

Wholesale & Retail

LEADERSHIP CHAIR

Collaboration opens the window to a world of opportunities



An E-learning Strategy for the W&R Sector: A Framework for Collaboration and Implementation within the South African Retail Sector A SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

One of the strategic objectives of the Wholesale and Retail Sector Education and Training Authority (W&RSETA) is the development of a comprehensive e-learning system to support the wholesale and retail sector. An e-learning strategy should enable the W&RSETA to accredit, monitor, and evaluate training providers; register assessors; certify learners; facilitate skills development; and give guidance to the wholesale and retail (W&R) industry.

The research project “An e-learning strategy for the W&R sector: A framework for collaboration and implementation within the South African retail sector” explores an e-learning quality assurance framework for W&R role-players, and makes recommendations for implementation by the W&RSETA.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

An exploratory desktop literature study was employed as methodology. The study included a review of concepts, policies, quality assurance (QA) frameworks and South African legislation related to e-learning. The project focused specifically on workplace learning and the W&R sector.

	PRIMARY SEARCHES	SECONDARY SEARCHES
SOURCES	Peer-reviewed journal articles Dissertations E-learning reports	Documents & reports on e-learning in SA legislation QA frameworks, including W&RSETA QA policies W&RSETA prior research on e-learning International retail & HR trade journals SA government website Websites of organizations supporting e-learning International correspondence Glossaries of e-learning terminology
KEY TERMS AND THEMES	E-learning definitions E-learning frameworks E-learning & vocational education E-learning & workplace learning E-learning & retailing E-learning policy E-learning quality assurance E-learning support organizations SA e-learning policies E-learning in Africa	E-learning & retailing Education & training white papers & reports QA frameworks used to accredit e-learning providers & programmes in Europe International organizations supporting e-learning Assessment of e-learning by large & small retailers W&RSETA QA policies E-learning terminology

The literature sources reviewed were subsequently divided into four focus areas.

FOCUS AREAS

1. E-learning concepts, definitions and frameworks, workplace literature, and e-learning experience related to the retail industry
2. International e-learning policy experiences, including SA education and training legislation referring to e-learning
3. International methods of supporting e-learning in education and training programmes, and feedback from the SA retail industry
4. Quality assurance frameworks used in the evaluation of e-learning providers and programmes



FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

What is e-learning?

E-learning is the use of information and communication technology (ICT) for the delivery of education and training. The South African Qualifications Authority defines e-learning as “a mode of teaching and learning that makes use of technology-mediated features”. Today the term “e-learning” is broadly used to refer to any learning using technology, whether this is a computer, laptop, tablet, or any other mobile device, and whether the learning setting is a school, college, business, or home. It encompasses computer-based training, webinars, virtual classrooms, and virtual workshops. When e-learning is combined with face-to-face classroom teaching, it is called “blended learning”. National retailers’ annual reports and websites bear evidence that e-learning is growing in use and popularity in South Africa, and in the W&R sector.

One e-learning model that is particularly relevant for the W&RSETA is so-called “distributed” or “flexible” learning. Distributed learning allows instructors, students, and content to be located in different, non-centralized locations, facilitating asynchronous learning. E-learning can provide distributed learning options for employees, allowing them to up-skill more rapidly.

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E-learning policies

The literature indicates that the development of e-learning policies follows a pattern: first, governments act to facilitate e-learning, second, e-learning is integrated into the education system, and third, e-learning changes the nature and operation of education institutions. The implementation of e-learning policies was found to be relatively new. A notable feature of initiatives in this area is a short implementation cycle, with the majority of e-learning policies operating on a two- to three-year implementation cycle. This could possibly be ascribed to the changing nature of technology, and to new trends in e-learning.

A supply-side approach to e-learning raises questions about possible barriers, and differences between developed and developing countries. The literature is generally silent about strategies for disadvantaged groups. The objective of e-learning in developing countries is to provide basic education to large numbers of poor students, which is very different from the objective in developed countries, namely to develop an effective knowledge economy and enhance lifelong education.

