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WORKING WITH DATA

ANALYSING SETA DATA MANAGEMENT SYSTEM FOR A STRONGER M&E SYSTEM

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What is the role of Data Management Systems in the M&E System?

A monitoring and evaluation system is a set of organisational structures, management processes, performance standards, strategies, plans, **data management systems,** reporting lines and accountability relationships which enables the organisation to discharge its M&E functions effectively (DPME, 2007). In addition to these formal managerial elements are the organisational culture, capacity and other enabling conditions meant to determine whether the feedback from the M&E function influence the organisation's decision-making, learning and service delivery.

The M&E system is in itself made-up of a number of inter-related and inter-connected sub-systems. One key sub-system of the M&E system is an effective and efficient **data management system**. Data management refers to the practice of organizing and maintaining data processes to meet ongoing information lifecycle needs. It is a process of creating, sharing, using and managing information of an organization. In practice, a data management system can take the form of an IT system that stores and retrieves data, improves collaboration, locates knowledge sources, mines repositories for hidden knowledge, captures and uses knowledge, or in some other way enhances the data management process.

In the case of the SETA system, the flow of skills development data from industry and training institutions, through the respective SETAs, to DHET and interested departments and agencies defines the SETA data management system. Without the smooth retrieval, processing, and querying of this data, the SETA M&E system would not function. In fact, the effectiveness of the M&E system (the ability to learn and make effective skills development decisions) depends critically on the integrity and comprehensiveness of the data management system.

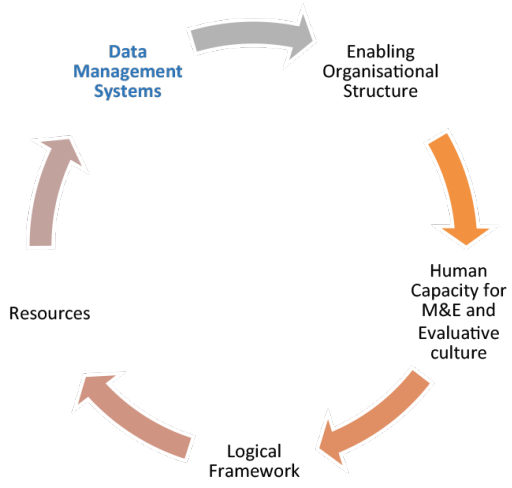


Figure 1: Basic Components of the M&E System

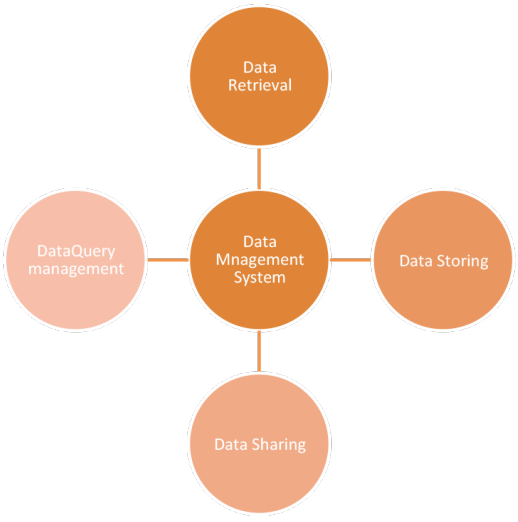


Figure 2: Functions of a Data Management System

What key contextual Elements affect Quality of Data Systems?

SETA EVOLUTION AND ITS EFFECTS

Since their establishment by the then Minister of Labour, Membathisi Mdladlana, in March 2005; SETAs have undergone many changes. There are many changes that took place over the years, some structural, and others strategic and even procedural. These changes have had effects on both the capacity and effectiveness with which data management systems within and across SETAs operate.

