SETA EMPLOYER INTERVIEWS

Proposed Conceptual Framework

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

|	
ATR	Annual Training Report
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
HTFV	Hard-to-fill vacancy
OFO	Organising Framework for Occupations
SETA	Sector Education and Training Authority
SSP	Sector Skills Plan
WSP	Workplace Skills Plan

PART 1

Background
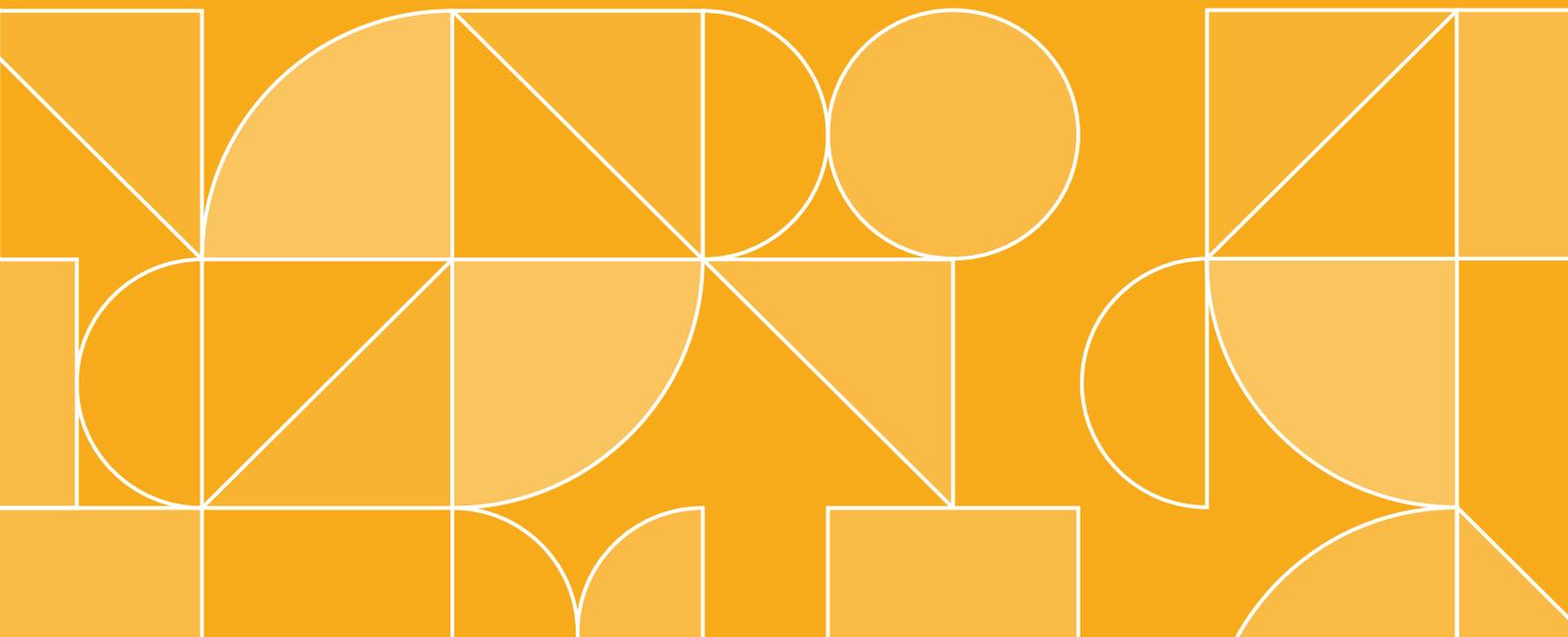
Employers hold information and insights that are key to understanding the labour market, and, more importantly, the skills needs of the labour market. Many countries undertake national, regional, and local employer surveys to collect such information. In South Africa, the government obtains employer data through its Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs), which provide mandatory funding to employers for education and training programmes. As regulated[1] by the grants, funded employers are legislatively required to submit data to their respective SETAs through Workplace Skills Plans (WSPs) and Annual Training Reports (ATRs) (Government Gazette, 2012). The SETAs then use the WSP data to develop their Sector Skills Plans (SSPs). As is generally well known, it is important to corroborate and complement quantitative data with qualitative information. Therefore, working in collaboration with the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), the SETAs have identified the need to interview employers as a way of gaining deeper insights into the labour market, and thereby strengthening their SSPs.

This employer interviews proposal describes how the SETAs and the DHET could obtain a more comprehensive view of the country's 21 sectors through direct and systematic engagement with employers. The findings from such an exercise will not only assist the SETAs in their SSP processes but will also support the DHET in its mission to undertake cross-sectoral, economy-wide skills planning. In particular, the department will utilise the findings from this study to aid its projects on occupations that are in high demand, and skills supply and demand in South Africa.

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1   The Appendix shows the WSP, ATR, and pivotal plan templates that employers must complete and submit to their designated SETAs to apply for mandatory grants.