E-learning is still in its early stages in developing countries, which experience unique challenges regarding infrastructure, information access, and technical and organizational support from institutions. E-learning policies in African tertiary education institutions revolve around enabling aspects, namely connectivity, capacity building, and content. Constraints to the growth of e-learning include access to electricity, use of mobile devices, and use of ICT. In most African countries, ICT integration in learning processes depends on the support of the government, local authorities, and the private sector. The rapidly growing market for mobile devices and social media in Africa will support the development of e-learning.

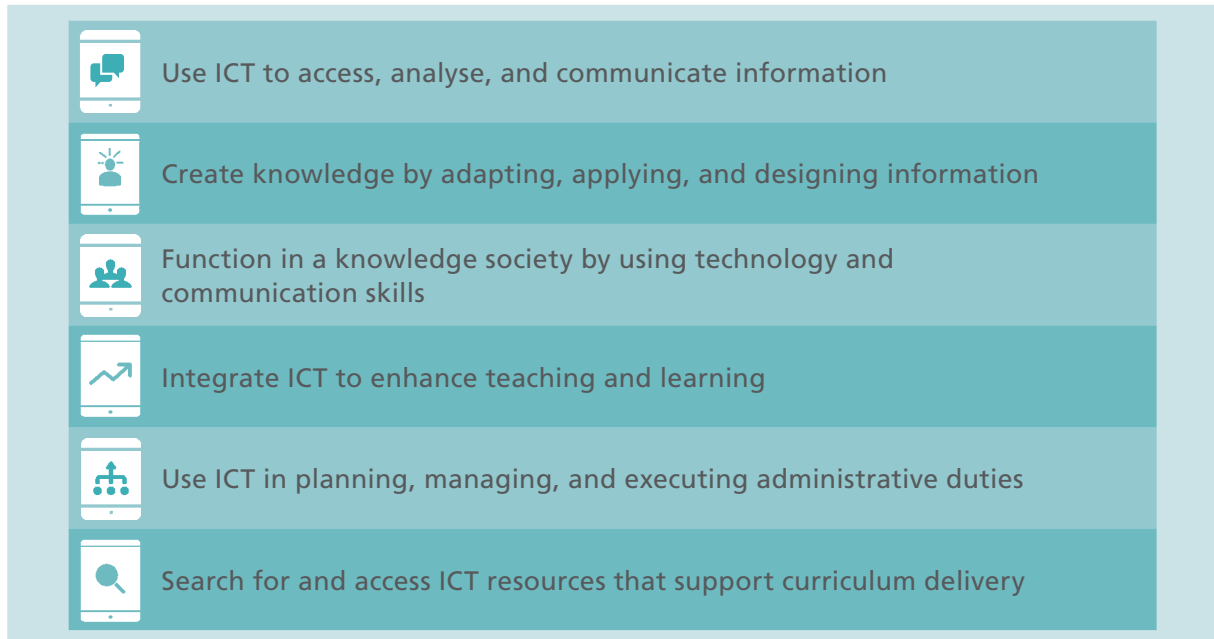
Specific barriers experienced in Africa such as connectivity, content, and capability should inform the W&RSETA's approach to e-learning. The W&RSETA should take note of South Africa's "digital divide", and of the fact that ministries are tasked to develop their own solutions, which implies that the evolving e-learning strategy of the Department of Higher Education and Training requires input by the W&RSETA.

