



A conceptual framework for the implementation and management of hospitality learnerships in South Africa. Towards a human centred, multi stakeholder approach.

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Track

The future of talent management.

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Paper

Abstract

In South Africa, the hospitality industry continues to face challenges in relation to skills shortages, high youth unemployment rate, and the differentiated implementation of learnerships. This paper presents a conceptual framework for the effective implementation and management of hospitality learnership programs through a human-centered, multi-stakeholder approach. Drawing on adult learning theory, social learning theory, and principles of good governance, five key pillars are conceptualized to support more equitable, efficient, and sustainable learnership implementation. The framework is informed by existing literature, international apprenticeship models, and the author's doctoral research. It aims to support hospitality employers, Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs), training providers, and policymakers in transforming learnerships into tools for workforce development and social inclusion.

Key Words

Learnership, Hospitality, Vocational Training, Skills Development.

Introduction

The hospitality industry in South Africa plays an important role in addressing youth unemployment and the broader skills dearth. In a post pandemic economy marked by transformation since 2020, the need for agile, hospitality training models has grown increasingly urgent. One such intervention is the learnership a structured work-based education and training program that combines theoretical instruction with practical experience in the workplace, typically resulting in an NQF-registered qualification. Unlike traditional vocational training, which is often classroom-based and institutionally led, learnerships are employer-driven and designed to be directly responsive to industry needs.

The COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted the hospitality sector through an extended lockdown, business closures, and mass retrenchments. These disruptions not only displaced a lot of workers but also exposed the sector's lack of workforce resilience and workplace readiness. In this context, learnerships offer a timely and strategic response, enabling rapid upskilling and reskilling of youth while embedding experiential learning in real workplace environments.

Despite ample state funding and clear potential, South African hospitality learnerships often yield limited impact due to inconsistent implementation, lack of stakeholder coordination, and weak learner support systems. This paper responds to these persistent gaps by proposing a conceptual framework for the effective implementation and management of hospitality learnerships. Grounded in various theoretical frameworks, international benchmarking, and sector-specific challenges, the framework advocates for a human-centred, multi-stakeholder approach. Its purpose is to guide policy development and practice toward a more inclusive, resilient, and future-oriented hospitality workforce.

Problem statement

Learnerships in South Africa's hospitality industry are often hampered by poor alignment with industry needs, low retention and completion rates, and the exclusion of rural or marginalized learners. Although intended to integrate theoretical learning with workplace experience, many programs struggle with outdated curricula, insufficient mentorship, and fragmented monitoring mechanisms.

Literature review

The hospitality sector in South Africa is characterised by high levels of informal employment, fluctuating demand cycles, and intensive customer-facing roles, which demand high emotional and cognitive labour (Saayman, Slabbert, & Ottebacher, 2023). A key challenge is the shortage of adequately trained personnel, which undermines service quality and guest satisfaction. Moreover, the sector continues to struggle with retaining talent due to low wages, limited upward mobility, and a lack of structured professional development pathways. These challenges have been compounded by technological shifts in guest interaction and service platforms, requiring new skillsets that traditional training models fail to provide.

Talent management and workforce development

Talent management in the hospitality industry increasingly requires an integrated approach that connects education, workplace learning, and lifelong learning. Traditional training systems, especially in the private training provider space, often operate in silos with limited employer input, resulting in curricula that are misaligned with industry realities. Learnerships bridge this divide by incorporating structured work experience into academic programs, thereby enhancing workplace readiness and employability. The alignment with Sustainable Development Goal 8 (decent work and economic growth) highlights the relevance of these programs in addressing youth unemployment and social exclusion (ILO, 2022). Scholars advocate for coordinated systems involving SETAs, employers, and educational institutions to manage learnerships more effectively (Bayari & Iwu, 2018).

Table 1. Comparative overview of traditional training vs learnerships

Dimension	Traditional training	Learnership
Curriculum design	Institutional, theoretical	Industry input

Employer involvement Learning environment	Minimal Classroom based	Active Blended classroom+ workplace
Focus	Academic outcomes	Workplace readiness and employability
Certification	Generic qualifications	Occupational specific qualification

Efficacy of learnerships

Although learnerships are a promising model, their implementation has been challenging. Issues such as inadequate funding, poor coordination between stakeholders, and inconsistent learner support undermine program quality (Akbar et al., 2016). Employers often view learnerships as a compliance exercise rather than a strategic investment, which limits their commitment to high-quality training environments. Furthermore, the lack of robust monitoring and evaluation systems hinders the ability to measure long-term outcomes such as graduate employment and career progression. A recurring theme in the literature is the need for flexible, learner-centred approaches that cater to diverse learner needs while maintaining rigorous standards (Rankin et al., 2015).