SETA EMPLOYER INTERVIEWS: PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

PART 2
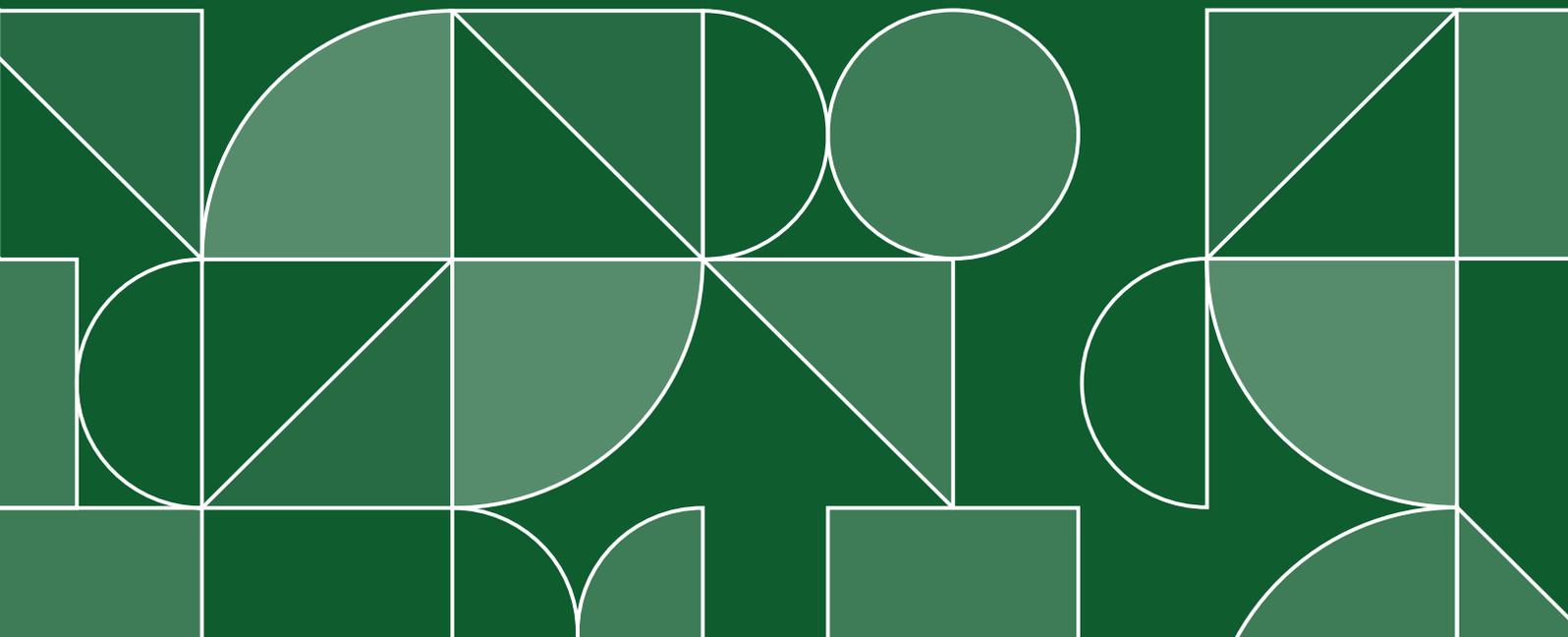
Purpose

The purpose of this conceptual framework is to outline the approach and methodology that can be used by the SETAs to undertake interviews with employers, and how the DHET could integrate the information obtained through these interviews for broader planning across the South African economy. This concept note also includes the basic interview schedule that the SETAs are expected to use to conduct the employer interviews.

Rationale
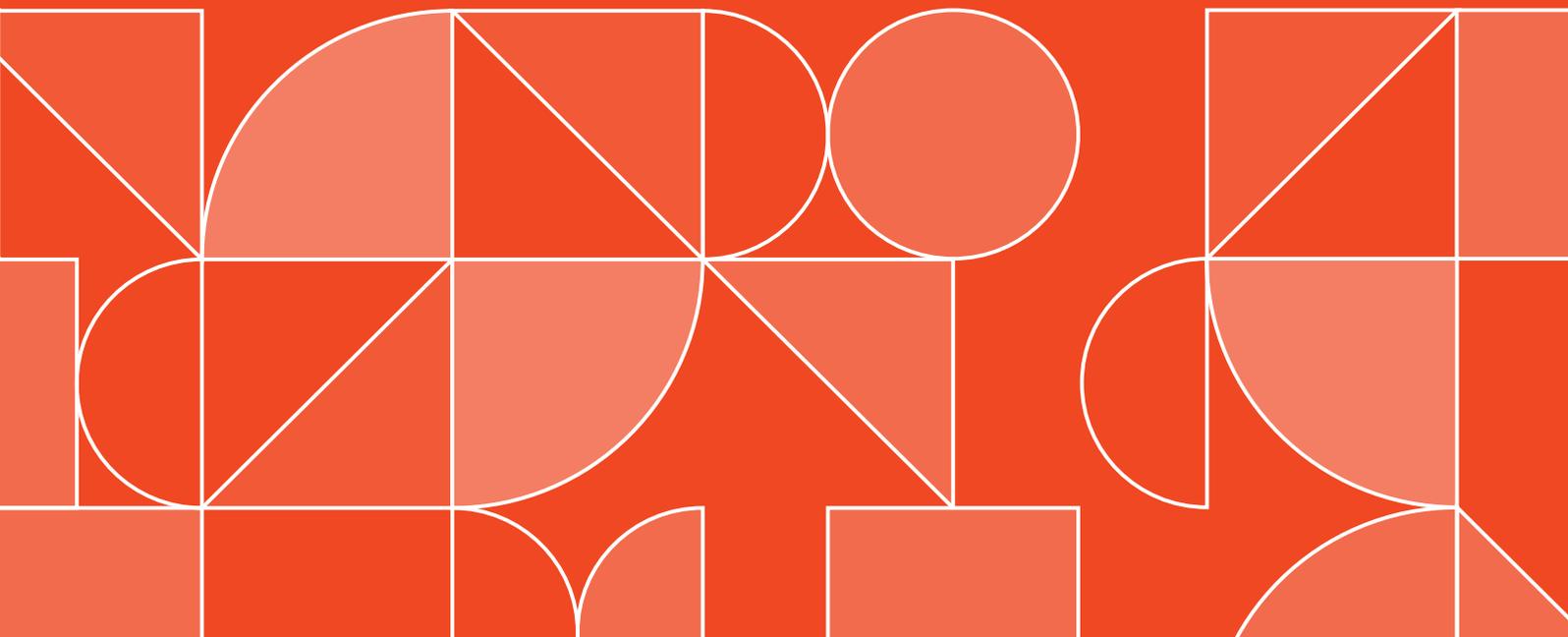
Ideally, effective sector skills planning requires both quantitative and qualitative information from employers on the availability of skills. Currently, the information that is gathered from the submission of WSPs and ATRs, which are expected to be replaced by the Workplace Skills Survey, is quantitative in nature. Qualitative research is not commonly used in the SETA environment and typically does not feature in SSPs and other SETA reports. However, the SETAs do engage directly with employers on an ongoing basis and many have developed strong relationships with key and other engaged employers and employer bodies in their sectors.

There is a need to obtain qualitative information from employers that would ensure a more holistic assessment of the state of skills in the labour market both in the present moment and in the future. Quantitative research offers representativeness, while qualitative research offers depth of understanding. By drawing on both research traditions, findings can be corroborated, information gaps addressed, and decision-making practices strengthened.

The importance of qualitative research for skills identification and anticipation is increasingly being used by policy-makers and -planners in many countries with national skills planning systems. Innovative qualitative research methods are being used to gather insights that cannot be substantively provided through quantitative means. Moreover, most countries at the forefront of research on skills systems are combining both research forms to make policy and programme decisions.

Mandate
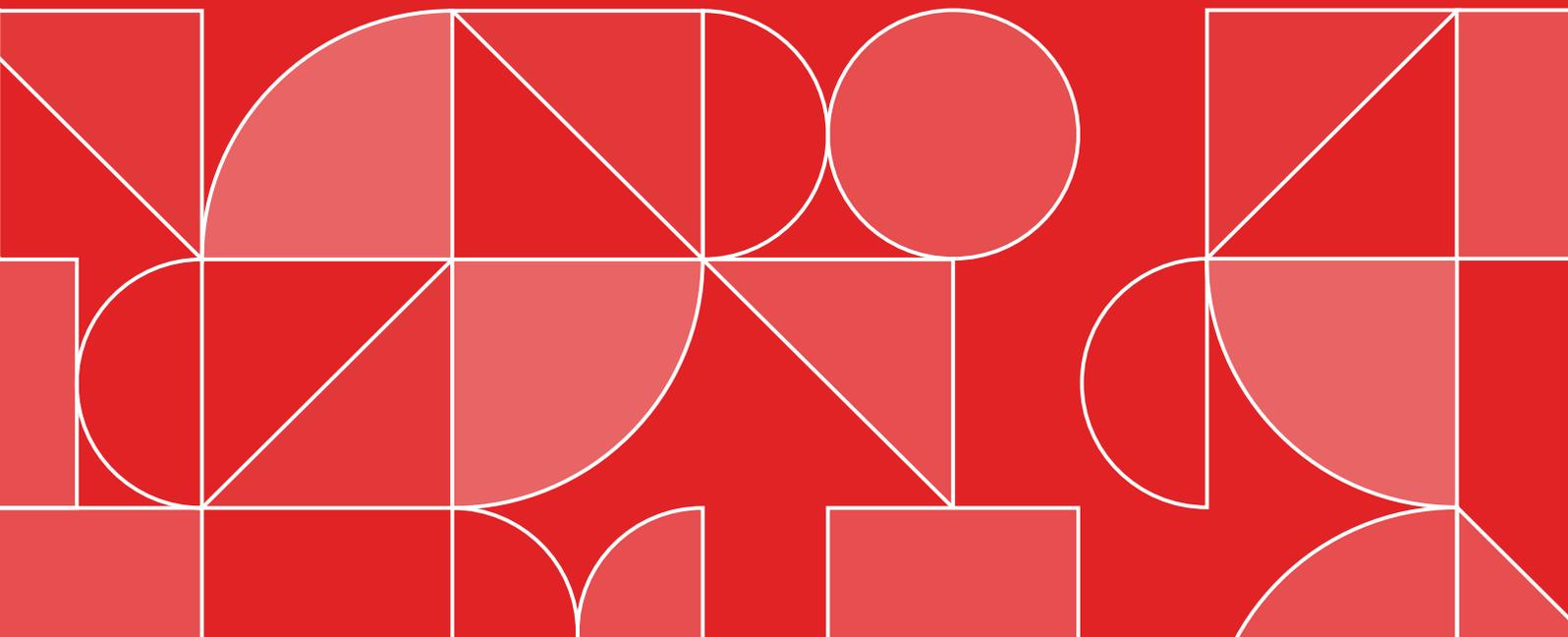
The *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training* identifies the importance of national-level skills planning, noting that "[planning] on a sectoral basis can be misleading, as many occupations are economy-wide" (DHET, 2013, p. 58). At the same time, the document recognises the significance of SETAs in providing key workplace data and in conducting sector-level research (DHET, 2013, p. 59).

