

Preparing out-of-school youth for work: A Namibian case study

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Abstract

Like other countries within the Southern African Development (SADC) region, Namibia also experiences high levels of unemployment, particularly among young people. Currently the unemployment rate stands at 37%. One of the most problematic and challenging issues in our society and economy has therefore been how best to prepare young people to compete in the labour market and to mature into productive members of society. The Municipality Assisted Training Scheme (MATS) in Keetmanshoop, Namibia was one employment and training programme that has been developed and implemented over the past four years with the purpose to provide on-the-job training to out-of-school leavers. Nevertheless, the Keetmanshoop Municipality found this programme lacking in its end result, namely enabling young people to gain employment. It became clear that employability skills are not automatically developed at school, or in the workplace without purposeful training.

The Municipality of Keetmanshoop sought advice from the University of Namibia how best to make the programme more efficient. In order to assist the MATS programme, a collective case study research on six enterprises within Keetmanshoop, was carried out. The research questions were as follows:

- What are the perceptions of the participating young workers regarding the effectiveness of their employability skills development?
- What are the perceptions of the participating employers with regard to the effectiveness of the MATS experience to develop employability skills in youth?

The MATS programme was found to be useful in some respects, but lacks the potential to develop employability skills over a broad spectrum in a quick and qualitative manner.

1. Background

Young people in Namibia account for a major part of the 37% of the total national unemployment rate (National Planning 2005). Thus, one of the most challenging issues in Namibian society and economy has been how best to prepare young people so that they can compete for and keep a job. After completing formal education until grade 12 it is hoped that young people should be able to make a successful move from school to employment with the skills and knowledge acquired. However, in most cases employability skills need to be developed through training and experience on the job. This process is an integral step towards promoting economic growth, poverty reduction and prosperity.

This research had its origin in 2005 when the Municipality of Keetmanshoop initiated a training programme with the aim to provide on-the-job training to grade twelve school leavers. This locally motivated programme is conducted in partnership with different non-governmental, social institutions and private business entities operating in Keetmanshoop. With these types of programmes, the Council aims to tackle the question of unemployment and poverty by creating opportunities for developing employability skills.

Keetmanshoop is the third largest town situated in the southern part of Namibia, with a population of approximately 16,800 inhabitants. Right from the start, MATS has been dedicated to the upliftment of the Youth in Keetmanshoop, by affording them opportunities to acquire skills crucial to be competitive in the labour market. Since 2005, MATS selected out-of-school learners for job placement at local government and business institutions in Keetmanshoop. Selected candidates should be between 18 and 20 years of age, with a grade 12 certificate, and with a fair amount of English proficiency. Successful candidates are then placed for a period of one year at any one of the following selected institutions in Keetmanshoop namely, Bank Windhoek, Ministry of Education - Karas regional Office, Karas Regional Council, Social Security Commission, Hotel Bird's Nest Mansion and Namibia Press Agency. The Municipality of Keetmanshoop also carry the responsibility of paying a small allowance of six hundred Namibian Dollars to each of the young workers every month, while the stakeholders are encouraged to provide some on-the-job training to the young workers. Furthermore, employers have the right to release young workers if they don't comply with the company's expectations. Employers are expected to submit a monthly progress report on the young workers' performances to the Keetmanshoop Municipality.

2. Literature review

Smith and Comyn (2003) are of meaning that a wealth of literature over the past number of years has identified the need and advantages of developing creative, critical and self-monitoring learners and that, as a result of the changing work environment and raised skill requirements, individuals now require the competencies and qualities previously associated with more highly educated individuals.