Table 2. Common barriers to effective implementation

Barrier	Description
Funding limitation	Inadequate funding support for program continuity and progression
Stakeholder misalignment	Poor coordination among SETA's, training providers and employers
Employer apathy	Lack of strategic buy in and commitment to training quality.
Learner support deficiency	Inadequate academic and emotional support mechanisms
Monitoring and evaluation gaps	Absence of systems to track outcomes and performance metrics.

Theoretical framework

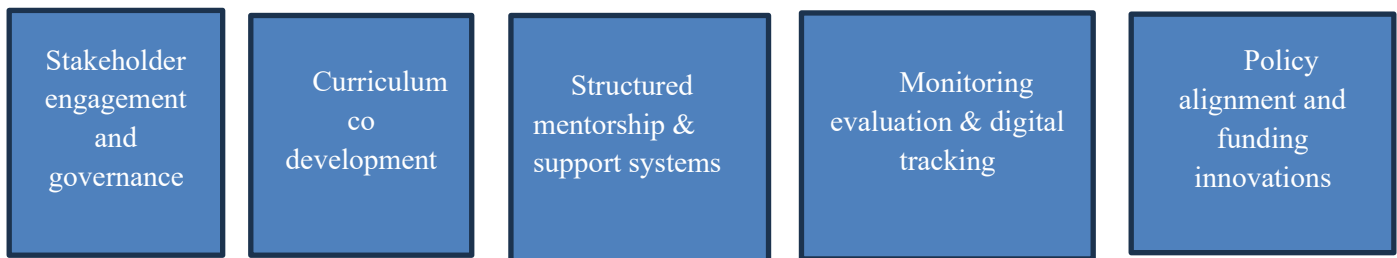
The conceptual framework for this paper is underpinned by five interrelated theories. These theories collectively inform the proposed framework and justify the multidimensional approach needed to manage hospitality learnerships effectively:

- **Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984):** Positions learning as a continuous cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. This theory validates the dual structure of learnerships that combine classroom and workplace learning.
- **Adult Learning Theory (Knowles, 1968):** Emphasises the autonomy and goal-oriented nature of adult learners. Learnerships are most effective when learners are treated as active participants in shaping their educational journeys.
- **Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964):** Links skills acquisition to improved productivity and economic returns. Investment in structured vocational training is therefore not only a social good but also an economic imperative.
- **Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977):** Highlights the importance of role models and mentorship in the learning process, which is central to the success of workplace learning.
- **Constructivist Learning Theory (Vygotsky, 1978):** Highlights the role of social interaction and cultural context in knowledge construction, supporting the view that learnerships must be contextually relevant and inclusive.

Conceptual framework: Enhancing learnership framework

The framework proposed in this paper identifies five critical pillars for the successful implementation and management of learnerships.

Figure 1. Proposed pillars for conceptual framework



Stakeholder engagement and governance: Effective learnerships depend on clearly defined roles and collaborative mechanisms among stakeholders. This includes policy alignment between government departments, active participation from employers, and strategic guidance from SETAs. Governance structures must be transparent and inclusive, incorporating regular feedback loops and performance evaluations (Rambe & Mutshaeni, 2015).

Curriculum co-development: Curriculum should be co-developed with input from industry experts to ensure alignment with current and emerging competencies in the hospitality sector. Emphasis should be placed on workplace literacy, sustainability, and customer-centric skills. Regular curriculum reviews and adaptation cycles must be institutionalised.

Structured mentorship and support systems: Mentorship is a cornerstone of successful learnerships. Workplace mentors should receive training on effective coaching, cultural sensitivity, and conflict resolution. Institutions must also provide learners with academic, emotional, and logistical support to navigate both learning environments.

Monitoring, evaluation, and digital tracking: Reliable systems need to be developed that track learner progress, employer satisfaction, and post-learnership outcomes. Digital platforms can streamline reporting and enhance data-driven decision-making. Benchmarking against national and international standards can promote continuous improvement (Rankin et al., 2015).