The white paper further envisages that the WSPs and ATRs are to be supplemented with workplace surveys (DHET, 2013, p. 59), of which the employer interviews are an example. Inputs into the national planning process—including from the sector-level—"will ensure the provision of comprehensive information on workplaces [… including] the nature of skills gaps" (DHET 2013, p. 59).

Key Research Questions
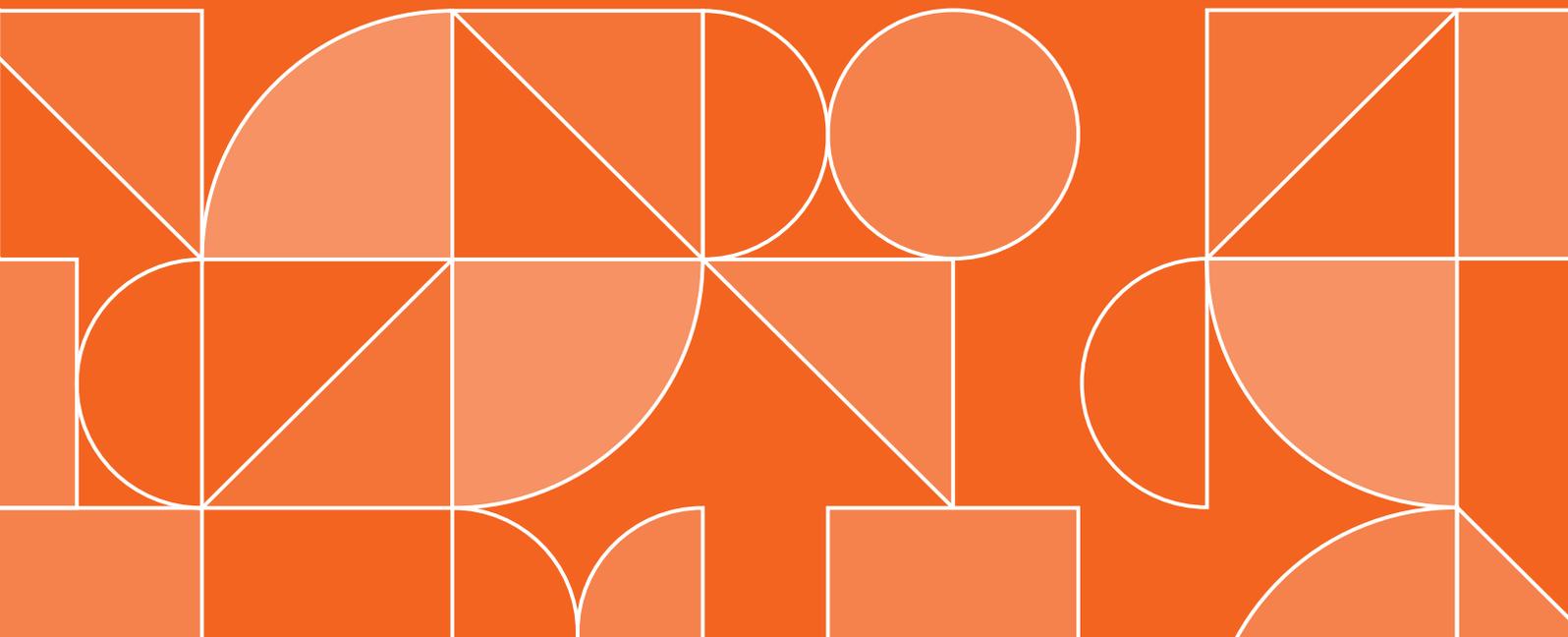
This research is guided by the following questions:

1. Which occupations are experiencing shortages[2] in South Africa, and what are the reasons behind these shortages?

2. What kinds of skills gaps[3] exist, and how did they come to be?

3. What is the future outlook in terms of occupational shifts, shortages, and skills gaps, and what factors contribute to this outlook?

In addition, the research approach should be flexible enough to incorporate important additional questions—such as the impact of COVID-19 on the skills landscape—on an ad hoc basis. Care must be taken, however, to ensure that additional questions do not induce fatigue on the respondents and thereby distract from the core focus of the research.

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2   A skills shortage refers to a situation where "employers require human resources that are not supplied in sufficient quantities by individuals in the labour market" (Khuluvhe et al., 2022). One of the ways in which shortages manifest is through hard-to-fill vacancies.

3   A skills gap arises "where a worker lacks one or more of the particular skills required to effectively perform their job" (Khuluvhe et al., 2022).

