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An investigation into the competence of workplace trainers to meet the special learning needs of underprepared learners*

ABSTRACT

This article focussses on the competence of trainers in the South African workplace to provide training to underprepared learners whose special learning need should be understood by the trainers. The National Qualifications Framework, brought into being by the South African Qualifications Authority Act of 1995, has as one of its goals the development of a competent workforce. This goal is shared by the business sector who is aware that only a competent employee can make a meaningful contribution to organisational growth. The writer investigated the capacity of South African trainers to meet underprepared learners' special need.. She found that most trainers who are confronted by underprepared learners are not able to provide all the special support that they require.

Key words: SA workforce; underprepared learners; NQF; competence of trainers; culture and learning; unit standards

OPSOMMING

Hierdie artikel is gerig op die vaardigheid van opleiers in die Suid-Afrikaanse werkplek om opleiding te verskaf aan ondervoorbereide leerders met wie se spesiale leerbehoeftes opleiers bekend moet wees. Die Nasionale Kwalifikasieraamwerk, in die lewe geroep deur die Suid-Afrikaanse Kwalifikasiewetgewing van 1995, het as een van sy doelwitte die ontwikkeling van 'n bevoegde werkerskorps. Die doelwit word gedeel deur die sakesektor wat daarvan bewus is dat slegs bevoegde werknemers 'n betekenisvolle bydrae kan lewer tot organisatoriese groei. Die skrywer het die vaardigheid van opleiers deur beskrywende navorsing ondersoek. Resultate van die ondersoek dui daarop dat die meeste opleiers wat met ondervoorbereide leerders gekonfronteer word, nie in staat is om al die nodige ondersteuning te verskaf nie.

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Background to the Research – The Need to Develop the South African Workforce

South Africa is categorised as a developing economy. This means it is vulnerable to certain economic forces that could weaken its ability to attract much-needed investment. Investors' funds pursue value. Investments chase successful countries that have, *inter alia*, highly productive workforces that can offer world-class goods and services at globally competitive prices. South African companies have no alternative but to compete in the global economy within which opposition companies and customers continually drive service levels up, and prices down.

To grow profits in such an environment, the South African workforce must be effective. Workers need to become fully competent in their current jobs and be able to engage in ongoing learning in order to respond rapidly to continuous change, for example technological advancement and changes in consumer demand (Herr, 1990; Bentley, 1991; Carnevale, 1991; Kerka, 1993; Van Krogh and Roos, 1995 and Carnevale and Kogod, 1996).

The National Qualifications Framework, a structure for lifelong learning in South Africa, was brought about by the South African Qualifications Authority Act of 1995 (*Government Gazette* Number 16725, 1995). As a result, many companies are implementing the government proposed outcomes-based learning (OBL) systems for employees. The establishment and maintenance of the systems are costly and demand that acceptable returns on investment are realised (Chemical Industries Education and Training Authority, 2001, March). Acceptable returns include, for example:

- workers that can provide evidence of competence in their current jobs
- measurable improvements to the organisation's bottom line
- less waste in production areas
- best practices in safety issues
- increased sales
- improved debt collection
- higher levels of customer satisfaction and loyalty

The Importance of Underprepared Learners in the South African Economy

Effective workplace OBL systems are especially important to South Africa. The profile of the workforce is characterised by, *inter alia*, low skills levels (Abedian and Standish, 1990), one of the poorest human resource development indices in the world, in terms of both the degree of skills in the workforce and the amount of resources being spent on training (Torres, Bhorat, Leibbrandt and Cassim, 2000: 92) and economic illiteracy (Hatty, 1999: 21).

Du Preez (1989: 79) states that Black South Africans make up nearly 75% of the industrial workforce in South Africa. Thus the group is a central factor to the economic growth of the country. However, because many of them may be defined as underprepared learners, the development of their skills and knowledge should be a high priority for government, business and the learners themselves.

Other factors impact upon the situation. Primary amongst these are:

- ongoing problems in the education system (Leighton, 1992; Agar, 1992, in Du Toit, 1993; Starfield, 1993; C2005 Review Committee Report, Executive Summary, 2000; News 24, 2001, May).
- high levels of poverty in the country (Poverty and Inequality in South Africa, 1998; Torres, Bhorat, Leibbrandt and Cassim, 2000; May 2000). High levels of poverty and a deprived socio-

economic background often form part of underprepared learners' backgrounds (Meadows, 1993; Spreadbury, 1995; Weinberger, 1995).