Firstly, reforms within SETAs were championed by different individual at different points in time. Akin to this, SETAs have not been immune to high staff turnover, especially affecting individuals championing pivotal changes in how the SETAs operate. This is said to have resulted in significant loss of institutional memory both within SETAs and - more critically to leadership – within DHET itself. Consequently, there are varying and competing appreciations of key procedures. This in turn, has affected how different SETAs manage data. More practically, it has resulted in different data management IT systems with varying standards and functions. As an example, SETAs apply different data retrieval methods guided by different arrangements with industry, to fulfil WSP and ATR reporting obligations. Depending on the sector, both procedures and tools for collecting skills data differ from SETA to SETA.

> *"The other issue has to do with SETA governance. Some SETAs tend to think that they are not government entities and do not have to behave as such. So, this adversely affects the governance style of respective SETAs, and causes inconsistencies across SETAs."* (DHET Official responsible for SETA performance)

Secondly, the fact that the SETAs were initially under the DoL and were subsequently transitioned into DHET resulted in a number of structural reforms. For one, the integration of the SETA mandate into the broader higher education and training framework implied a different set of expectations on the role of SETAs to also include **M&E as a key strategic imperative** for example. Another significant reform which came with the transition and remains a matter of differential understanding and application, is the SETA organisational structure. Each SETA tends to interpret its mandate differently, and each is therefore configured according to its interpretation. Consequently, each SETA's capacity to manage data is in turn, affected by the way it's structurally configured. As an example, some SETAs have a dedicated M&E unit and some SETAs M&E function is embedded into other units. And sadly, in some extremes, M&E is not a significant feature of other SETAs' operational manuals.

> *"Part of the root cause of this confusion in how SETAs should operate might have been caused by the transition from Labour to DHET. Under labour, SETAs may have been conceptualised differently with a different level of autonomy, while at DHET, there is a strict requirement to behave as a government entity." (DHET Official responsible for SETA performance)*

NORMS & ADVERSE INCENTIVES

Although SETAs have invested in expensive data managing systems, there is yet some work needed to put in place an appropriate quality assurance mechanism to ensure high levels of data integrity. Admittedly, one of the underlying drivers of poor quality data is a poor culture of organisational learning. SETAs are part of a broader government wide system which is characterised by strict reporting protocols. Referred to as ***"a burden of reporting"*** by officials, these strict protocols tend to focus generally on input and output reporting, with little to no tracking of meaningful change. In fact, the culture surrounding reporting across SETAs seems to be driven primarily by compliance, and less about organisational learning.

> *"The quality has been taken as a given, and the entire process is perceived as a compliance exercise. It's mostly about the submission itself and less about the content of the submissions. It is only a handful of SETAs who actually play an active role in ensuring good quality submissions" (M&E Manager at one of the SETAs)*

An example is the WSP and ATR data collected annually from industry. The WSP/ATR process has become unintendedly transactional between SETAs and industry, where employers comply by submitting annual WSP and ATRs in exchange for receiving mandatory grants. Oddly, the mandatory grand process was meant to incentivise good quality reporting by employers and strengthen collaboration. The original conceptual framework and intention of this processes was unfortunately lost overtime, giving way for incorrect application of the process and further promotion of a compliance driven behaviour, and a stronger transactional relationship with industry, as opposed to a collaborative relationship.



Due mainly to limited understanding of the purpose and value of M&E, M&E across the SETA system is normally viewed as a silo'ed and detached function within, when in fact it should be an intrinsic part of every function. This behaviour is also enabled by the prevailing sector planning process which until recently, was (by design) based on primary collection of industry skills and training data, with no procedural mechanism for performance reflection by each of the SETAs. This way, while planning was done each year, process did not follow a conventional planning cycle, i.e, it did not include performance reflection, or if it did, it was subsumed in to the SSP research process and not given adequate "cloud".