Specific employment-related generic skills or competencies have been identified in countries such as Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, South Africa and the United States (Werner 1995). Other countries, such as Norway, Switzerland and Finland, have placed greater emphasis on the broader social relevance of generic skills (Nijhof & Streumer 1998; Rychen 2000) while others have linked the issue to debates on qualification frameworks and processes of curriculum development. For example, the British National Skills Task Force recently refined their nation's approach to the development of generic skills, redefining them to be 'those transferable skills, essential for employability which are relevant at different levels for most' (National Skills Task Force 2000:27). Australia's Mayer Committee defined their set of generic skills as being 'essential for effective participation in the emerging patterns of work and work organisations'. The Mayer key competencies are as follows:

- Collecting and analysing information
- Communicating ideas and information
- Planning and organising activities
- Working with other in teams
- Using mathematical ideas and techniques
- Solving problems
- Using technology (Smith & Comyn, 2003:16).

Gonezi, Curtain, Hager and Harrison (1995) add an eight competency of cultural understanding. This involves knowing about cultural cohesion and diversity; respecting the rights and responsibilities of others and working with them to achieve common goals which reflect equity and social justice. A third definition of employability skills by Bhaerman (1988:42) stated that "employability" skills are all those transferable skills that signal that an individual is ready to perform in a job: being punctual, maintaining consistent attendance, being well groomed and dressing appropriately, exhibiting good attitudes and behaviours, working well with others, and assuming responsibility.

A common feature of the debates surrounding generic and employability skills is an assumption that these qualities in workers should be developed before they begin their working lives. A number of detailed studies have charted the experiences of school leavers entering the workforce. These

include Ashton and Field (1976), West and Newton (1983), Griffin (1985) and Hodgkinson (1995) in the United Kingdom; Borman (1991) in the United States; and Reeders (1989) and Smith (2000) in Australia. Borman found the school leavers in her study resourceful and skilled. However, the literature does clearly indicate that a proportion of young people do have what has been described as an 'attitude problem' (Becker & Hill 1981). Sometimes, frequent job changing is seen as a characteristic of young people who lack employability skills, although job changing is seen by other commentators as normal and often positive (Bilsker & Marcia 1991).

Employers also play a major part in either assisting or making more difficult a young person's adaptation to working life. The Smith (2000) study found examples of employers who had well tested methods of settling young workers into the organisation, as well as examples of employers who paid no attention to this role.

While there is some belief that young people who enter the labour market later may be more employable, Cregan (1999:194) maintains that this is essentially an old-fashioned believe, and is based on an idea that youth alone leads to a lack of work ethic. Cregan establishes evidence that, in Britain later entry to the labour market does not appear to lead to greater success in finding work.

3. The purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to see whether the Keetmanshoop MATS programme could provide sufficient skills development opportunities for young people to enable them to obtain jobs. The research therefore set out to investigate the perceptions of the participating young workers as well as their employers regarding the effectiveness of the MATS experience in developing employability skills?

4. Design and method

This research focussed on 13 out-of-school leavers who applied for jobs between the periods 2005 - 2007. Since 2005, the Municipality of Keetmanshoop advertise job placements at the beginning of every year in local newspapers, to try and attract school leavers to apply for these one year placements in the Karas Region. Selected candidates are interviewed by a panel consisting of council members and stakeholders from the various business enterprises.

This research started during November 2007, when one of the researchers visited the Keetmanshoop municipality with the purpose to recruit students for University programmes. The coordinator of the MATS programme then informed the researcher about the Municipality's initiative to try and combat unemployment amongst the youth in the Karas region. According to the coordinator the programme did not achieve what it set out to accomplish, namely to provide work for school leavers. He then requested input from the University of Namibia, to try and find out why the programme was not so successful. The researcher was informed about the rationale of the MATS programme, and was also given names of school graduates who applied for the job placements during 2005 – 2007 as well as the names of the stakeholders involved in the programme. Permission was also given to visit the enterprises or to have interviews with the managers or young workers. During February to March 2008, various telephone interviews were held with stakeholders as well as with the young workers.