These are indicators that underprepared learners (ULs) will be entering the workplace for many years to come.

Furthermore, there is ample evidence that the AIDS pandemic is by no means under control (Bureau for Economic Research, 2000; Hegner, 2000; Love Life Report, 2000, published with support from the Henry J Kaiser Family Foundation in the United States; Smith, 2000). The pandemic will bring about the need to train quickly and effectively new persons brought into the workplace to replace those lost to AIDS. It is thought that the group that will be most affected by losses will be operational workers, a group that includes extremely high numbers of ULs (Bureau for Economic Research, 2000).

Developing the Underprepared Learner

ULs confront a number of linguistic, cultural, social and cognitive barriers to achieving competence. They therefore require special support in workplace training programmes (Human Sciences Research Council/National Training Board 1989). If such support is not provided, it is likely that they will not become fully productive employees. South Africa cannot afford this to occur.

It is obvious that ULs are workplace learners who require particular attention. This draws into the spotlight the group which is responsible for their development, namely workplace trainers.

The researcher's own workplace experience as a trainer, as well as the results of a previous study (Cowley, 1997), have led to her concerns about the competence of trainers to meet the special learning needs of ULs fully. The concerns were reinforced by similar findings from research overseas, e.g. in the United States of America (Friedenberg, 1995; Frantz, Friedenberg, Gregson and Walter, 1996 and Kraska, 1996). Related research in South Africa shows matching findings in the workplace and education (Retief, 1983; Du Preez, 1989; Leighton, 1992; Starfield, 1993; C2005 Review Committee Report, Executive Summary, 2000; News24, 2001, May).

Investigating the Competence of Trainers to Meet Underprepared Learners' Needs

The researcher undertook to investigate the competences of trainers to provide for the special needs of ULs. Influenced by Leedy (1997) that descriptive surveys look with great accuracy at the phenomena of the moment, the researcher adopted a descriptive approach to the research.

The Sample Group

Seventy trainers, comprising thirty-five professional and thirty-five non-professional trainers, formed the sample group. Professional trainers are those whose primary responsibility is training. Non-professional trainers are those for whom training is a secondary, but nevertheless important responsibility. Examples of this group are line managers and subject matter experts. Where the sample group is referred to as trainers, both professional and non-professional trainers are included in the group.

The Questionnaires

The sample group was interviewed by means of telephonic interviews, using two prepared questionnaires. One questionnaire (consisting of twenty-four questions) was used with professional

trainers, and the other (consisting of twenty-two questions) was used with non-professional trainers. The questionnaires differed by only two questions that related to:

1. respondents' awareness of professional trainers' unit standards (Education, Training and Development Practitioners)
2. respondents' intention to become competent in these standards.

These two items were included in the questionnaire for professional trainers, but excluded from the questionnaire for non-professional trainers.

The questionnaires comprised both qualitative and quantitative questions and focused on exploring trainers' skills, knowledge and attitudes in regard to training ULs. The latter area of focus (i.e., trainers' attitude towards developing ULs) was examined because:

- research in the USA has shown that trainers working with ULs sometimes experience decreased job satisfaction (Lobosco and Newman, 1992);
- of the changing environment in the South African workplace brought about by legislation such as the Employment Equity Act of 1998 (Department of Labour, 1998). It was thought that there might be some evidence of negative feelings towards ULs as a result of the legislation. Only very insignificant levels of such feelings were found.

Limitations of the Research

While the researcher acknowledges that the sample group was too small to allow the findings to be generalised, she does believe that they do raise a red flag in regard to shortcomings in developing ULs in this country. The research findings, based on quantitative and qualitative data, were supported by an extensive literature survey. This process of triangulation provides a credible indication of what is taking place in the training environment in South Africa.

Defining Underprepared Learners

For the purposes of the investigation, the writer defined ULs as having one or more of the following four characteristics:

1. They had, and perhaps still have, a disadvantaged socio-economic background.
2. They had a disadvantaged education.
3. They have limited English proficiency. That is, their first language is not English. (In South Africa, English may be the UL's third or even fourth language).
4. Their culture is not the Western, European culture that currently predominates in the SA workplace.

