

real briefing

No. 1, 2022



Connecting the Silos:

The challenge of skills planning and provision in the public service sector

Key findings

Central to building a capable and developmental state is capacity to identify what skills are needed in the sector, and to shape provision and qualifications. This REAL Briefing focuses largely on a review of skills anticipation and provision planning processes so as to provide insights about strengthening labour market intelligence to address skills needs in the public service more effectively. The skills of individual public sector workers are only one of many issues that affect the performance of the state. Work organization; the state of management or the lack thereof; and how organisational structures, politics, and skills interact are all crucial. But the focus of this REAL Briefing focuses largely on the complexity of planning in the public service sector.

REAL's research focused on mapping how skills supply and demand planning happens in the public service sector with a view to strengthening these processes.

An overarching finding from the research is that skills planning and provision is complex and disconnected, with multiple stakeholders governed by a web of regulations and commitments. Three different systems used to identify skills needs run in parallel, and have little direct connection with each other, or with the institutions that provide skills for the public service sector. Three sets of policies, procedures and systems, tends to overlap and contradict each other and they have no mechanism for sharing of data and insights to identify future skills or shape the pipeline.

The PSETA, which uses national skills anticipation and provision planning policy, coordinates by establishing partnerships with key players to limit duplication and build alignment. An important gap is that the Sector Skills Plan uses data from Workplace Skills Plans and Annual Training Reports, but not necessarily from service delivery improvement plans. This is a challenge within and across departments. And higher education and government training institutions lag and struggle to catch up. All this leads to fractured demand and supply across a range of institutions.

The research highlights the need to rethink how planning is conducted; what skills are needed to build a capable state and how coordination can be achieved to remove duplication and operating in silos.

Some issues for consideration include:

- Current skills lists have very little bearing on what is actually happening in workspaces and on the ground.
- Public service sector training is often reactive because there are limited joint conversations about what a future supply line should be. In addition, training is seen as a solution to service delivery problems but often seems to be decontextualized from workplace or delivery realities on the ground.
- A compliance culture has become evident and developed as a result of the reams of reporting templates which need to be completed – this has become the focus instead of improving delivery and access for the poor.
- Coordination has to be political; this means that departments have to want to work across boundaries in unsafe territory; if the intention is to change practices for a developmental state.



Introduction

A capable and developmental state is essential for ensuring economic and social growth and development and addressing poverty and inequality in South Africa. Chapter 13 of the National Development Plan (NDP) identifies a number of strategies for building a state that delivers, including the professionalisation of the public service sector. The first priority of the 2019-2024 Medium Term Strategic Framework (MTSF) is building a capable, ethical and developmental state.

What does it mean to build a capable, ethical and developmental state?

- A capable state has the human, institutional, operational and technological systems and processes to deliver services (to all, but mostly to the most marginalised) and engage flexibly with citizens.
- An ethical state follows the Constitutional values and principles of public administration and the rule of law. It is honest and committed to social justice. It does not use state revenue for personal gain and focuses on the public good.
- A developmental state meets people's different needs by intervening where necessary to drive development. It rises above sectional interests for the benefit of all sectors of society.

A state that is capable, honest and just is premised on a public service that is able to deliver services, engage with and support citizens, and commit to social justice. Most importantly, a state that is capable, ethical and developmental, is also able to identify what skills are needed in the sector (demand) and shape provision and qualifications (supply). In other words:

- Skills for the sector need to be foreseen in relation to the strategic needs and demands of delivering services and driving development now and in the future. And, in context, based on a data-driven understanding of the political economy of the sector, including what is in place.
- Qualifications and provision need to be shaped to ensure a continuous supply of relevant and aligned skills across the sector. Skills lists and occupations should be contextually pertinent and adaptable to future shifts or in times of crisis (like the Covid pandemic).

What is the problem?

There is a range of challenges within the public service skills planning system that limits the capacity of the state to deliver on the NDP. There are three different cycles of planning and reporting, without a coordinating mechanism for understanding skills development, or the implications for current and future delivery. A poor understanding of demand across the public service political economy affects public service supply planning.

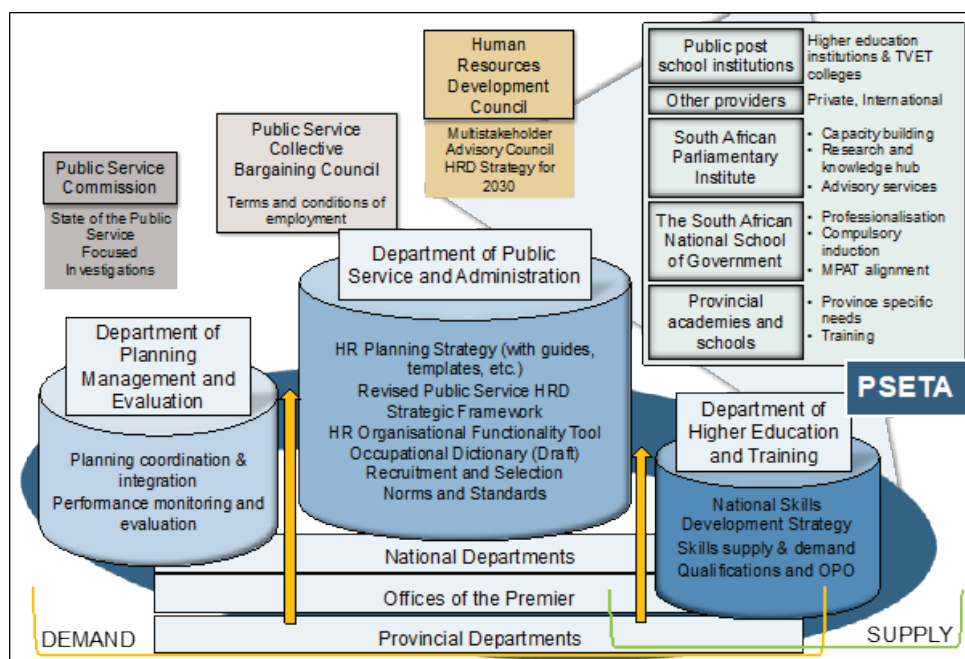
Networks of government departments, Chapter 9 institutions, advisory councils, Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs), higher education institutions (HEIs), and other education and training providers attempt to anticipate and provide skills to build state capability. This includes multiple regulatory and statutory bodies that oversee the structuring and quality of programmes. The PSETA is required to operate as a node of coordination and alignment across these institutions in which human, financial, and infrastructural resources are unevenly distributed. How can this be achieved?