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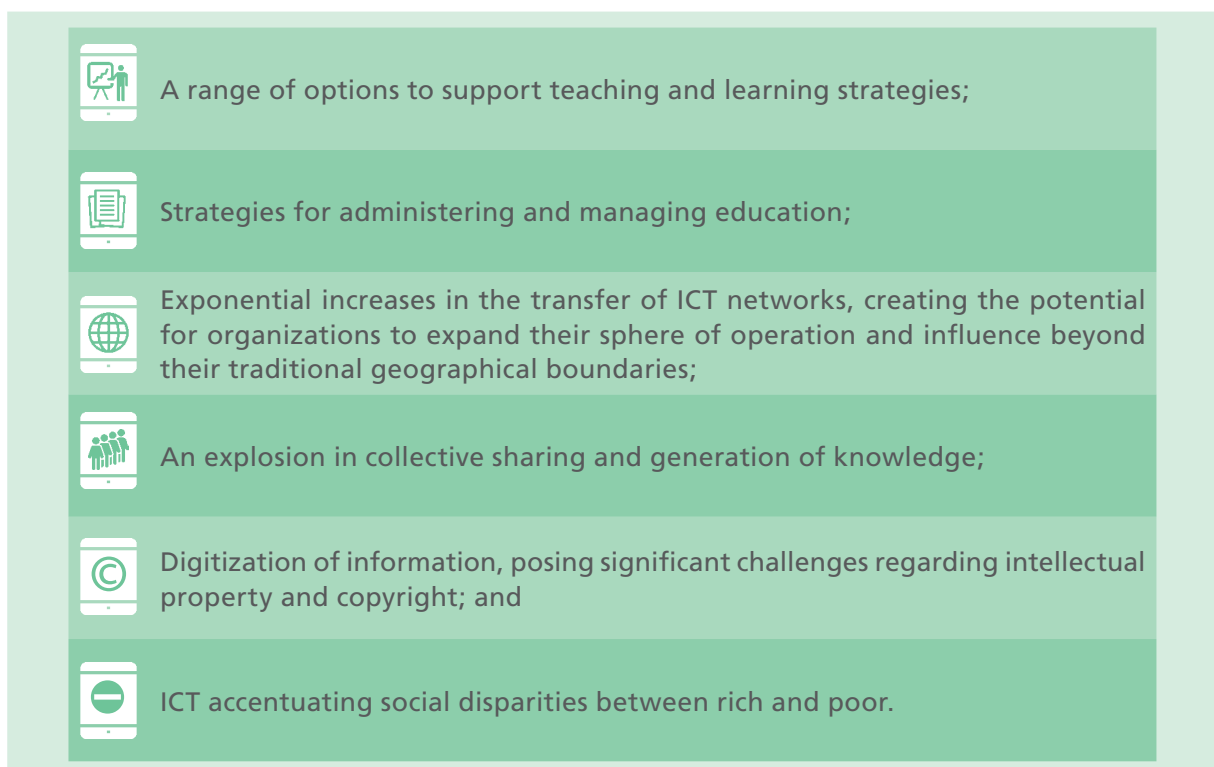
E-learning and post-school education and training

Two government white papers and two national policy frameworks speak directly to the subject of e-learning.

The **2004 White Paper on E-education** was the first policy proposing a national e-education strategy. The provincial governments were tasked with its implementation in the various provinces, and the Western Cape, Gauteng and the Northern Cape are already implementing the policy. The white paper states that all South African educators and learners should be able to:



The draft **Policy Framework on Distance Education in South African Universities** highlights six trends in higher education:



The policy notes that collaboration in the creation of open educational resources (OERs) provides an opportunity to address access, quality, and cost issues simultaneously.

The **2013 White Paper on Post-School Education and Training** draws a distinction between vocational and occupational education, where vocational education focuses on knowledge and skills in terms of a general, broad orientation, and occupational education focuses on specific occupations, as well as ongoing professional development and training in the workplace. An extension of the white paper, the **Open Learning Policy Framework for Post-School Education and Training**, views e-learning as a tool to enable and enhance open learning.

In spite of the existence of these white papers and policy frameworks, the research concluded that the application of e-learning within the workplace is not specifically nor extensively addressed by the current South African legislation and policy frameworks.

E-learning in the workplace

A substantial part of the W&RSETA's activities address training within the workplace through the allocation of resources to scarce and critical skills, as identified by the sector skills plan (SSP). The research sought to identify the main drivers, benefits, and barriers with regard to e-learning from a workplace perspective.



The **drivers** for e-learning can be summed up as the growth of information at industry and profession level, the expansion of technology within the industry, the requirement for a return on investment, and companies' need for legal compliance (for example with regard to health and safety, and certification).



The **benefits** of e-learning from a workplace perspective can be grouped into three categories: E-learning improves access to training and allows training to be delivered flexibly in terms of time and place; e-learning is a means of ensuring consistent and scalable training; and e-learning is sustainable and cost-effective, resulting in minimal stoppages and time off. E-learning helps improve employees' basic skills, providing organizations with a competitive advantage. E-learning decreases the costs of up-skilling a workforce by reducing travel and employee time away from work, and is useful for a geographically dispersed workforce because it can deliver a consistent training experience.