PART 6

Focus Areas
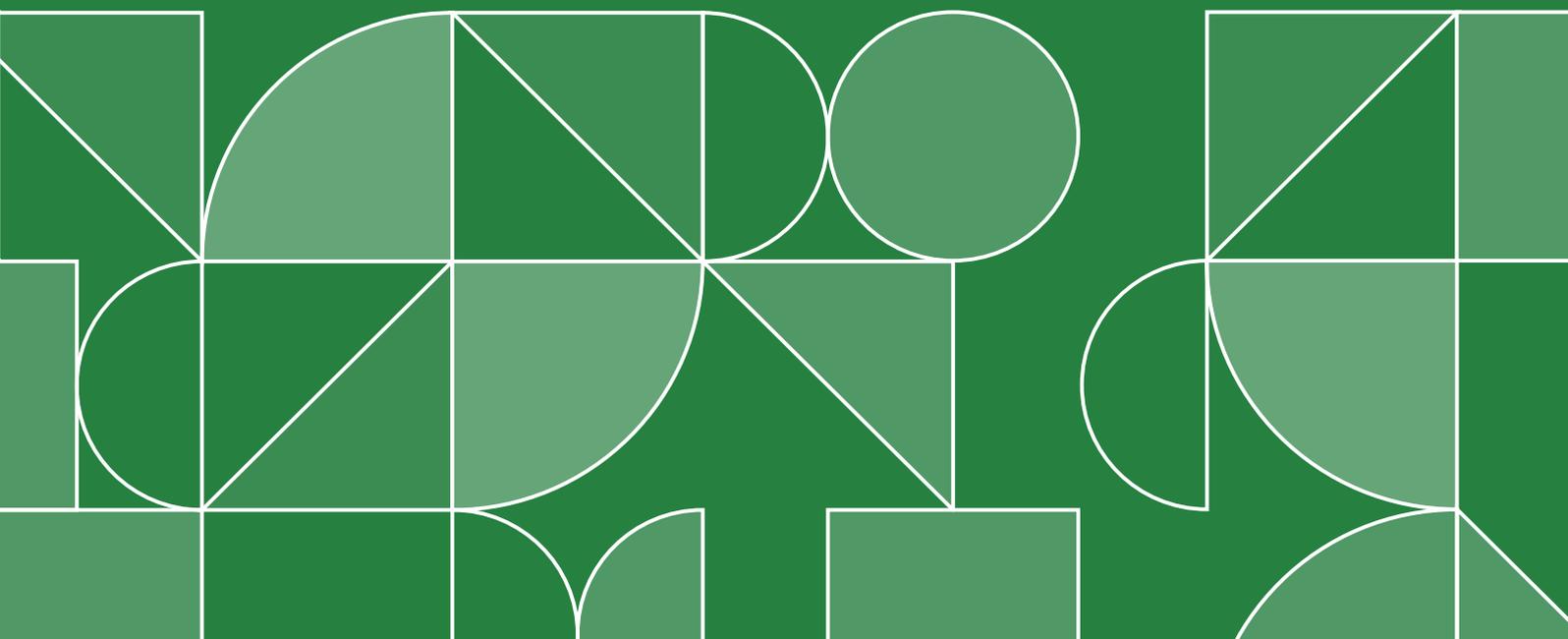
The key research questions guide the focus of the data collection:

1. Occupational shortages, as indicated by hard-to-fill vacancies (HTFVs), and their underlying causes;

2. Skills gaps and their underlying causes;

3. Future outlook for occupational shortages and skills gaps over the next five years; and

4. Other general issues.

Research questions should steer clear of direct evaluations of SETA performance and other similar topics, given that the data is collected by the SETAs and that selection of respondents is unlikely to be entirely random.

Methodology
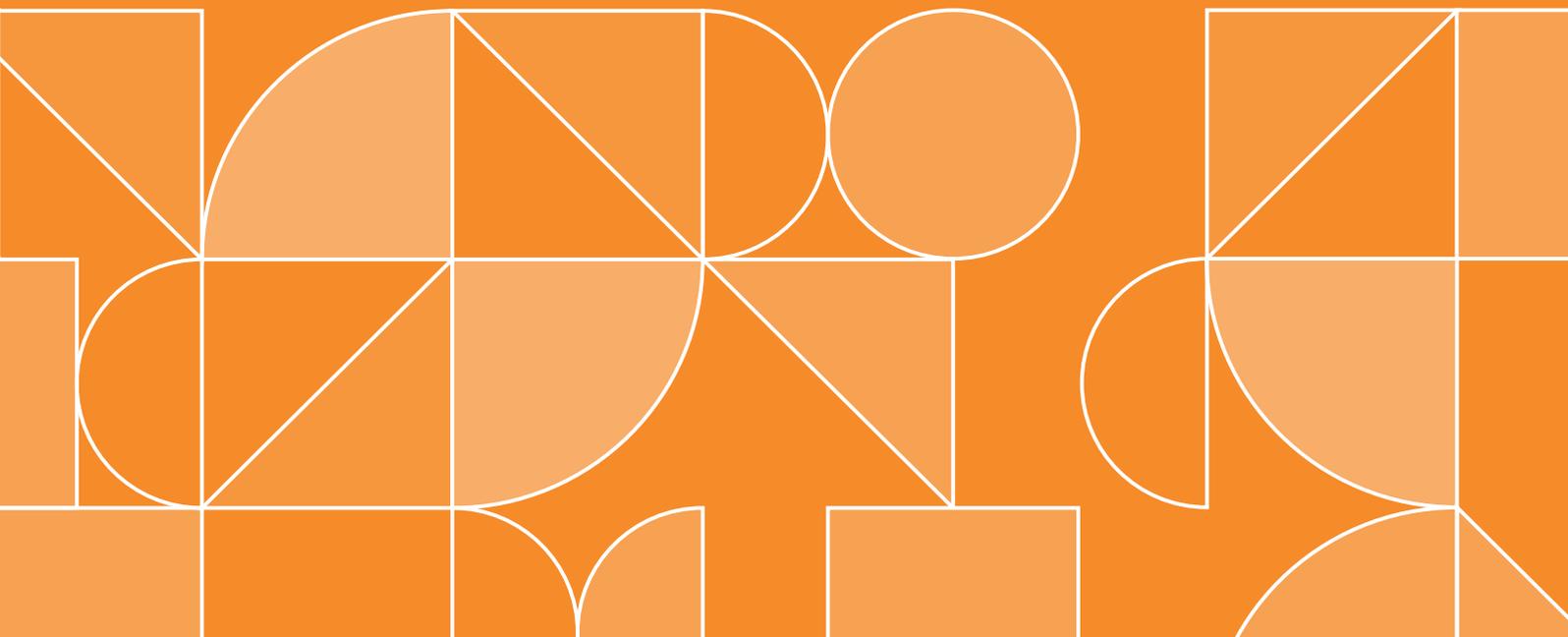
A key challenge with this research is the decentralisation of the data collection process and the devolution of the task to the 21 SETAs. This decentralisation brings with it the risk of inconsistencies in approach across the SETAs, some of which have been evident to greater or lesser degrees in previous iterations of the employer interviews. Given the importance of a consistent approach for the integrity of the research, this section maps out the key aspects of the process to be followed.

It is important to note at this point that the methodology detailed below assumes that the SETAs hold their own employer interviews and that each SETA compiles its own reports detailing its analysis of the results. Once this has been done, the SETAs will provide their data to the DHET, which can then consolidate the data in order to produce a national analysis. This process allows the SETAs flexibility in terms of the number of interviews they can conduct, it empowers the SETAs to undertake their own analyses relevant to their sectors, it enables the SETAs to submit a much more simplified information template that is restricted to the quantitative side of the interviews, and it allows the DHET to compile a national analysis that addresses the varying sample sizes across all 21 SETAs.

7.1   The template for consolidated information

At its core, the data collection process is guided by a template developed by the DHET in consultation with the SETAs. The template is shared with the SETAs each year ahead of the commencement of the data collection process. This template should guide the interview process and, critically, the SETAs should ensure that all information stipulated in the template is covered during their interviews with employers.

It is proposed that the DHET and the SETAs should engage annually on the template to identify any of the permanent questions that may require refinement and to agree on the inclusion of any additional ad hoc questions for the coming round of interviews.