ULs need not have all these characteristics in order to be termed "underprepared". What is important is the extent to which the characteristic is a barrier to learning and to what extent the UL requires special learning support. ULs may be described across a continuum, depending on the degree to which their weaknesses impede the achievement of competence.
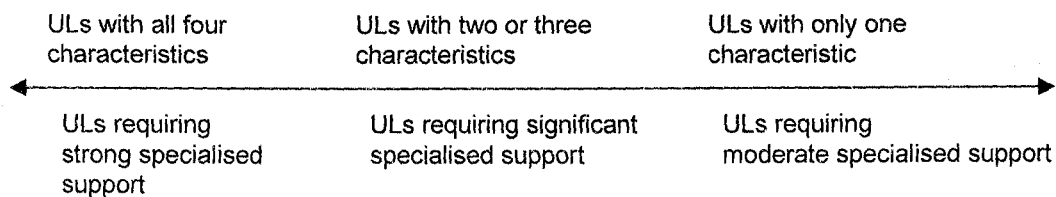
ULs with all four characteristics	ULs with two or three characteristics	ULs with only one characteristic

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ULs requiring strong specialised support	ULs requiring significant specialised support	ULs requiring moderate specialised support

FIGURE 1 Continuum of ULs and the support they require to become competent

The Research Findings

The research findings indicated areas in which trainers are performing well in terms of meeting ULs' needs and areas where improvement could take place.

The researcher is of the opinion that most trainers are sympathetic to the needs of ULs and are cognisant of the importance of facilitating their development.

Training the Trainer

However, the complexities of the problems that confront ULs in the scientific-industrial workplace do need particular study in order for them to be thoroughly understood. Trainers need to have adequate opportunities to learn more about these problems in order to be able to support ULs properly.

When asked if they had attended any special training programmes that would equip them to train the underprepared learner, only two of the seventy respondents answered in the affirmative. There would appear to be a dearth of such training available to South African trainers, a situation that requires resolution. This is an unfortunate situation, especially in the light of the enthusiasm and goodwill that so many of the sample group expressed and their obvious goodwill to do the best they can to support ULs.

Linked to this scarcity of specialised training is the issue of management support for appropriate training for ULs. The research indicates that generally the sample group believed that management was not providing as much support for training ULs that they could. One might infer that if South African business was more cognisant of the benefits of effective training for ULs, they might support specialised training for trainers.

The Cultural Divide

Another factor that might contribute towards the lack of understanding of ULs is the apparent divide that has existed for many years between various race groups. Du Preez (1989) believes that Whites generally do not realise the extent of the deprivation of the socio-economic background and education of Black South Africans and this has impacted negatively on the ability of Black South Africans to benefit from Western-style, workplace learning systems. The extreme heterogeneous nature of the SA workplace makes it susceptible to what Carnevale and Kogod (1996) term "cultural collisions". These might lead to loss of trust between groups (Mbigi and Westbrook, 1998). If trust is lost between trainers and ULs, or between ULs and non-ULs, effective learning is negatively impacted upon.

The Importance of Relating to Underprepared Learners

Against this background, it was encouraging to find that the majority of the interviewees believed

that it is necessary to relate to ULs in order to provide successful learning. Indeed, many respondents thought it ludicrous to suggest that trainers could teach knowledge, skills and attitudes to ULs without initially establishing a supportive and mutually respectful relationship with them.

The relating to ULs turned out to be important in the light of the large numbers of respondents who reported that ULs generally lack confidence in the learning situation.

Investigating Learner's Backgrounds before Training Sessions

However, when questioned about how thoroughly they investigated learners' backgrounds before training sessions, another picture emerged. Respondents were asked how frequently they sent out pre-course questionnaires, focusing on the learners' first languages, educational standard[1] and background. The purpose of the questionnaires would be to allow trainers to ensure that they had learning resources that would meet the needs of all learners in the training session.

It was found that the minority of trainers sent such questionnaires out prior to training. There were no significant differences in the responses of professional and non-professional trainers. This implies that trainers are walking into training with learning resources that might not support the development of competence in ULs. Barriers to learning could occur across all learning resources, e.g. workbooks, videos, realia, posters, role-plays, etc. The resources could disadvantage ULs in a number of ways, e.g. by use of inappropriate language and/or pictorial information. A common source of difficulty for ULs is the use of English for Specific Purposes in training.