Barriers to e-learning in the workplace include the high up-front costs; training-the-trainer costs; developing interactive and personalised content; employee resistance to e-learning; not having a learning culture in place and lack of management support; lack of technical support; training being irrelevant to real-time work tasks and not integrated with business processes; and the tendency to relegate compliance-type training to the e-learning environment. Other barriers relate to connectivity – limited access to the internet and ICT; capability – the unknown ICT competencies of managers, trainers, and employees; and content – lack of e-learning content relevant to the organization's specific needs.

THE STUDY IDENTIFIED THE FOLLOWING KEY THEMES FOR THE SUCCESSFUL DEPLOYMENT OF E-LEARNING IN THE INDUSTRY:

 AWARENESS	Raising the awareness of both managers and employees regarding the benefits of e-learning is a key driver for their active commitment to, and participation in, e-learning initiatives.
 COMPLIANCE	Personnel management applications, such as learning management systems, ensure compliance.
 STRATEGIC PLANNING	The implementation of e-learning plans should be fully integrated with the organization's training plans.
 MANAGEMENT SUPPORT	Senior management should be committed to the introduction of e-learning.
 CONSISTENCY OF TRAINING	E-learning can deliver quality training to all employees regardless of location or timing.
 PEOPLE	Staff require an impetus to move from low skills to higher-level skills.
 PRODUCTION	E-learning applications improve training speed and reduce employee down-time.
 QUALITY	E-learning improves the quality of training, which is essential to increase the knowledge and skill levels of employees. Employees can return to the online resources at any time, reinforcing learning that has taken place.
 TIME	E-learning provides the benefits of speed and flexibility for the learner.

Further lessons included:

- Large organizations are more likely to adopt e-learning than small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), because they have better infrastructure, and can more readily achieve economies of scale.
- SMEs can form collaborative networks to share knowledge, resources, and expertise to overcome cost and other barriers.
- Firms need to have strategies in place to support e-learning. Managers' support for e-learning in the workplace, including allocating sufficient time for e-learning, is critical to success.

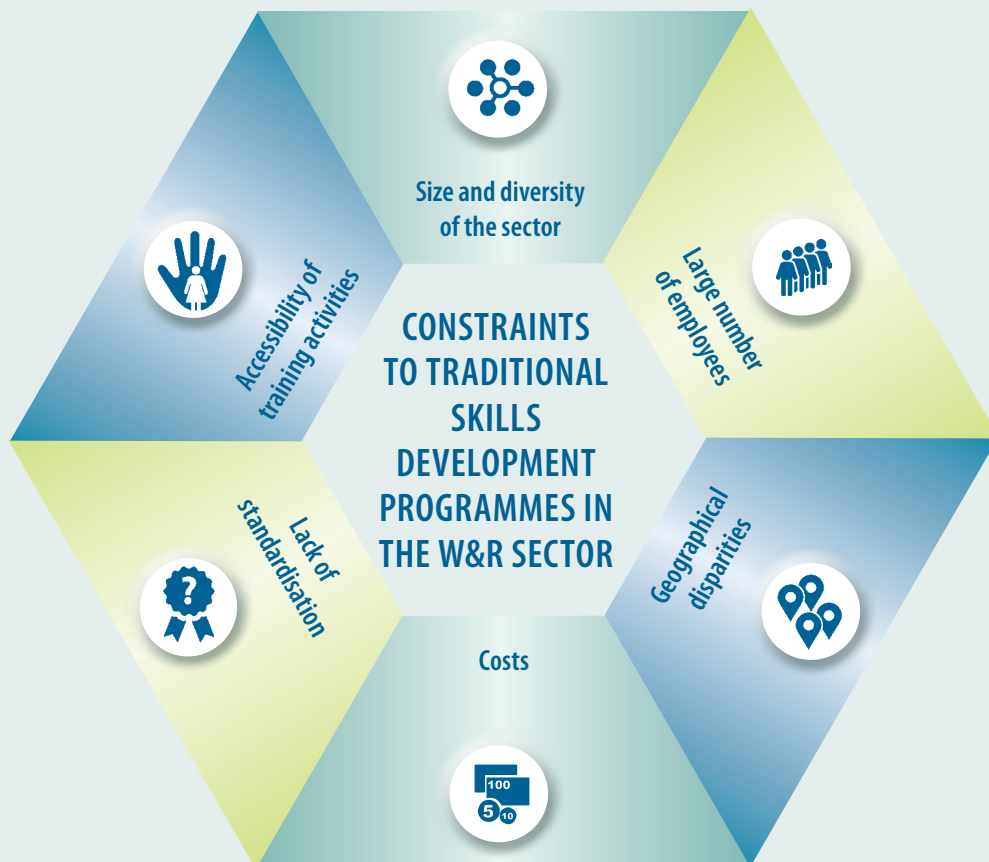
It is important that the W&RSETA gains an understanding of the drivers, benefits, and barriers in respect of e-learning, in order to be able to deliver effective and targeted support to its stakeholders. Key pointers are the need for a differentiated approach for large and small businesses, enhancing the capacity of providers, and understanding what inhibits and enhances e-learning in the workplace.