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

Over and above procedural and cultural issues discussed above, there are a number of structural and positioning challenges which affect the SETA data management system. Firstly, SETAs have positioned themselves ideologically too far away from "industry action" to effect quality information contribution by employers, in order to improve quality of the country's skills planning. Although arguably unintentional, SETAs carry a regulatory image within the respective industries. As opposed to being perceived as a collaborative social partner representing government, SETAs are unintendedly perceived as a skills development regulator and are therefore used by employers mainly as a clearing house for accredited training courses. While some SETAs have successfully established closer and better arrangements for exchanges with

industry, this positioning admittedly remains an obstacle for meaningful collaboration, especially given that labour information can be sensitive.

Secondly, SETAs have historically operated based on the assumption of a short horizon, generally driven by the life-span of National Skill Development Strategies of five years at a time. This has also meant that SETA leadership tenures and organisational plans for any reforms were limited to the set time horizon. The challenge with this is that it makes it difficult to make lasting changes on the SETA data management systems, at least at the level of the SETA. Especially because systemic change programme take longer time horizons to take effect.

Finally, although DHET has an existing governance manual which sets out clear reporting lines for SETAs, sets rules for board appointment and approval procedures including planning procedure; there is yet to be a similar guide for monitoring and evaluation. So, thus far, some SETAs have developed their own M&E framework and/or policy. Which therefore further explains why M&E function and capacity across the various SETAs is different. Consequently, the respective data management systems vary as well.

What is the problem with SETA data management system(s)?

SETAs manage data from a number of different sources, all required for different levels of performance reporting. On the one hand, SETAs collect skills training reports from SETA funded programmes, mainly used to track progress on skills development by SETAs themselves. On the other hand, SETAs rely on industry employers to submit Workplace Skills needs and reports on skills development initiatives managed by industry. In managing the movement and manipulation of this information, the following gaps are observed:

1) The procedure designed and applied by SETAs to retrieve WSP and ATR data assumes that employers themselves have the requisite capacity to manage and supply quality data, which is not such a sound assumption given that many employers do not even have dedicated personnel to do so. To give a clearer picture of the reality, only less than 5% of the transport companies submit WSP and ATR annually. Even so, it is a well-known fact that the quality of the data is poor, and provides limited usefulness. It is for this reason that SETAs increasingly rely on secondary sources of data to compile respective SSPs.

2) Data retrieval processes by SETAs tend to be manual, putting a strain on already poor technical capacity within SETAs. So, programme data passes through a number of "hands" before it makes its way into the system, thereby increasing probability of human error. In addition, the manual capturing process normally takes too long that by the time capturing is complete, the data can be declared obsolete for any meaningful decision making.

3) In order to meet ongoing reporting requirements, SETA M&E units (if they exist at all) tend to invest most of its resources to managing the data capturing process, thereby crowding out efforts for meaningful analysis and engagement with performance information to facilitate organisational learning.

