree on priorities, allocate responsibilities, monitor progress and report on results. The Research Conference 2028 should serve as an accountability and learning milestones.

2. Strategic Context and Purpose

The wholesale and retail sector is being reshaped by e-commerce, automation, artificial intelligence, data-driven operations, changing consumer expectations and evolving supply chains. These developments are changing occupational requirements and the way businesses recruit, organise work and serve customers. At the same time, the sector continues to face challenges relating to youth unemployment, workplace readiness, uneven access to opportunity, the sustainability of small enterprises and the integration of formal and economic activity.

Research Conference 2026 contributions also placed the future relevance and performance of SETAs in focus. In the context of the SETA licensing review and the period beyond 2030, the

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skills development system must demonstrate credible value, stronger accountability and evidence of impact. This requires a clear link between research priorities, the Sector Skills Plan (SSP), the Research Agenda, funded interventions and the outcomes experienced by learners, workers and enterprises.

The purpose of this report is to: (i) consolidate the strategic outcomes emerging from the conference; (ii) identify practical areas for collaboration; (iii) propose a 24-month action plan; and (iv) establish a process for tracking progress and reporting at the Research Conference 2028.

3. Key Conference Outcomes and Strategic Priorities

3.1 Future Skills, Digital Transformation and AI Readiness

E-commerce, automation, AI and data analytics are changing retail occupations, customer interaction and supply-chain operations. The sector requires both technical and human capabilities. Priority skills include digital and data fluency, AI literacy, adaptability, customer experience, problem-solving, communication, ethical judgement and continuous learning. Emerging functions include e-commerce platform management, retail media, data analysis, digital marketing, customer experience and last-mile coordination. Technology adoption must be accompanied by responsible oversight, sound data practices and investment in people.

Strategic implication: W&RSETA and its partners should identify priority digital and AI-related skills by occupation and business type, then translate these needs into accessible learning pathways for frontline workers, supervisors, managers and entrepreneurs.

3.2 Curriculum Responsiveness and Education - Industry Collaboration

The discussions identified a continuing gap between the pace of workplace change and the responsiveness of education and training provision. Employers need to contribute skills intelligence and participate in curriculum development and review. Institutions need stronger workplace links, lecturer industry exposure, relevant equipment and opportunities for workplace-based learning. Micro-credentials, short courses and competency-based learning can help address rapidly changing skills needs. Retail should also be promoted as a viable career pathway.

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Strategic implication: Build sustained partnerships between employers and universities, TVET colleges and other PSET institutions. Focus collaboration on curriculum relevance, practical learning, workplace exposure, placements and learner absorption rather than engagement for its own sake.

3.3 SMME Development, Township Economies and Inclusive Entrepreneurship

The conference reinforced the importance of including township businesses and semi traders in sector skills responses. Business needs include digital capability, bookkeeping, stock control, logistics, payment systems, market access, customer management, waste management and business formalisation. Local sourcing and supplier development require attention to quality, delivery, sell-through, fair pricing and reliable business relationships. Examples of digital innovation, including mobile money, illustrated opportunities for adapting practical solutions to local enterprise needs.

Strategic implication: Align enterprise support with the operational realities of SMMEs and semi traders. Combine business skills development with mentorship, market linkages, digital access and opportunities to participate in retail value chains.

3.4 Labour Market Intelligence, Research and Evidence-Informed Decision-Making

A central message was that research must inform decisions and implementation, rather than remain in reports or conference proceedings. Better employer intelligence, data categorisation, consumer insights, skills forecasting and learner tracking are needed. Tracking should extend beyond enrolment and completion to placements, absorption, employment, further learning, career progression and enterprise creation. The conference also emphasised the importance of connecting research priorities with the SSP and actual skills interventions.

Strategic implication: Strengthen the evidence-to-action cycle. Define the decision to be informed, identify the evidence required, make and implement the decision, and use outcome data to improve subsequent planning and interventions.

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3.5 Sustainable and Ethical Supply Chains, Consumer Intelligence and Innovation

Conference discussions highlighted traceability, product verification, food safety, data integrity, consumer protection and ethical supply chains. Examples from market operations illustrated how research and data can support traceability, reduce food loss, improve pricing transparency and strengthen farmer participation. Relevant capabilities include cold-chain management, logistics, food safety, data intelligence, governance and sustainable sourcing.

Strategic implication: Identify skills and research opportunities across supply chains, including food safety, traceability, responsible sourcing, logistics and the use of data to improve efficiency and consumer trust.