Policy alignment and funding innovations: Incentivising employer participation through outcome-based funding, tax rebates, and public-private partnerships have proven to contribute to the improvement of commitment to learnership quality. However, these tax rebates should reward not only enrolment numbers but also program outcomes such as retention, certification, and employment.

Table 3. Learnership implementation road map

Phase	Key activities	Responsible stakeholders
Planning and design	Needs analysis, stakeholder alignment, curriculum co design	SETA, training providers, employers
Recruitment & onboarding	Learner selection, mentor assignment, induction sessions	Training providers, employers
Delivery & support	Blended learning delivery, mentorship, learner support services	Employers, training providers
Monitoring & evaluation	Continuous tracking, feedback mechanisms, performance assessments	SETA, employers, training providers
Post program transition	Job placement, learner tracking, policy review	Government, employers, industry associations

International benchmarking

Comparative international studies have consistently demonstrated that vocational training systems perform best when they are contextually grounded, employer-driven, and supported by strong policy frameworks (ILO, 2020). In South Africa, learnerships were introduced as part of the Skills Development Act to address structural unemployment and improve the relevance of skills training in alignment with national economic priorities. These programs typically rely on coordination among SETAs, employers, and training providers to deliver structured learning that combines theory with workplace experience (Bayari & Iwu, 2018). However, fragmented governance, inconsistent funding, and limited industry responsiveness continue to undermine their effectiveness.

In comparison, the U.S apprenticeship model specially registered apprenticeships regulated by the Department of Labor have evolved into a highly adaptable system driven by employer demand (Lerman, 2014). U.S. apprenticeships benefit from robust partnerships between employers, community colleges, and workforce boards, enabling seamless integration between education and employment pathways. The U.S model places emphasis on occupational standards, on-the-job mentoring, and performance-based progression. These factors have contributed to the increasing relevance of U.S. apprenticeships in both traditional trades and emerging sectors such as information technology and healthcare (Fuller et al, 2017).

From a policy perspective, South Africa's learnership system offers more direct state involvement in funding and regulation, whereas the U.S. system allows for greater decentralisation and private-sector innovation. This divergence has implications for outcomes: while South Africa has made strides in equity and access, the U.S. system demonstrates stronger alignment with labour market needs and higher employer engagement.

By benchmarking these two systems, scholars and policymakers can identify translatable practices such as incentivising quality over compliance, enhancing institutional coordination, and embedding monitoring systems to improve learnership outcomes in South Africa (Rankin et al., 2015). This comparative lens enriches our understanding of vocational training's potential to foster inclusive economic development and highlights the need for flexible, learner-centred, and industry specific responsive models.

Table 4. Comparative overview of learnerships in South Africa and apprenticeships in the U.S

Dimension	South African learnerships	U.S apprenticeships
Structure	Formal NQF aligned program integrated with SETAs.	Registered with the U.S Department of Labor.
Employer role	Moderate: compliance driven.	Strong: Employer initiated and managed.
Policy framework	Guided by the Skills Development Act and SETA mandate.	Governed by the National Apprenticeship Act and state specific policies.
Integration with education	Collaboration between employers and training providers.	Linked with community colleges and trade schools.
Industry alignment	Varies: sometimes not responsive to emerging sector needs.	Highly responsive: designed to address real-time industry demand

Conclusion

The research affirms that hospitality learnerships in South Africa presents a potential tool for addressing skills shortages and promoting youth employment. However, fragmented stakeholder engagement, inconsistent program quality, and underdeveloped monitoring mechanisms limit their impact. By benchmarking against the U.S. apprenticeship model and grounding the framework in well-established learning theories, a more responsive, inclusive, and sustainable model can be created.

Recommendations:

- Enhance stakeholder collaboration through regular policy and industry forums.
- Incentivise employers based on quality outcomes, not just participation.
- Invest in digital monitoring platforms to track learner journeys and inform continuous improvement.
- Adopt co-designed curricula that reflect emerging technologies and service expectations.
- Expand mentorship training to ensure high-quality learner support across contexts.

This framework contributes to the discourse on vocational education reform and offers actionable strategies for elevating the hospitality sector's human capital through effective learnership programs.

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