However, it should also be recognised that individual SETAs may leverage this process for their own research purposes. This may entail additions to the scope of the interviews (i.e., the inclusion of additional questions in the interview process) or increases in the number of employers with whom the SETAs choose to engage.

The SETAs are allowed to add to the scope of the interviews, with the proviso that any additional questions do not negatively impact on the collection of the core data required in the template. Thus, additional questions should be limited in number so as not to compromise the willingness of employers to participate in the research. Where SETAs do choose to add questions, they should flag this when making their submission to the DHET and should include their amended interview guide as part of their submission. Ideally, SETAs making amendments to the interview guide should confirm their changes with the DHET ahead of their engagements with employers.

Many SETAs face pressure from employers to ensure full representation of the broader employer body across the various subsectors within the respective sector, which makes it difficult for the SETAs to include only a limited number of firms in research such as described here. For example, this has led to some SETAs conducting very large numbers of interviews in previous iterations of this research.

For the SETAs' own reports, the inclusion of additional respondents would serve to enhance the credibility of the analysis, as it allows for the incorporation of responses from a broader group of employers. However, if unaddressed, a large degree of unevenness in the number of employers interviewed across SETAs will lead to distortions in the DHET's analysis for the national report. This is due to the fact that a larger number of respondents will result in a greater weight being assigned to responses from a particular SETA, potentially leading to sectoral themes being mistakenly identified as themes at the national level.

The 2024 round of interviews has already begun the process of adapting the template for consolidated information to accommodate the changing emphasis of the interviews and the need for more accurate data. Consultations with the SETAs in mid-2024 confirmed, for example, that the detailed questions around the impact of COVID-19 are no longer relevant. In addition, given that the pandemic was declared almost half a decade in the past, it has become increasingly difficult for respondents to provide accurate responses (e.g., they may no longer accurately recall the situation at that time, or they may not have been with the organisation at the time). The COVID-19 questions have, therefore, been removed from the interviews. Additionally, questions around remote work have been included for the 2024 round.

A more significant change has been the shift to an Excel-based template that collects individual employer responses. The template includes two types of spreadsheets. The first is used to collect responses directly from employers, allowing the SETAs to directly input responses into the sheet during the interview. The second set of sheets is used to consolidate information collected from employers after the interviews have all been completed. The latter broadly corresponds to the way responses were consolidated in previous iterations of the interviews.

Importantly, both individual employer responses (anonymised) and consolidated information will be submitted to the DHET. It is expected that the new template will address the data quality problems experienced with the quantitative data collected through the interviews, but it will also ensure that the full range of responses received to the qualitative questions are available to the DHET after the interviews. Indeed, it should be possible to link an employer's responses to both quantitative and qualitative questions to each other for potential further analysis. The 2024 interview guide and template structure is presented in the appendix.

7.2 The selection of employers

Consistency in the data collection process requires that the SETAs interview a minimum number of respondents. This minimum number must take into account factors such as differences across the SETAs in the number of employers and the need to ensure that the burden imposed on the SETAs by this research is not overly onerous. It is therefore proposed that each SETA interviews a minimum of 20 employers.

While the objective of this research is not statistical representivity as would be the case for a quantitative survey, the SETAs should take care to select interviewees in a way that facilitates incorporating a diversity of employer views. This is particularly important in the context of systematic differences in the experiences of employers with varied characteristics. It is proposed that the SETAs determine the joint distribution of employers across firm size, subsector, and location, and that they ensure that the

sample of respondents provides coverage throughout these key characteristics and is therefore broadly reflective of the larger pool of (levy-paying) employers in each sector. For example, the SETAs might consider this through the use of a table, as illustrated below.

Example of a table to construct a joint distribution of employers across firm size, subsector, and location

LOCATION	SUBSECTOR 1			SUBSECTOR 2			…	TOTAL		
	Small	Med	Large	Small	Med	Large	…	Small	Med	Large
WC										
EC										
NC										
FS										
KZ										
NW										
GP										
MP										
LP										
Total										

There will be some challenges in ensuring comparability of these joint distributions across the SETAs, particularly given the differences in what the SETAs view as 'subsectors' and the fact that the large number of provinces is likely to yield small numbers in particular cells. As a compromise, it may be advisable to simplify the location characteristic to a distinction between South Africa's three main provinces from an economic perspective—Gauteng, the Western Cape, and KwaZulu-Natal on the one hand, and the other six provinces on the other, for example. Furthermore, subsectors should not simply refer to the standard industrial classification sector codes, but should rather follow broader functional groupings of these codes (e.g., merSETA's chambers). This information will be critical to the DHET's ability to conduct the national analysis.

7.3 The employer interviews

Data for this research should be collected through two main channels, namely individual interviews with employers and group interviews with employers (or a combination of the two). Individual interviews should ideally be held either face-to-face or online via a platform such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom,

or Google Meet. The use of cameras in online engagements would be useful in terms of promoting consistency with face-to-face interviews.

Where necessary, SETAs may also opt to undertake group interviews. A key challenge with group interviews, however, will be to ensure that all voices have an equal opportunity to be heard, particularly in instances where group dynamics and differences in the respondents' personalities may not support this structure. Importantly, where group interviews are undertaken, the SETAs would still be required to collect the necessary employer-level information from each employer.

Interviews should be carried out by relevant staff members within the SETAs' Skills Planning Units, who have a robust understanding of the sector and its skills challenges. Employer representatives who will participate in the interviews should have sufficient seniority to be able to provide the kind of high-level strategic and forward-looking assessments required at various points of the interviews.

Interviews should not be so long as to discourage participation by employers, particularly given that these interviews are intended to take place annually. It is recommended that individual interviews should not take much longer than one hour each. Group interviews may take longer—up to 120 minutes, although this may vary.

It is advised that the interviews are recorded with the prior consent of the respondents. This method ensures an accurate record of each of the interviews that can be used for the purposes of transcription and the recording of data, as well as the clarification of meaning or intent where necessary. Freed from having to take detailed notes, interviewers will also be better able to engage with what respondents are saying, allowing for the improved quality of interviews.

In order to make a consolidated national-level analysis possible, it is critical that the SETAs commit to collecting information in the stipulated format. For example, where Organising Framework for Occupations (OFO) codes are required, these should be provided unless such codes do not exist (in which case this should be noted). Where priority training interventions are required, the SETAs should have a common understanding of the basic types of interventions (rather than simply listing learnerships, bursaries, and internships as has been the case in the past). Without this common understanding, the DHET's ability to complete national-level analysis may be significantly impacted.

7.4 The SETAs' analysis of information from the interviews

The first step to facilitate the process of analysing the information collected through the interviews with employers involves preparing the data in an organised way. For the more quantitative aspects of the template, the data should be recorded in an appropriate format (e.g., in a spreadsheet), from which it can later be analysed.

The more qualitative data emerging from the interviews could be usefully explored through thematic analysis. Transcriptions of the interviews should be prepared and the content coded according to themes. This strategy allows for the identification of common themes and patterns arising from the

data, which may then form the basis for each SETA's analysis. This process can be significantly aided by the use of qualitative data analysis software.