For the purpose of this case study, a qualitative research approach was employed. According to Bogdan and Biklen (1982:28), qualitative researchers can 'learn what the important questions are'. Moreover, workplaces are not homogeneous environments, and a qualitative approach allows 'a perspective that will lead to the description and understanding of phenomena in ways that reflect their complexity' (Guba & Lincoln, 1982:71). Therefore the ways in which employability skills were developed in the different enterprises could be examined within the full context of the enterprise's business. A case study method was deemed to be the most appropriate technique for the study to enable an understanding to be gained of different participants' viewpoints (Yin 1994). Investigating different viewpoints is a form of triangulation and adds to the trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba 1985) of the data. The study is an example of the case study type known as the collective case study, where several cases are examined.

The study was enriched by the experience of the research team members, who between them had the following experiences:

- Developed and conducted in-service training programmes on supervisory and customer care services to government and private enterprises;
- Providing University bridging programmes;
- Assisting young people in the transition from school and unemployment into employment through training programmes.

5. Results and discussion

5.1 WHAT ARE THE PERCEPTIONS OF THE YOUNG WORKERS REGARDING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THEIR EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS DEVELOPMENT?

The combination of approaches was no doubt influenced by the type and nature of work, the workplace culture, the relationships between and amongst staff, as well as the nature of the individual worker. The following table illustrate the approaches used by some of the workers to develop their employability skills.

Step	Approaches use by workers
Adopt the right attitudes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask for more work • Punctuality • Being friendly and helpful
Manage the impressions you make	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Showing willingness and enthusiasm • Prepared to work after hours • Demonstrate reliability
Build effective relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop team spirit • Trust mentor
Become a good follower	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek advice • Don't try and know it all
Master the task of your job	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask for more responsibilities • Watching, asking questions, listen actively
Acquire the knowledge, skills and abilities you need	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take advantage of off-the-job training opportunities • Using skills learnt at school • Develop a system for organising tasks.

Many of the young workers described what they had done to improve their employability skills, and what they did to try and impress their employers. Apart from the workers from the Hotel Bird's Mansion who received meals and often tips from travellers, they all complained about the small allowance received from the Municipality.

The following quotation provides some insight of how some of the young workers felt about the allowance.

I know that I must be thankful for the Municipality who provided us with a job, but the money was too little. I never got any money to buy myself some clothes, so that was the reason why I had to look for another job.

The Municipality kept us at least off the street, but I sometimes felt that we worked very hard for the little money we got. Why can't the Municipality ask the employers to give us extra money? Sometimes we work for a whole year before they employ us.

5.2 WHAT ARE THE PERCEPTIONS OF THE PARTICIPATING EMPLOYERS WITH REGARD TO THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE MATS EXPERIENCE IN DEVELOPING EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS IN YOUTH?

The following questions were asked to all the employers that were interviewed.

(a) Why do employers agree to recruit out-of-school leavers?

The following table illustrates how the stakeholders reacted to the question.

Reasons for recruiting youth	Bank Windhoek	Ministry of Education	Social Security Council	Hotel Bird's Mansion	Karas Reg. Council	Nam Press Agency
Free employment	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Energy of youth	✓	✓			✓	
Knowledge of technological skills	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Community obligation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Development of existing staff		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Free employment:

All employers were in agreement that since the Municipality provided a small allowance to the workers, their responsibility should be seen as to provide guidance and in some cases on the job training to the workers.

Energetic school leavers

Three of the six employers felt that young workers are bringing new energy to the workplace, and invigorate other employees. Bank Windhoek felt that it was good for staff with these characteristics to serve at the information desk.

Knowledge of technological skills

All the employers agreed that youth of today are very knowledgeable about computers or other technology and that they bring this knowledge with them to the work place.

Community obligation

The employers felt that they had an obligation to the community to provide employment opportunities for young people.

Development of existing staff

Most of the employers felt that their staff could benefit by employing young workers. They also felt that it was good for staff to be involved with training, or to provide mentorship to the young workers.