W&R perspectives on e-learning

A number of benchmarking surveys involving retail organizations in the UK, the USA and Canada were conducted between 2011 and 2015, and these studies provide insight into the international retail e-learning experience. The use of e-learning appears to be growing at retail workplaces internationally, with an estimated 38% of training at UK retailers taking place online in 2015, and up to 96% of retailers surveyed in Canada making use of e-learning. The approach of using e-learning as flexible or distributed training is evident in a shift from classroom or face-to-face learning to blended learning. It appears that, internationally, the bulk of e-learning training at retailers now takes place using a blended approach, which is consistent with the move to e-learning that is reported by South African retailers.

A recurrent theme in international surveys on e-learning in the retail sector is that specific types of training are favoured for the e-learning environment. Foremost among the types of training offered using e-learning are health and safety training, and industry-specific regulatory compliance training. The drivers of e-learning identified within the retail context are the importance of providing information to staff, the induction of staff, and the sales focus. With regard to e-learning at international retailers, it was noted that online assessment is not yet extensively used, other than at UK retailers surveyed.

With regard to the South African W&R sector, the study identified the following constraints to traditional, classroom skills development programmes.



To overcome these constraints to traditional skills development, South African retailers are increasingly using ICT to reduce costs and improve effectiveness. Consequently, the W&RSETA urgently requires an e-learning training policy to achieve the industry's strategic objectives.

Representatives from the South African W&R sector were quoted as follows:

Our new e-learning methodology assists us in the rapid roll-out of induction, product knowledge, compliance, and customer service-related training. The implementation of e-learning in our supermarket store environment leads to a substantial increase in training interventions and beneficiaries. – Shoprite, 2015

In the past year, we provided retailers with tablet devices that contain the “Fresh Studio” – a full online manual that provides information about every department, its products and systems. – Spar, 2014

R5,1 million spent on e-learning in the current year. This technology makes training available to associates on a daily basis regardless of where they are geographically located. – MrPrice, 2015

In 2014, two surveys were commissioned by the W&RSETA, one among small retailers and one among large retailers, aimed at investigating the possibilities of e-learning as an alternate to face-to-face instruction. The findings show that a comprehensive and systematic approach to formulating an e-learning strategy that addresses demand- and supply-side considerations is needed. The South African W&R sector's readiness and enthusiasm for e-learning is apparent from the two studies, with the articulated needs falling within the mandate of the W&RSETA. However, some issues related to infrastructure, such as the provision of a platform, may not be within the mandate of the W&RSETA, and may require further investigation and dialogue.

A desktop review of organizations supporting e-learning internationally provided clarity on the main streams of support currently being rendered to e-learning programmes, such as prioritising the expansion of existing e-learning capacity, enhancing collaboration, and advocacy of e-learning efforts.

Proposed W&RSETA e-learning objectives

The research identified the following objectives for e-learning:

- Mobilise existing capacity for the delivery of e-learning skills in the workplace;
- Provide differentiated support for e-learning in larger and SME retailers;
- Provide training programmes for both large and SME retailers; and
- Provide information and best-practice support.

It appears that, internationally, the bulk of e-learning training at retailers now takes place using a blended approach, which is consistent with the move to e-learning that is reported by South African retailers.

