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Skills development through structured qualifications: learnerships and apprenticeships

The trade test – a constraint on artisan skilling?

The shortage of artisanal skills in South Africa is alarming. Amidst inconsistencies in ascertaining the scale of demand, it is generally accepted that the country needs to drastically improve its production of artisans. But there is great concern over the quality of training and the match between training and assessment, particularly in key industries **JOAN ROODT** and **ANGELIQUE WILDSCHUT** report.

There are a number of routes to artisanal skilling, but all end at a common point — the trade test. The National Development of Learnerships, Employment, Skills and Labour Assessments (INDLELA) used to be the only national centre where apprentices could take the trade test and qualify as artisans until private, decentralised trade test centres were established from 2000 onwards. It is, however, not clear how INDLELA's data is being incorporated into the Department of Higher Education and Training's (DHET) data, as inconsistencies were found between INDLELA and DHET data.

Our period of evaluation of artisan skills production spans the final year of the NSDS II (2009/10), when 5 531 trade test registrations were recorded on the INDLELA database.

SMALL NUMBERS OF ARTISANS PRODUCED

Just over 80% of the INDLELA population applied through the Department of Labour (DoL), and almost one in five candidates registered for a trade test through one of the Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs),

which fall under the auspices of DoL. The two largest groups that applied were the manufacturing, engineering and related services SETA (MerSETA) (11%) and the transport education and training authority (TETA) (3%).

Among those who registered for a trade test, less than half (41%) were successful. Similar to the application trends, the majority of those who completed a trade test were in government; 11% in MerSETA; 3% each in local government sector education and training authority (LGSETA) and TETA; 1% in energy sector education and training authority (ESETA); and less than 1% in the construction education and training authority SETA (CETA).

No apprentices in the chemical industries education and training authority (CHIETA) and the mining and minerals sector education and training authority (MQA) who were registered on INDLELA completed their trade tests over this period. These dismal 2009/10 completion figures do not compare well with 3 430 successful trade test completions per annum recorded in the 2000-2008 period (refer to Figure 1). The 2 303 qualifications also stand in stark contrast to the record pass rate in 1985 of 13 500 artisans.

POOR SUCCESS RATES IN KEY SECTORS

With low total numbers, it is of further concern that 24% of successful candidates required more than one attempt at the trade test. Roughly 20% of candidates were successful on their second attempt, 4% on their third attempt and only a few on their fourth attempt.

Boilermakers (12.4%), plumbers (12.9%), diesel mechanics (10.1%) and electricians (9.6%) were the trades in which the most ap-

plications were received. The highest pass rates were obtained by those candidates who successfully completed their trade tests in motor mechanics (64%), boilermaking (63%) and welding (62%), while automotive electricians (14%) and bricklayers (16%) had the lowest pass rates among those who completed their trade tests over this period.

FEW STRUCTURED APPRENTICESHIPS

Further disaggregation by type of apprenticeship shows that the majority of applications for the trade test and of those declared competent artisans were Section 28 apprentices (those who were not formally indentured — in other words, those with no formal binding contract with an employer for a specific term).

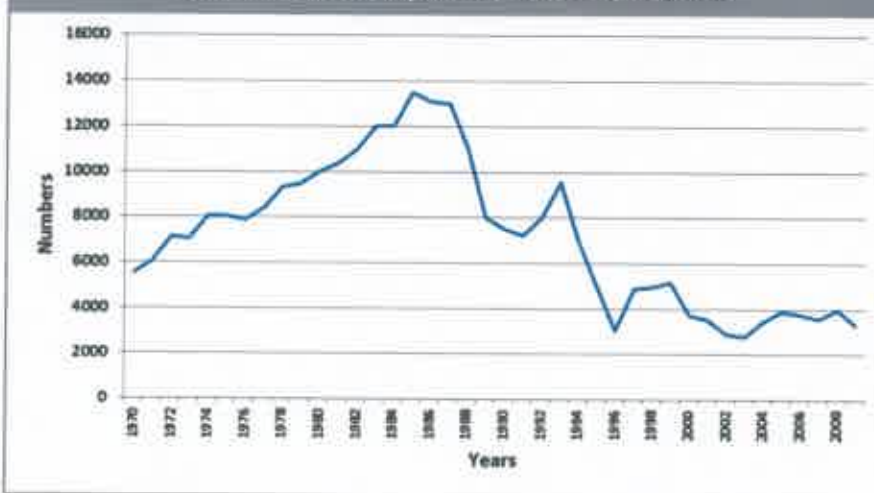
This suggests that potential artisans applied to INDLELA mainly on the basis of recognition of prior learning in the workplace. Those who entered structured apprenticeship programmes through SETAs — mainly young school leavers — are not yet proceeding into and through the artisanal trade test system.

CONCLUSION

Our analysis reflects an artisanal testing system that is not efficient. The nature of artisanal training is such that an apprentice should complete sufficient practical and theoretical training before applying to sit for the trade test. The low success rate raises questions about both the quality of training and the match between training and assessment, particularly in key industrial sectors that are expected to deliver on planned infrastructure required for economic growth. Accurate trend data on artisanal skills production is critical if accelerated targets are to be met.



Figure 1: Number who passed a trade test; 1970-2009



Source: INDLELA

Table 1. Number of apprentices by type of apprenticeship and completion status

Type	COMPETENT	%	REGISTRATIONS	%
Section 28	2050	89.01%	5021	89.53%
Section 13	11	0.48%	24	0.43%
Unspecified	242	10.51%	563	10.04%
Total	2303	100%	5603	100%

This article was drawn from two reports commissioned by the Departments of Labour/Higher Education and Training. Both reports are available on www.hsrc.ac.za:

A Technical Report on Learnership and Apprenticeship Population Databases in South Africa: Patterns and Shifts in Skills Formation, by Wildschut, A; Kruss, G; Janse van Rensburg, D; Haupt, G; and Visser, M; 2012.

Learnerships and Apprenticeships Survey 2010: Technical Report: Identifying Transitions and Trajectories through the Learnership and Apprenticeship Systems, by Janse van Rensburg, D; Visser, M; Wildschut, A; Roodt, J; and Kruss, G; 2012.

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