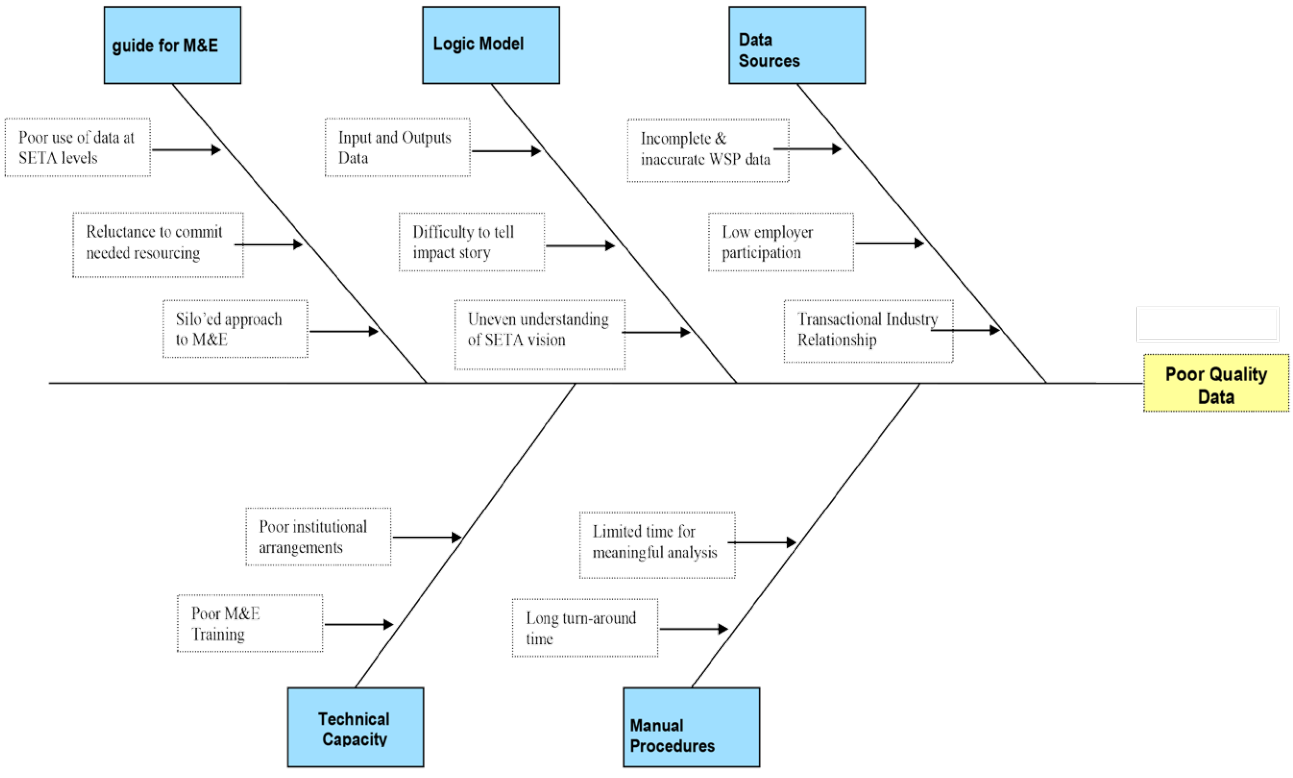
> *"An information- sharing system across SETAs is also needed because some qualifications are accredited by a different SETA so any delays from them regarding learners' qualifications will cause the SASSETA personnel to miss their own targets. All SETAs have this problem so they should know the consequences and not work in silos".* SASSETA Official

4) Despite high levels of data capturing and reporting committed by SETAs, the bulk of the data is still input and output level of reporting. It remains difficult (if not impossible) to tell any meaningful impact story using the data.

5) The data has also been found to be too internally focussed. SETAs tend to report on skills programmes funded by themselves, when there are a lot more skills initiatives managed independently by industry. The current mechanism does not adequately capture industry skills information. This therefore skews national skills planning and critical estimates.

6) Until recently, the manual reporting process made it possible for duplicate reporting and manipulation of progress results by different SETAs. Quality assurance mechanisms for this information have been found to be unstandardized and ineffective.

7) Finally, Data collection and processing seems to be feeding mainly the compliance imperative, with admittedly little effort to use performance data for learning and decision-making at SETA level.



What has been done?

In order to strengthen the SETA M&E system, significant strides have been made both within SETAs and at DHET level, some directly dealing with data management challenges as discussed above. The most pivotal steps include:

1) Design and implementation of the Skills Education and Training Management Information System (SETMIS), which is a unit record based information system that stores and maintains unit records of Skills Education and Training data related to Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) and their providers, employers, assessors, moderators and learners. The data content of SETMIS is primarily maintained and supplied by SETAs. The SETAs create electronic data submission files in standard formats and transmit them to the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) to be loaded into SETMIS. **As of March 2019, all SETAs are now 100% onto the system.**

2) Efforts to standardise the language for WSP and ATR reporting instruments in order to promote a common understanding of key data points across all SETAs have been made.