Where possible, the SETAs should aim to triangulate or corroborate the emerging findings using other available information. For example, the SETAs may compare the findings to those from the WSPs or to other research they may have conducted. Where findings differ, it would be important for SETAs to try to identify the reasons behind the differences and whether or not they signify shifting conditions. Where time allows, the SETAs might also ask participants to validate the relevant findings coming from the analysis as a way of ensuring the credibility of the findings.

The SETAs should submit their reports analysing the results of the interviews, the data captured from the interviews, and the full transcripts of the interviews to the DHET.

7.5 The DHET's analysis of information from the interviews

It is important to recognise that consolidating the interviews from each of the SETAs into a single national analysis is not simply a matter of collating and summarising the sectoral reports. This is due to the uneven numbers of employers interviewed by each of the SETAs. Instead, it is recommended that the DHET re-analyse the interview data using the transcripts received from the SETAs, while simultaneously accounting for the uneven distribution of interviews. This approach has a number of important benefits:

1. By re-analysing the information, the DHET can ensure consistent treatment of the data throughout all the SETAs.

2. Going back to the transcripts allows the DHET to address the issue of varying numbers of respondents across SETAs, where such variation may distort the analysis.

3. Analysing the interviews as a single group allows for themes that are broadly relevant across sectors but not necessarily the most important within a given sector to emerge, thereby creating the kind of national analysis that is most relevant for national-level, cross-sectoral policymaking.

There are essentially three types of questions in the interviews:

1. Those that collect data that will be analysed quantitatively (e.g., assessments of current and future business conditions);

2. Those that collect 'top-ranked data' (e.g., the three most common skills gaps for high-level occupations); and

3. Those that collect lists of information (e.g., occupations with HTFVs in the previous 12-month period).

The unequal numbers of respondents across SETAs has different implications for the analysis of data from these three types of questions.

For data analysed quantitatively, the unequal number of respondents across SETAs has the ability to distort the results. While the sectors do vary in terms of their relative economic contributions, we do not have robust evidence to adjust the data in a way that ensures that each SETA's data is weighted relative to the sector's economic importance. This is something that has been raised in the previous two iterations of the employer interviews research (Oosthuizen & De Villiers, 2022; Oosthuizen & Hill, 2023). In both of these reports, the data was analysed in two ways: making no adjustments to the data then reporting the results from the combined pool of interviewed employers, and adjusting the data to ensure that each SETA's results are given equal weight in the analysis. Going forward, a similar two-pronged approach may be taken using the data received from the SETAs.

For the other two types of data—top-ranked data and lists of information—the consolidation of the data is significantly impacted by unequal numbers of respondents. SETAs interviewing large numbers of employers may generate long lists of HTFVs, for example, even if the number of those vacancies per interviewed employer is small. Similarly, once consolidated, top-ranked data may show significant bias towards the contexts and experiences of the sectors where SETAs interviewed large numbers of employers.

The proposed solution is for the DHET to analyse a sample of interviews from each SETA. Based on the kind of joint distribution of employers at the SETA level described and illustrated in the table above, the DHET should compile an integrated distribution and sample employer interviews to ensure that the consolidated sample is broadly reflective of the whole distribution. Since this relies on the degree to which the SETAs themselves have managed to achieve this with their samples, it is critical that the SETAs place sufficient emphasis on this aspect of the interview process. The DHET may then commence analysis of the data—obtained from all three types of questions discussed above—using this sample of interviews.

It may be worthwhile to have some degree of tolerance towards variations in the number of interviews across the SETAs by including all the interviews from SETAs that conducted up to 30 interviews, and sampling 30 interviews each from SETAs that conducted more than 30 interviews. This does, however, have the potential to increase the volume of interviews to be analysed by the DHET considerably, from 420 if only 20 interviews from each SETA are included to as many as 630 interviews.

Once the interviews have been sampled, the DHET would be able to analyse the interviews in the same way as the SETAs would. Given the volume of interviews, it is strongly advised that the DHET makes use of appropriate qualitative analysis software. This analysis may be complemented by the explanations, contextual information, and triangulated evidence provided by the SETAs in their individual reports.

Time Frames
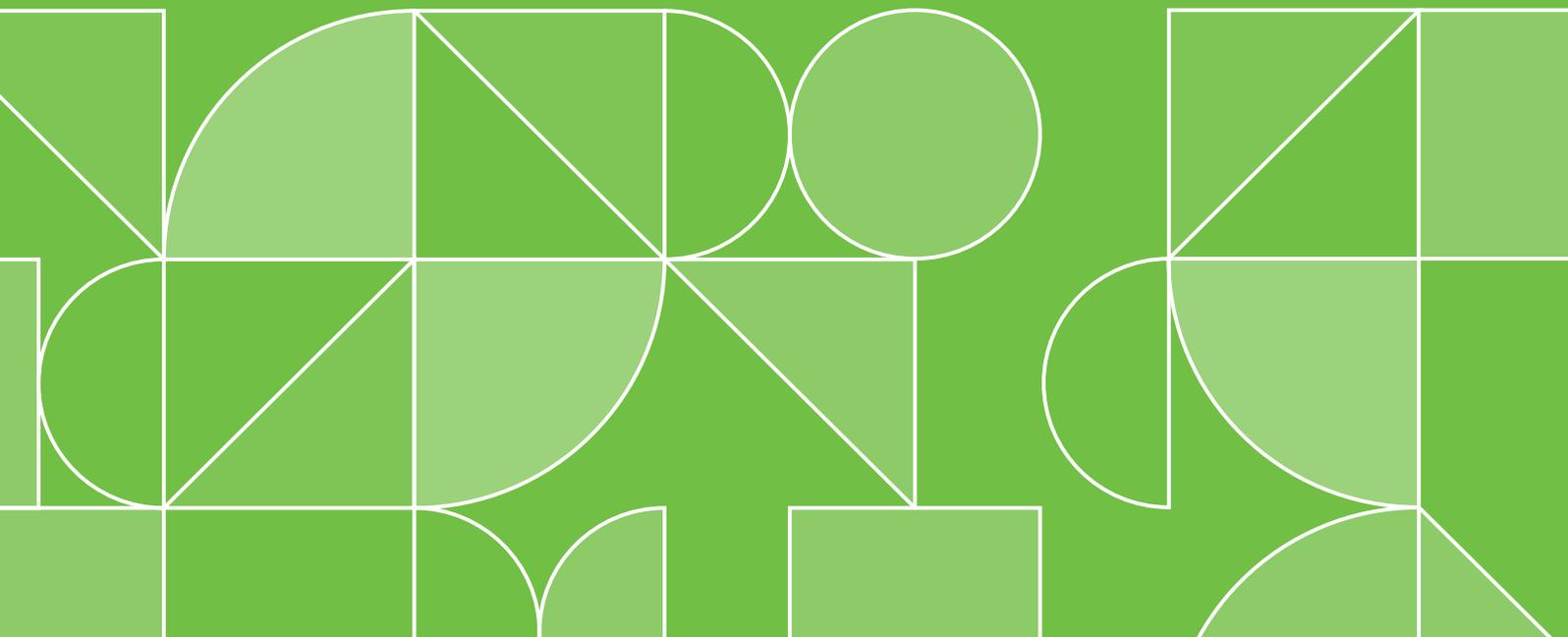
Assuming that this research is repeated on an annual basis, the following broad timetable is proposed.

