

ICT mid-level skills: lively demand matches steady supply

The importance of ICT skills to the economic, social and political trajectory of South Africa in a global context cannot be underestimated, says SALIM AKOOJEE in a new study that examines the supply of intermediate-level ICT skills, providing insight into key elements of demand.

BOTH THE GOVERNMENT AND THE PRIVATE SECTOR have articulated the significance of information and communication technology (ICT) as a national development priority. It is an integral component of numerous initiatives to ensure that the country stays abreast of cutting edge developments and plays an invaluable role in responding to identified socio-economic national imperatives.

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This study investigates the demand for intermediate ICT skills in the South African labour market and assesses the supply by private providers of education and training. Based on data from various sources including government and private ICT company employees, and an analysis of data from career and ICT websites, it provides an overview of the capacity and shortcomings in the field.

A key finding is that there is a high demand for ICT *end-user skills* in the trade and

financial sectors. The supply of these skills shows that it is located almost completely in the private sector. The predominance of ‘for-profit’ entities means that companies are completely reliant on a steady stream of learners for sustainability.

While ICT work encompasses different intellectual and employment levels, there are certain characteristics which apply to the ICT sector as a whole. Private provision patterns suggest a robust sector with some specific traits. For example, due to rapid changes within the ICT field and a consequent demand for updated training, the sector exists in a state of constant flux.

There is a considerable diversity in training provision. Provider types are distinguished on the basis of the extent of specialisation in ICT-linked courses, ownership-types (single, multiple ownership or franchising models), location (urban or rural) and premises-based (institutional) or non-premises based (consultant-type) provision patterns.

Most ICT training is not fixed on a particular skills level, but provides either training at all levels (beginner, intermediate, advanced) or training together with ‘soft skills’ such as human resources. Most specialist ICT training providers respond to the needs of the corporate market.

Types of training provision include part-time (evenings and weekends), full-time (during the course of the working week) and short-term (for a continuous duration of up to 7 days) courses. Quality is generally regulated by the industry itself and positive learning experiences represent a defining feature of continued sustainability.

In addition, while progress has been made in the intermediate-level ICT sector with regard to demographic changes, there is still room to address future demand by equity imperatives. The three challenges of regulation, sustainability and quality associated with private skills provision still remain.

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The study identifies a sector crucial to South Africa’s development, and contributes to an understanding of the supply and demand considerations in this field. As such, the research is key to strengthening South Africa’s competitive position in the globalised world. ●

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A copy of the publication, ICT skills at the intermediate level in South Africa: Insights into private provision and labour market demand, by Salim Akoojee, Fabian Arends and Joan Roodt, can be downloaded for free, or ordered from www.hsrcpress.ac.za.