English for Specific Purposes

Questions that focused on English for Specific Purposes (ESP) revealed that there might be some cause for concern regarding trainers' perceptions of ULs and ESP. While generally the trainers were aware that ESP does play a part in learning, they did not necessarily have a thorough understanding of its central role in the learning process.

When asked to describe strategies that they used to help ULs understand the academic and occupational English spoken during training sessions, the seventy trainers could provide only fourteen strategies

Five professional trainers and nine non-professional trainers could each come up with one strategy only to help ULs understand the English used during learning. One non-professional trainer could not think of any strategies at all.

Some of the strategies were not altogether sound. For example, some trainers said they instruct ULs to use dictionaries to research the meaning of terms they do not understand. It was obvious that the trainers were unaware that using dictionaries is by no means a simple exercise for ULs; nor will it necessarily result in choosing the correct definition or meaning from the dictionary.

Only 24% of the respondents mentioned using visual aids to assist ULs in their comprehension of ESP.

In response to the question asking if culture could affect the accurate interpretation of visuals, 77% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that it could. Some respondents also provided some interesting qualitative data that indicate that they had a good grasp of ULs' low visual literacy levels. It was apparent, however, that some respondents had a superficial understanding only of how poor visual literacy hinders ULs' learning.

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1. The writer acknowledges that careful planning and implementation of such investigations must be undertaken in order not to damage employee relations.

The Influence of Culture and Learning

In looking at the larger influence of culture on learning, respondents' descriptions of the cultural differences that might be identified during learning resulted in a clear picture of the underprepared learner attempting to function competently in the scientific-industrial workplace and learning environment.

The cultural differences that the respondents identified may be described as trends or tendencies often found among ULs. It should be noted that in the discussion of cultural differences in learning, it was how ULs' learning behaviour differed from that in the Western model of learning that was discussed. This does not indicate that the Western model is the only correct one.

ULs' problems in speaking and understanding English were accepted as a cultural difference on the grounds that language is inextricably linked to culture. The educational background of the ULs was also accepted as a cultural difference because so-called Black education in SA has been identified with a number of cultural markers, e.g. the absolute authority of the instructor.

The most striking feature of the interviewees' responses was the consistency that emerged in regard to some of the characteristics displayed by ULs during training. These characteristics were: lack of confidence, cultural-group perceptions and problems in understanding and producing English.

Some responses that caused concern were:

- One non-professional trainer said that he did not know that he should look for cultural differences during learning and would not know where to look for them.

- Three non-professional trainers did not know that cultural differences affected learning.

- Two non-professional trainers and two professional trainers said that they did not believe that culture affected learning. Two of these respondents motivated their opinion by adding that the success of the learner depended entirely on the trainer and has "nothing to do with the learners."

- One respondent stated that the culture of the learner was irrelevant: "(T)hey either want to learn or they don't."

- Three non-professional trainers were unaware that culture affected learning but conceded that perhaps it could.

- Four professional trainers and one non-professional trainer stated that they had never seen any cultural differences in learning, but believed that they were probably there. (Between them, these five trainers had been providing workplace training for thirty-two years).

Some of the trainers were able to offer examples of how cultural differences manifest in learning programmes. Some of these are provided below:

- One trainer said she had used the Walt Disney character Mickey Mouse in a lesson and for an assessment. The ULs in the group were unable to connect the foreign notion of a small mouse that speaks and wears clothes with the content of the lesson. They found the mouse nonsensical and the trainer stated that its use had alienated the ULs. Time had to be taken from the lesson to explain Mickey Mouse and to reassure the ULs that no offence to them had been intended;

- another trainer who had used drawings of donkeys when facilitating learning for a mixed group provided a similar example. He said that some Black learners had been offended by the drawings of the donkey because they had presumed that he was likening them to the animal and so was labelling them as "silly";

- nurse educators frequently cited body language as interfering with assessments. For example, Black learner nurses were often corrected in clinical assessments because they:
- did not use direct eye contact when speaking to patients and/or hospital staff;
- were inclined to "crowd" patients when working with them. (In other words, they stood too close to patients or engaged in excessive tactile communication.);
- were inclined to speak very loudly to Black patients which annoyed White patients in the same ward. (This aspect of paralinguistic dysfunction was a common cause of cultural interference in nursing assessments.);
- nurse educators also noted that cultural differences brought about different beliefs on the causes of diseases. (Some Black nurses believed that diseases were a punishment or are caused by *sangomas*).