| DATE	ACTIVITY	RESPONSIBLE
June	Consultations on the interview schedule between the DHET and the SETAs	DHET and SETAs
Mid-July	Interview schedule finalised	DHET and SETAs
July to mid-August	Preparation for interviews	SETAs
Mid-August to end of September	Interviews conducted by the SETAs	SETAs and employers
October and November	Preparation of transcripts, data analysis, and report-writing	SETAs
End of November	Reports, interview transcripts, and interview data provided by the SETAs to the DHET	SETAs
December to end of February	Consolidation of data, data analysis, and report-writing	DHET
Early March	Presentation of draft report to the SETAs, and feedback	DHET and SETAs
End of March	Publication of the national-level analysis and the SETA analyses by the DHET	DHET

PART 9
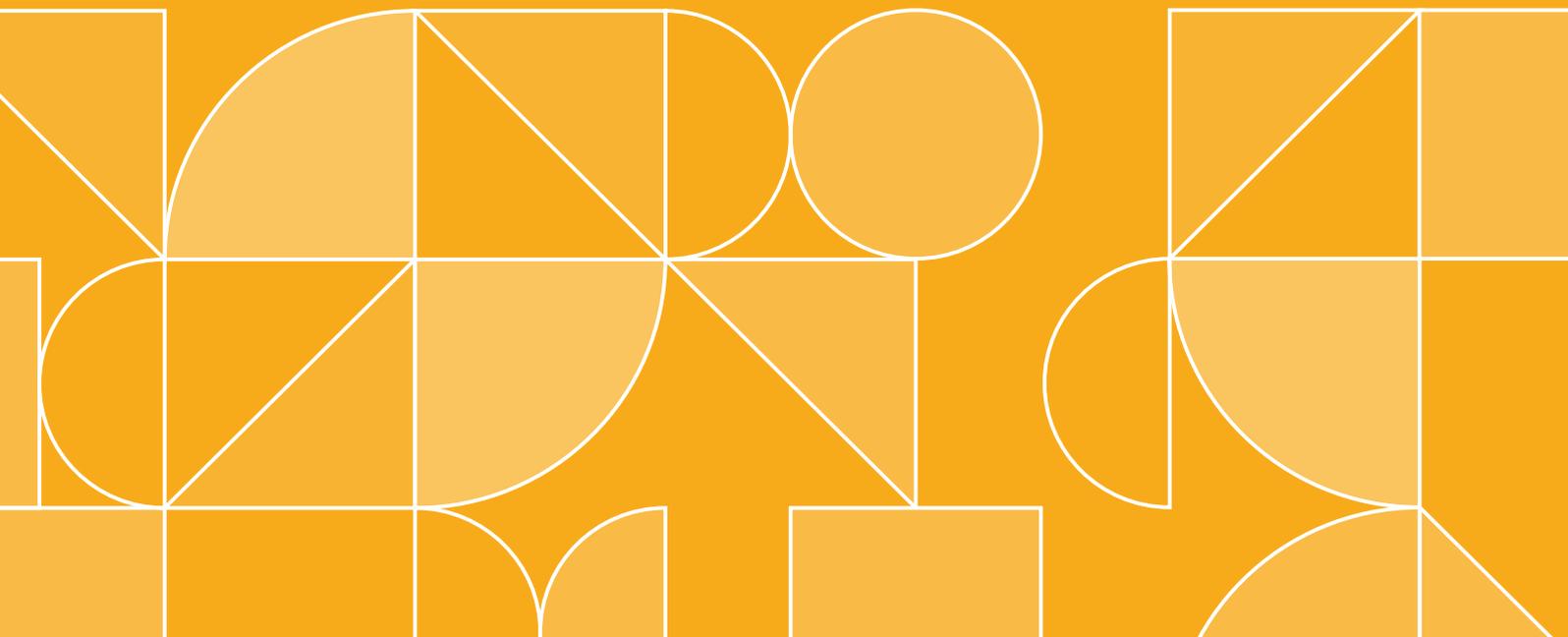
Outputs

This research is expected to have two key outputs:

1. Each of the SETAs will produce short reports on the findings from the interviews held within their respective sectors (based on their full set of interviews).

2. The DHET will produce a national report analysing the data from a specified number of interviews from each sector.

Links to Other Labour Market Intelligence Research
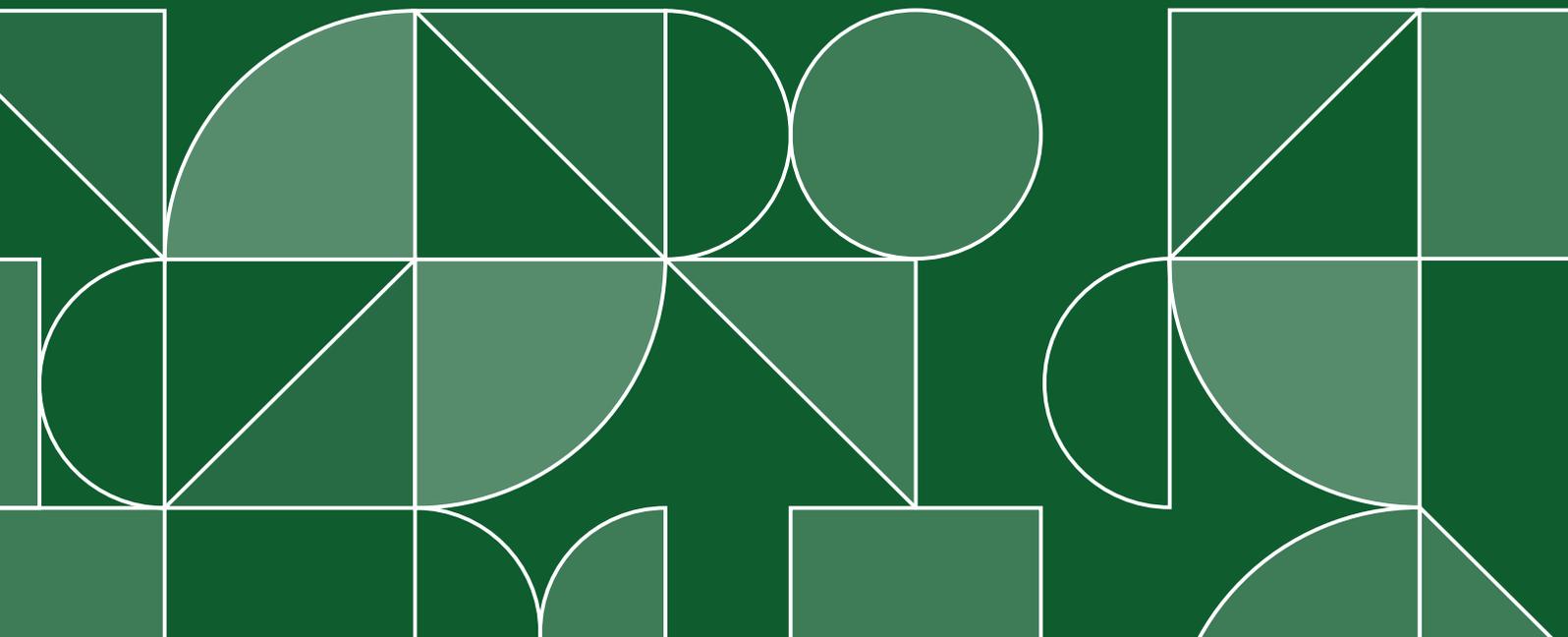
As noted, this qualitative approach to the research is intended to complement the more quantitative data collected through the WSP and ATR processes. The reports envisaged as part of this study would serve as beneficial inputs into the *Skills Supply and Demand in South Africa* report, and contribute to the SETAs' SSPs. In addition, this research may also significantly inform and advance other labour market intelligence research into skills gaps and HTFVs in this country.