3.6 Worker Transitions, Workplace Readiness and Employment Pathways

The conference recognised the need to prepare young people for workplace entry while supporting workers affected by automation, restructuring and other changes. Workplace readiness, communication, resilience, adaptability, mentorship and continuous learning remain important. Reskilling and transition support should also consider experienced and older workers. Social dialogue between employers, organised labour and government is important when managing technological change and its effects on work.

Strategic implication: Strengthen pathways from training to work and support workers to adapt to changing occupational requirements. Track whether skills interventions lead to employment, progression or further learning.

4. Proposed Implementation Model: W&RSETA Learning Session

The W&RSETA Learning Session is proposed as the central platform for coordinating implementation of the Research Conference 2026 outcomes. Its role should extend beyond information-sharing to include structured follow-through, action-outcomes implementation and tracking, partner accountability and shared learning. It should connect the Research Agenda, Research Leadership Chairs, SSP priorities and relevant programme delivery.

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The proposed operating model is to:

- Convene relevant strategic partners around the six priority workstreams.
- Agree with a small number of practical deliverables for each workstream, with named leads and supporting partners.
- Use evidence from employers, research projects, impact studies and programme evaluations to guide decisions.
- Record decisions, commitments, implementation progress, risks and support required at each Learning Session.
- Consolidate progress for consideration by W&RSETA EXCOM and relevant governance structures.
- Use the 2028 Research Conference to report results, share lessons and agree with the next research and implementation priorities.

Potential participants include relevant W&RSETA Business Units (SPPE, OPS & Special projects); DBE; Research Leadership Chairs and universities; TVET and CET colleges; employers and industry associations; organised labour; SMME and Semi-trader representatives; public entities and innovation partners; and relevant international partners. Participation should be determined by the workstream and the contribution required.

5. Proposed 24-Month Implementation Action Plan

The action plan below is a proposed framework. Lead and supporting partners, budgets, baselines and numerical targets should be confirmed during the establishment phase. The plan should be integrated with existing W&RSETA programmes and partnerships wherever possible.

Workstream	Priority actions (proposed)	Potential lead and supporting partners	Indicative timing
1. Digital and future skills	Map priority digital, AI and data skills by occupation and business type; engage	W&RSETA Research and Strategic Planning; employers; Research	Needs assessment: Feb-Apr 2027;

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	employers on emerging roles; identify or develop short courses and micro-credentials; pilot learning interventions and assess uptake and workplace application.	Leadership Chairs; universities and TVET colleges; relevant technology and industry partners.	design/pilots: May-Oct 2027; implementation and review: Nov 2027-Jul 2028.
2. Curriculum and industry alignment	Identify priority curriculum gaps; establish employer-institution working arrangements; strengthen lecturer industry exposure; expand workplace-based learning, placements and employer participation; review learner progression and absorption.	W&RSETA skills/programme SPPE Unit; employers and industry associations; TVET colleges; universities; organised labour.	Gap identification: Feb-Apr 2027; collaboration and pilots: May-Oct 2027; monitoring and refinement: Nov 2027-Jul 2028.
3. SMME, township and Semi trader development	Assess enterprise skills and support needs; strengthen digital, financial, stock and operational capabilities; facilitate mentorship and market linkages; identify local supplier opportunities; connect enterprises to relevant value-chain partners.	W&RSETA; SMME and Semi trader representatives; employers and retailers; municipalities and relevant public entities; enterprise support partners.	Needs assessment: Feb-Apr 2027; interventions: May 2027-Apr 2028; evaluation: May-Jul 2028.
4. Research and labour market intelligence	Agree priority research questions; strengthen employer intelligence and data quality; improve tracking of funded	W&RSETA Research and Strategic Planning; Research Leadership Chairs; employers;	Framework and indicators: Feb-Apr 2027; data and research

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	learners and programme outcomes; how research informs the SSP, Research Agenda and interventions; disseminate usable findings.	research institutions; monitoring and evaluation functions.	activities: May 2027-Apr 2028; synthesis: May-Jul 2028.
5. Sustainable and ethical supply chains	Identify skills and research needs in traceability, food safety, cold-chain management, logistics and responsible sourcing; engage market and supply-chain actors; identify practical research or skills pilots; share lessons and potential models.	W&RSETA; employers and market operators; universities and TVET colleges; food safety and supply-chain partners; relevant public entities.	Scoping: Feb-Apr 2027; pilot development: May-Oct 2027; implementation and review: Nov 2027-Jul 2028.
6. Worker transitions and employment pathways	Engage employers and organised labour on changing work and reskilling needs; strengthen workplace readiness, mentorship and transition support; identify placement and absorption opportunities; track employment, further learning and progression outcomes.	W&RSETA; employers; organised labour; TVET colleges and universities; relevant employment and public-sector partners.	Partner engagement: Feb-Apr 2027; interventions: May 2027-Apr 2028; outcomes review: May-Jul 2028.