In addition to these examples, respondents described how cultural factors could interfere with the assessment process in outcomes-based learning.

- One respondent said that assessments usually have a Eurocentric context and are thus unfair to an assessee raised in an African environment.
- The assumptions made by assessors in regard to ULs' backgrounds often compromised the latter because the assessor had a "different world view" from that of the UL.
- The use of humour was very difficult in assessing mixed groups. "Half the class might think the joke the funniest thing they've heard for a long time, the other half is left cold because either they didn't understand it or it offended them."

Unit standards for SA Education, Development and Development Practitioners (Professional Trainers)

As mentioned earlier, the two questionnaire items in regard to the unit standards were put to professional trainers only.

The South African Qualifications Authority has registered unit standards for South African occupation-directed Education, Training and Development Practitioners (ETDPs). It is the researcher's opinion that the unit standards, while not ideal, do add value to human resource development practices.

The major purpose of the unit standards is to transform the field of education, training and development in South Africa and to make workplace training more equitable and effective for all employees. Such transformation is aligned to the principles and purposes of the Skills Development Act of 1998 and the Employment Equity Act of 1998. Furthermore, the unit standards articulate that ETDPs' forms of practice should promote the values described in the Bill of Rights and that they fulfil their roles and responsibilities in accordance with the aims and objectives of the National Qualifications Framework and Skills Development Strategy.

These objectives are important to all learners, but have particular meaning for ULs.

The unit standards make a favourable impression in terms of highlighting some important issues regarding ULs. They make eleven references to culture and seven references to linguistics or language.

The thirty-three unit standards contain:

- no explicit reference to underprepared learners;
- no explicit reference to special learning needs;

- eleven references to culture;
- seven references to linguistics or language.

The researcher would have preferred to see greater articulation of the special needs of ULs. Unit standards that focused exclusively on ULs as a group (and on the characteristics that define them) and that ensured an understanding of them, would have been extremely useful. In the researcher's opinion, this would have placed a greater emphasis on the needs of this very large and critical group of learners in the South African workplace. This would have been preferable to crucial issues such as culture and language becoming somewhat diffused, placed as they currently are in the unit standards.

Such unit standards could have:

- concentrated on all the factors that characterise ULs
- focused on the achievement of competence in meeting the special learning needs of ULs.

However, throughout the unit standards there is a strong and repetitive emphasis on:

- getting feedback from learners
- reflecting on one's own practice and devising ways to improve it.

Both these factors should go some way toward making ETDPs more aware of their own performance and encouraging them to initiate attempts to enhance their performance. This will support the transformative intention of the unit standards and should benefit ULs. As such, the unit standards become important to professional trainers and ULS and for this reason, the interviews contained the following two questions about the unit standards:

1. Did you know that the South African Education, Training and Development Practices Project has developed a set of draft unit standards[2] for ETDPs?
2. It is not compulsory that trainers become competent in the unit standards. At this time, are you planning to become competent in the unit standards as soon as they are registered?.

Fifty-seven percent of the professional trainers stated that they were aware that the draft unit standards had been published. However, the majority of them were totally unfamiliar with their contents.

Their answers ran along the following lines – they had "heard about the standards somewhere", but they

- did not know what they comprised;
- had not attempted to get a copy of the standards;
- were unaware how the standards might influence working with underprepared learners;
- were unaware of the composition of the group which had drafted the standards, or with whom this group had consulted in the development process.

The few interviewees who had read the draft standards hoped that they would add value to the field of human resource development (HRD) in SA. However, they were hesitant about stating to what extent the (final) standards for ETDPs would in reality upgrade HRD practice in the SA workplace.

The responses to these interview items raise a number of concerns, particularly that there were ETPs who were aware of the draft standards but who apparently were not sufficiently motivated to investigate their content and find out how this would impact on the training profession.

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2. At the time of the interviews, the unit standards were still in draft form.

The researcher raises the following questions:

Could the low awareness of the contents of the unit standards indicate a general lack of interest by professional trainers in:

- the unit standards, in general, being generated as a result of the South African Qualifications Act of 1995;
- the unit standards being developed for their own field of expertise;
- the South African Skills Development Act of 1998;
- the South African Skills Development Levies Act of 1999?

Similar questions could be posed about the 15 respondents (43%) who were unaware of the draft unit standards.