The objectives were subsequently divided into those that fall within the W&RSETA's mandate, and those that do not.

OBJECTIVES WITHIN THE W&RSETA MANDATE	OBJECTIVES OUTSIDE THE W&RSETA'S SCOPE OF SUPPORT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assistance with developing e-learning materials • Funding of learners once a provider is accredited • Providing a facility for assessment and uploading of e-portfolios • Providing training for key employees on identified aspects of e-learning • Publishing standards of good practice for e-learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding e-learning programmes that are not specified as National Qualifications Framework standards or qualifications • Providing infrastructure, including learning management systems and bandwidth • Hosting and maintaining an e-learning platform

An education and training quality assurance framework

The quality assurance principles in the South African Qualifications Authority Act of 1995 form the departure point for all W&RSETA quality assurance, and hence also the basis for quality assessment of e-learning.

The proposed e-learning policy highlights two methods for assessing and monitoring e-learning programmes, namely benchmarking and the specification of standards. These measures are part of the proposed Education and Training Quality Assurance framework, which defines benchmarks of good practice and evaluates training providers in terms of these benchmarks. The W&RSETA should also monitor, on a continuous basis, national and international e-learning developments. To keep pace with international developments, representation in international organizations and networks should be considered. The establishment of an e-learning advisory board is also suggested.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the research, the following recommendations are presented.

Recommendation 1: Focus of W&RSETA initiatives



It is recommended that the W&RSETA focuses on distributed learning in a workplace context, i.e. flexible learning options for employees in different locations, so that instruction can take place independent of time and place. The W&RSETA should focus on content and capability, since the third barrier identified, connectivity, may fall outside the mandate of the W&RSETA.

Recommendation 2: Alignment with government policies

It is recommended that the W&RSETA aligns its e-learning approach with evolving government policies on post-school education and training.



Recommendation 3: Integration with existing strategies and quality assurance policies



It is recommended that e-learning strategies should form an integral part of, and support, the existing W&RSETA vision and mission. E-learning quality assurance should be included in existing W&RSETA quality assurance policies.

Recommendation 4: Consultation with stakeholders

It is recommended that the W&RSETA engages in a comprehensive planning and feedback cycle with relevant stakeholders on the proposed e-learning evaluation framework, including identifying stakeholders, compiling an action plan, providing documentation to training providers, and holding workshops with stakeholders. It is envisaged that this will result in a pilot programme with selected training providers to test e-learning.



Recommendation 5: Provide documentation on best practice



It is recommended that the need for documentation and reference material on e-learning could be addressed by creating an online e-learning resource hub, as well as a best-practice database. The W&RSETA should compile and maintain a register of programmes and training materials appropriate for use by training providers.

THE W&R SECTOR

W&R is the fourth largest contributor to GDP and the 30 000 tax-registered retail enterprises employ about 20% of the total economically active workforce according to Stats SA.

About 86% of registered enterprises in this sector are small and micro enterprises, 9.5% medium size and 4.5% large companies. Only 66% of operational retail traders are formally registered and contributing to the fiscus, suggesting there are over 100 000 informal (unregistered) traders in the sector accounting for 10% of national retail turnover.

The main employment increase has been in the informal /SMME sub-sector. This project is the twentieth research study conducted by the WRLC.

Wholesale&Retail **LEADERSHIP CHAIR**

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THE WRLC

The Wholesale and Retail Leadership Chair (WRLC) at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) was established in 2013, based on an initiative by the Wholesale & Retail Sector Education and Training Authority (W&RSETA) to contribute towards sector research and professional qualifications development at Higher Education levels.

A national survey report entitled Priority Research Needs of the South African Wholesale and Retail Sector marked the first step taken by the WRLC towards the creation of a basis for relevant research in this dynamic business sector.



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The lead researcher was Mr Jonathan Aspeling, Wholesale & Retail Leadership Academy Manager, Cape Peninsula University of Technology. His research team included Professor Roger B. Mason, Wholesale & Retail Leadership Chair, Cape Peninsula University of Technology and Mr Patrick Coates, International Skills UK Ltd.

The full report is available at:

<http://wrlc.org.za/research-2-2/completed-research/>

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