How does the state plan and provide skills?

Skills planning in the public service is driven by the same mechanisms and tools for understanding demand across the economy. The institutional terrain is complex and there are a multiplicity of players.

Three system-type relationships frame public service sector skills supply and demand (see diagram below). All of these systems are complex, difficult to change, and dynamic within boundaries. There is a tendency to abstract skills from socio-economic and political contexts, as well as the institutionalised cultures and routines which enable or constrain work-based learning and application. As highlighted in the diagram below, there are three key departments which govern public service sector skills supply and demand:

- The Department of Public Service and Administration defines terms and conditions of employment, competencies and mandatory training and development for all officials employed under the Public Service Act.
- The Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation within the Presidency, is responsible for national planning, performance and evaluation.
- The Department of Higher Education and Training is responsible for post-school education and training which includes HEIs, colleges and SETAs.



What this planning system means for skills supply and demand

Emerging out of a review of this complex and fragmented planning and provision system, the following issues relate to what is happening on the demand side:

- Skills planning is managed through policies and procedures that include human resources planning and priority setting.
- Skills identification is guided by the National Development Plan, the Human Resources Development Strategy, followed by the Medium-Term Strategic Framework.
- Development goals are translated into 3-year departmental strategic plans aligned to human resource development plans. Each national and provincials department, in turn, develops annual performance plans that frame the performance management and development system.
- All officials complete a personal development plan indicating where and how they need further development. Individual performance goals link to departmental goals but not always to development plans.
- Most departments comply to the various planning processes, completing plans and reporting within timelines. This includes workplace skills plans. Planning is driven by compliance and most departments do not analyse results for skills anticipation.
- Insufficient attention is paid to anticipating institutional conditions for skills planning and support, as well as data collection and analysis.

On the supply side:

- There is fractured provision across a complex range of institutions across national departments and provinces.
- There is a focus on offering standard administrative and management training with little emphasis on the formation of the norms and values that create a common ethos and sense of purpose.
- Curriculum quality varies, as do training methodologies, assessment strategies and training materials. Course design does not pay attention to institutionalised cultures and practices and how the learning (if any) translates back into workplaces.
- Training is often of doubtful relevance (due to a lack of data and about how the delivery systems work and what skills are required to shift established patterns) with limited impact on performance.
- The links to employment criteria and career paths in relation to administration, supervisory, middle and senior management are not activated.
- Training is only part of the challenge of building a public administration that can get the work done. Issues of political will, employment criteria, discipline and culture need to be addressed at the same time.

Interventions for strengthening the system

Despite attempts to ensure aligned and integrated demand supply routines in the public service via integrated planning, this takes place within three planning and reporting systems. Within this, there is duplication and limited engagement with the implications of planning across the public service sector.

The PSETA has prioritised consolidating planning templates and reporting dates with the DPISA to limit duplication and improve data analysis. Horizontal coordination is difficult to achieve against decades of institutionalised silo bureaucracy. The PSETA will have to work hard to build pathways that enable the analysis of needs and shaping of provision across silos.

There is a lack of clarity and understanding about skills for a capable, developmental and ethical state – a state that delivers. The tendency is to work from what is already known. In order to shape future supply, a more nuanced understanding of what actually happens in organisations, contexts and about socially inclusive, poverty reducing service delivery is required.

Public service training is often reactive because there are limited joint conversations about what a future supply line should be. Training is seen as a solution to service delivery problems but it often seems decontextualized from workplace or delivery realities on the ground. Also, the focus on skills supply seems mainly aimed at ensuring transmission and implementation instead of transforming workplace behaviour.

The coordination of goals (not only of the mechanisms, but also of ways of ‘seeing’ that move beyond the departmental silos) and the internal cycle of performativity is focused on ticking off goals to account upwards within departments, rather than outwards in terms of services delivered.

This has created a compliance culture, evident in the reams of reporting templates, where departments systematically spend large chunks of time completing forms to prove they have done what they said they would, rather than improving delivery and access for the poor.

The coordination has to be political; this means that departments have to want to work across boundaries in unsafe territory; if the intention is to change practices for a developmental state.

There must be a rethinking of planning to include not only skills, but also institutions, cultures and contexts, and issues of organisational agency and motivation. Current skills are wish lists that match a ‘ideal-type’ idea of public service with little bearing on what is actually happening in workspaces and on the ground.

Finally, some deep thinking is required to identify the critical skills that enable the public service sector to focus outwards to citizens, work across silos and spheres, collaborate and focus on improving services. Systems will need to change to minimise patronage, individual ambition and just ticking the boxes, if the public service is to be capable, developmental and ethical.