(b) How do employers view employability skills and which skills are valued most?

Respondents' comments during interviews varied from personal characteristics to skills identified as being technical in nature. Skills such as communication were found to be very important by all employers especially where there was strong interaction with the public. All respondents were able to identify those employability skills most valued in their enterprises. These findings are reported in the following table.

Attributes	Bank Windhoek	Ministry of Education	Social Security	Hotel Bird's Mansion	Karas Reg. Council	Nam Press Agency
Loyalty	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Punctuality	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Honesty & integrity	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Enthusiasm	✓	✓			✓	✓
Reliability	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Positive self- esteem	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Motivation	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Creativity		✓		✓		
Skills						
Communication	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Team work		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Problem-solving	✓			✓		
Initiative	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Planning & organising				✓		✓
Self-management		✓				
Learning skills		✓	✓			✓
Technology skills	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓

(c) What practices are used to develop employability skills?

The respondents noted that the approaches were not solely used to develop employability skills. In most cases, the processes were primarily in place to develop young worker’s technical skills. That is, to enable appropriate performance of job tasks and these were seen as having a secondary role in the development of employable skills. The processes can be summarised under the following headings:

- Recruitment and induction
- Mentoring
- Providing training
- Performance reports
- Learn through mistakes

Recruitment and induction

Both recruitment and induction were seen as being relevant to the development of employability skills amongst the young workers. There were exceptions to this; for example, at the Hotel the interview explicitly involved discussion of expectations about availability for work, while the Namibia Press emphasised good communication skills.

Mentoring

All six employers commended that the young workers were mentored by co-workers who provided one-to-one guidance in a less intimidating fashion than might be the case if managers took on this role.

Providing training

Bank Windhoek and the Council were among the stakeholders where the development and maintenance of a training culture was seen as relevant to developing the employability of young workers. One of the young workers in Bank Windhoek mentioned that she spends one hour per week with her supervisor on issues that she needs clarification on. Bank Windhoek as well as Social Security allows young workers to rotate on the job so that they can gain experience of other departments as well. In other environments, such as the Ministry of Education and Hotel Bird’s Mansion, employability skills were not included in formal training but were addressed in an ad hoc manner.

Performance reports

All six stakeholders commended that monthly reports were expected which, in some instances, involved self assessment by the young workers. These approaches were seen as being relevant to the development of employability skills through either explicitly using assessment criteria related to employability skills, or indirectly to commend on the work performances of the young workers.

6. Conclusion

This research focussed on a wide range of activities that took place in the six case studies, which helped to develop the employability skills of young workers. There were many reasons why employers were recruiting young workers and, having recruited them, they were undertaking a series of activities aimed, sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly, at developing their employability skills. While able to identify drawbacks to employment of young workers, they nevertheless continued to recruit them.

Different stakeholders attached different value to the various employability skills and attributes required in the jobs to which they recruited young workers. Communication, initiative and computer skills were the most commonly valued skills, while punctuality, honesty and reliability were the most commonly valued attributes.

A major implication from this study indicates that most employers were paying some attention to developing the employability skills of the young workers. Suggestions were made by both employers and young workers in the case studies as to how employability skills could be developed more effectively by means of formal training workshops.

The MATS programme opportunities developed some job-related skills that could be developed without direct contact with customers eg. Attitudes, planning and team work. Other skills such as English communication and computer skills that require personal coaching and time were neglected in most cases. The MATS programme therefore, lacks the ability to provide effectively for some employability skills development. In addition, the duration of one year appears to be too long for students without earning more money than the six hundred Namibian dollars. The programme needs to incorporate formal training workshops in order to develop some skills faster and more efficiently. A more extensive research about employability skills in Namibia might be relevant upon which, training workshops materials could be developed.

Finally, it is suggested that all Municipalities in Namibia could be involved in implementing a revised MATS programme to the benefit of the individuals, businesses and the country as a whole.

7. References

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