In regard to the second question, there is a possible anomaly between the 43% of the respondents who were unaware of the draft unit standards and the 71% who said they would become competent in the standards as soon as they were registered.

There might be a disparity between those who had not had adequate interest in the development and content of unit standards for their professional field, and their stated intention to become competent in the standards. A graphic presentation of those respondents who were unaware of the draft unit standards but who professed their intentions of becoming competent in them upon registration, is presented below.
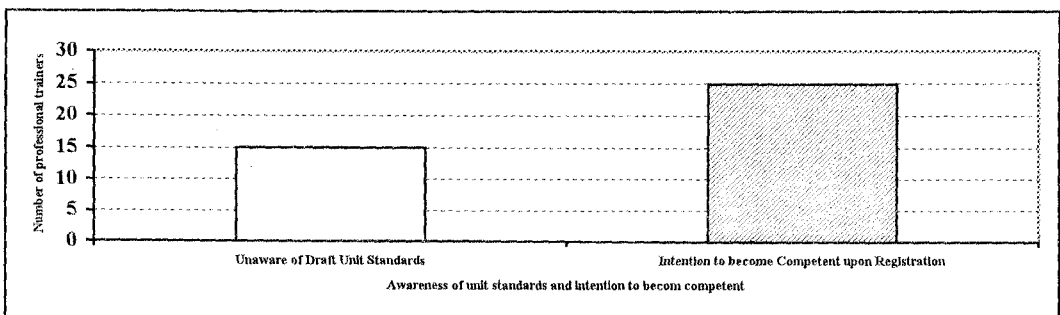

FIGURE 2 Professional Trainers who were unaware of the draft unit standards, but who stated that they intended to become competent in them upon their registration

Becoming competent

There are reservations about the candour of the 25 respondents (71%) who responded in the affirmative because of their possible need to appear:

- supportive of the national initiative to upgrade ETDPs' standards;
- willing to upgrade their own professional practices.

One questions the sincerity of respondents who perhaps have not had adequate interest in the development of unit standards for their professional field and their stated intentions to become competent in such standards. A graphic presentation of those respondents who were unaware of the draft unit standards but who professed their intention to become competent in them upon registration, is presented below.

There is also a possible anomaly between the 15 respondents (43%) who were unaware of the draft unit standards and the 71% who said they would become competent in the standards as soon

as they were registered. The anomaly is significant when it is considered that many of those who stated their intention of becoming competent in the unit standards were at the time of their statement unaware of the contents.

Of the 10 trainers (29%) who said they did not intend becoming competent in the unit standards, several said they believed that they were already competent to a level beyond the standards. It is worth noting that none of these respondents were aware that the draft unit standards had been published and were, therefore, unaware of their contents.

These respondents had: bachelors, honours or masters university degrees. This implies that the respondents assumed that the standards would be inferior to their current qualifications, would not assist them in their career development or were irrelevant to their jobs. However, there is certainly no guarantee that their present qualifications have equipped them to meet the special needs of underprepared learners.

Research Recommendations

Included in the recommendations, the researcher suggests

- the existing unit standards be revised to place a greater focus on ETDs' competence to serve ULs;
- the introduction of legislation to make mandatory that ETDPs become competent in their unit standards should be considered. (Their registration with Sector Training Authorities as individual trainers – in addition to their respective companies' becoming accredited training providers – could be valuable.);
- ETDPs should have the achievement of competence of their unit standards written into their performance documents;
- ETDPs need to take up the challenges to transform training and development in the South African workplace;
- ETDPs should provide management with a better understanding of the importance of meeting the special learning needs of ULs;
- diversity programmes that focus on productive working relationships in the South African workplace should be developed and implemented as a matter of urgency.

Conclusion

In conclusion it may be said that the majority of the trainers interviewed were found to be extremely keen to make a good job of training ULs. They were sympathetic to the difficulties that ULs experience in the learning situation. There appears to be a will to do their jobs even better than they are doing them at present and this commitment to continuous improvement is extremely valuable to the country. It seems that, despite the reservations that some ETDPs might have about becoming competent in their unit standards, many trainers would avail themselves of the chance to become more competent to meet the ULs' special learning needs. It would appear that what is required is the development, implementation and wide advertising of such learning opportunities.

In the light of the many problems that South African business and the workforce are confronting, it is essential that these opportunities be made available.

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