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6. Implementation Phases and Milestones

6.1 November 2026 -January 2027 | Establishment

Confirm the Learning Session mandate and coordination arrangements; identify strategic partners; confirm workstream leads; IPEC project proposal drafting, agree reporting templates and a consolidated implementation register.

6.2 February -April 2027 | Evidence and planning

Complete focused needs assessments as per IPEC project proposal approval; confirm baseline information; agree indicators and realistic targets; SSP engagement and alignment identify existing programmes and resources that can support implementation.

6.3 May -October 2027 | Design and initial implementation

Develop and initiate priority interventions and pilots; APP alignment; formalise partner responsibilities; document early implementation issues and lessons.

6.4 November 2027 -April 2028 | Implementation and refinement

Continue interventions; monitor delivery and participation; assess early outcomes; address implementation barriers and adjust activities where necessary.

6.5 May -July 2028 | Evaluation and consolidation

Assess progress against agreed indicators/priorities; consolidate research and programme evidence; document partner contributions, outcomes, gaps and recommendations.

6.6 August -October 2028 | Reporting and Research Conference 2028

Prepare the outcomes report and evidence base; share implementation results and lessons at the Research Conference 2028; agree priorities for the next cycle.

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7. Monitoring, Evaluation and Accountability

- Monitoring should focus on implementation, impact and results, not only on activities completed. During the first six months, the W&RSETA Business Units and partners responsible should establish baselines and agree measurable targets. Indicators should be proportionate to the scope of each workstream and should use existing data systems where feasible.
- Partnerships with agreed workstream responsibilities, deliverables and evidence of active participation.
- Priority on digital, AI and data skills need identified, with relevant learning interventions developed or implemented.
- Curriculum or programme improvements informed by employer input; lecturer industry exposure; workplace-based learning, placements and absorption.
- SMMEs and Semi traders reached through relevant skills and enterprise support, including evidence of market or value-chain linkages.
- Research outputs completed and demonstrably used in planning, the SSP, the Research Agenda or programme design.
- Improved availability of learner outcome information, including placement, employment, further learning and career progression.
- Research or skills initiatives addressing food safety, traceability, cold-chain management and sustainable supply chains.
- Workers and young people are reached through reskilling, workplace readiness, mentorship or transition support.

Each Learning Session should review progress against the implementation register and record decisions, risks, corrective actions and responsible parties. A consolidated progress update should be prepared periodically for management and relevant governance structures. The 2028 Research Conference report should distinguish outputs delivered from outcomes achieved and identify areas where evidence remains limited.

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8. Expected Outcomes by Research Conference 2028

- A functioning Learning Session mechanism that coordinates strategic partners and tracks implementation.
- Stronger alignment between research priorities, the Sector Skills Plan and skills development interventions.
- Practical digital, AI and data-related skills responses informed by employer demand.
- Improved collaboration between employers and education and training institutions on curriculum relevance and workplace learning.
- More responsive support for SMMEs, township businesses and semi traders, including stronger market linkages.
- Improved use of labour market intelligence and research evidence in planning and programme decisions.
- Better information on learner pathways and outcomes after training.
- Stronger attention to skills for sustainable, safe and ethical supply chains.
- Evidence of interventions that support worker transitions, workplace readiness and employment pathways.

9. Recommendations

- Adopt the W&RSETA Learning Session as the coordinating platform for taking the conference outcomes forward, with a clear implementation and accountability mandate.
- Integrate the action plan with existing W&RSETA programmes, Research Leadership Chairs, strategic partnerships, the Research Agenda and SSP rather than creating parallel structures.
- Prioritise a manageable number of interventions with clear deliverables, responsible partners and evidence of progress.
- Place greater emphasis on learner outcomes after training, including placement, absorption, employment, further learning and career progression.
- Confirm baselines, targets, partner roles, budgets and reporting arrangements during the first six months of implementation.

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- Position the Research Conference 2028 as an accountability milestone at which partners report on commitments, results, lessons and remaining gaps.

10. Conclusion

The Research Conference 2026 reaffirmed the importance of evidence, collaboration and responsive skills development in a sector undergoing significant change. Its value will ultimately be measured by what happens after the conference: whether research informs decisions, partnerships deliver practical interventions, and skills development improve opportunities and performance across the wholesale and retail sector.

The proposed 24-month action plan provides a route from conference dialogue to implementation. Through the W&RSETA Learning Session and active strategic partnerships, the SETA can track progress, address emerging challenges and present a credible account of results at the Research Conference 2028.

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