3) Inclusion of a reflection and progress analysis chapter (chapter 5) into the SSP report has been widely welcome, thereby encouraging SETAs to reflect on passed performance and incorporate lessons into the sector plans.

4) Individual SETA excellence in setting arrangements with industry for accurate retrieval of unit records for skills planning purposes have been observed, thereby reducing excessive human interaction with data, and reducing human error. At the same time, reducing manual reporting by employers which can encourage participation.

5) Establishment of SETA M&E and research working groups to facilitate peer-learning and establishing platforms for sharing of common infrastructure and reform projects.

What remains a challenge?

As the effort to ultimately host a functional SETA data management system continues, there are still a few challenges needing urgent attention. Firstly, further exacerbation of the SETA technical capacity constraints continues to be experienced as relatively more capable personnel migrate to institutions whose structures are well organised and offer a better working environment. SETAs therefore continue to lose institutional memory and capacity.

Secondly, while DHET is successfully orchestrating a revamping exercise to strengthen the SETA M&E framework, it remains uncertain as to where the oversight and championing of the M&E function for SETAs will be located. Although there is a legislative mandate which clearly locates it within the National Skills Authority (NSA), there is a general consensus that the NSA simply does not have the capacity to take on such a responsibility. The DHET M&E directorate and unit which has significantly more capacity (29 staff members) therefore presents a more viable alternative.

Thirdly, SETMIS still relies on the existing data retrieval process within SETAs, each with a myriad of challenges. Most SETAs still rely on manual processes for data capturing. So in essence, while SETMIS makes reporting much easier, it does not change challenges associated with inaccuracy, long turnaround time, and incompleteness.

Finally, selection of critical and useful data for purposeful monitoring still remains a challenge. Without a clear SETA theory of change and logical framework, SETAs continue to commit limited resources to chase after many performance indicators which do not necessarily capture meaningful change.

What are the recommendations?

Wide consultation with SETA management and DHET officials responsible for SETA oversight and performance, including academia, continues to surface potential solutions for improvement of the SETA data management system. While there is a much longer list of suggestions made by the various stakeholders, the following represents a list of strategic interventions which are intended to address challenges associated with critical and catalytic points of the system.

1) The system should always be viewed as whole, and not as fragmented pieces. This said, piecemeal solutions such as one-time training of staff should never be a solution worth investing in. ***"It should be about M&E and its value for the entire system".*** We need to strengthen how each SETA deals with M&E as an institution, and how each institution should be configured to support the bigger SETA and PSET system. In specific terms, SETAs should be supported to address institutional arrangements for better M&E practice. This is especially important as each SETA has a unique set of challenges. While the resulting intervention might certainly include training, the aim should be for a systems change, not training as a single intervention.

2) In order to decisively disrupt a continuous and overbearing culture of reporting without meaningful improvement in performance, while at the same time improving the ability to tell an impact story; there is an urgent need to install a commonly understood theory of change with a strategically selected indicator framework for skills development by SETAs

3) As a low hanging fruit, some effort should be made to integrate government inter-institutional data systems for more accurate data. Employers at the moment are found having to report the same data to a number of different departments for the same reasons, i.e.; possibly, the same skills data reported to SETAs is reported in more accurate format somewhere else in government.

4) Some SETAs have managed to establish more effective unit record retrieval arrangements with industry, while other SETAs continue to struggle. This presents an opportunity to scale up working approaches across the entire SETA community. SETAs cannot afford to operate in silos going forward. However, this level of collaboration might need some steering by DHET as a credible and trusted leader.

5) SETA M&E function will need an implementing and oversight champion going forward. Without a dedicated driver for the implementation of the M&E framework, M&E function at SETA level will continue to be deprioritised. It is therefore critical that a location for the oversight function is identified sooner and decisively, in order to enforce performance/ implementation standards.

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