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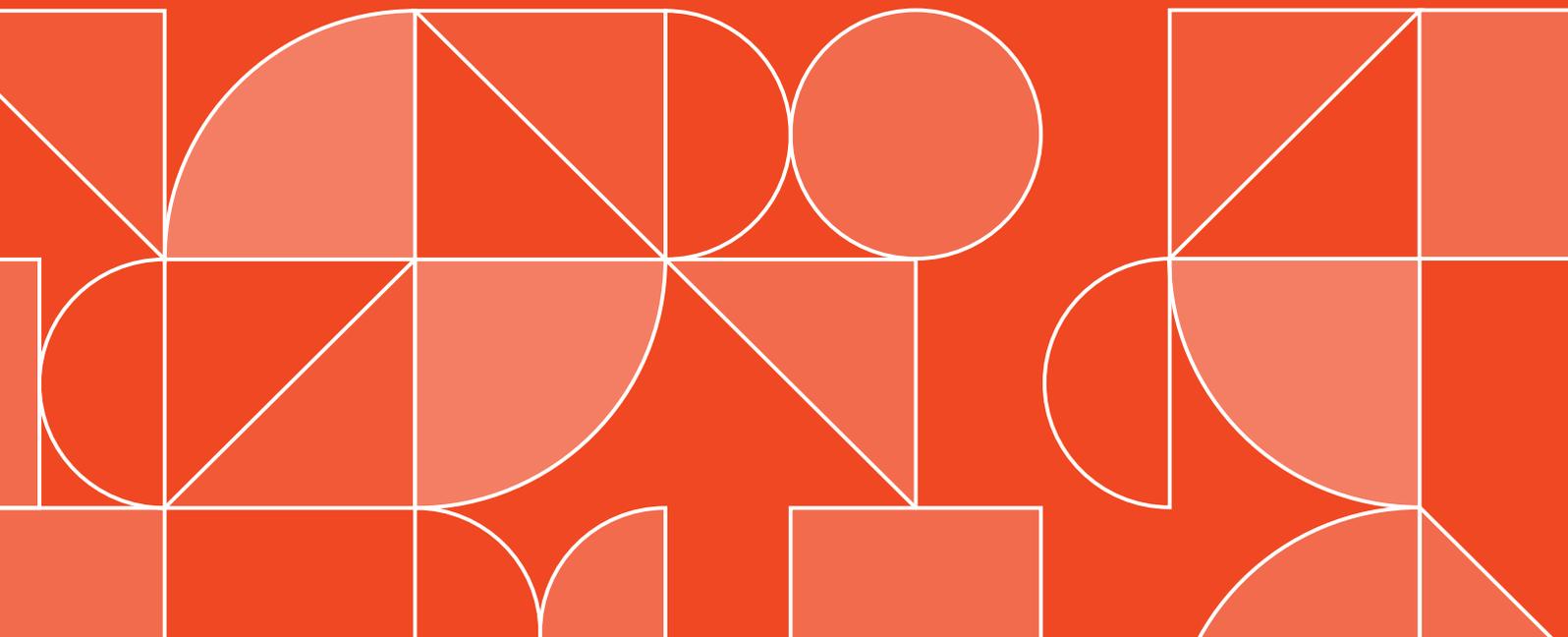
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PART 12

Appendix

Interview Guide and Template for the 2024 Employer Interviews

SECTION 0: SETA INFORMATION	
0.1	SETA name
0.2	Contact person for this project
0.3	Submission date
0.4	Number of organisations interviewed
0.5	Subsectors covered by the SETA

SECTION 1: GENERAL	
INFORMATION RECORDED SEPARATELY FOR EACH RESPONDENT ORGANISATION.	
1.1	Number of individuals interviewed
1.2	Distribution of interviewees by level of position (senior, mid-level, lower-level)
1.3	Size of organisation (1–50 employees, 51–150 employees, 151 + employees)
1.4	Subsector covered by employer (options determined by SETA responses to question 0.5)
1.5	Provinces covered by interview (WC, EC, NC, FS, KZ, NW, GP, MP, LP)
1.6	Use of Sector Skills Plan 1.6.1 Does your organisation make use of the Sector Skills Plan (SSP) when planning for skills development in your organisation? 1.6.2 How does your organisation make use of the SSP when planning for skills development in your organisation?
1.7	Business conditions 1.7.1 What is your assessment of current business conditions in your industry? (1 = Very poor, 5 = Excellent) 1.7.2 What is your expectation of business conditions in your industry in 12 months' time? (1 = Very poor, 5 = Excellent)
1.8	Remote work 1.8.1 What proportion of staff within your organisation work remotely at the moment? (0%, 1–10%, 11–20%, 21–30%, 31–40%, 41–50%, 51–60%, 61–70%, 71–80%, 81–90%, 91–100%, Unsure) 1.8.2 What proportion of staff within your organisation worked remotely as at 30 June 2022? (0%, 1–10%, 11–20%, 21–30%, 31–40%, 41–50%, 51–60%, 61–70%, 71–80%, 81–90%, 91–100%, Unsure) 1.8.3 What proportion of staff within your organisation worked remotely as at 30 June 2019? (0%, 1–10%, 11–20%, 21–30%, 31–40%, 41–50%, 51–60%, 61–70%, 71–80%, 81–90%, 91–100%, Unsure) 1.8.4 What type of remote work system does your organisation currently use? (No remote work at all, Fully remote work for all employees, Fully remote work only for some employees, Hybrid work only for some employees, Hybrid work for all employees, Other. If other, please specify) 1.8.5 In which occupations do people work remotely in your organisation? (Managers; Professionals; Technicians and associate professionals; Clerical support workers; Service and sales workers; Skilled agricultural, forestry, and fishery workers; Craft and related trades workers; Plant and machine operators and assemblers; Elementary occupation workers) 1.8.6 What has been your organisation's experience with remote work? What opportunities or challenges has remote work presented to your organisation?

1.9	Skills development priority
	1.9.1 To what extent will skills development be a priority for your organisation over the next 12 months? (Low, Medium, High)
	1.9.2 What is the key reason for your answer to the previous question (priority of skills development)?

1.10	Hard-to-fill vacancies (HTFVs)
	1.10.1 Did your organisation have occupations that were hard to fill over the past 12 months? (Yes, No)

SECTION 2: OCCUPATIONS WITH HTFVS OVER THE PREVIOUS 12-MONTH PERIOD

INFORMATION RECORDED SEPARATELY FOR EACH OCCUPATION AND RESPONDENT ORGANISATION.

2.1	Occupation
2.2	Six-digit OFO code (full list provided)
2.3	Reason(s) for HTFVs in a specified occupation

SECTION 3: MOST COMMON SKILLS GAPS

INFORMATION RECORDED SEPARATELY FOR EACH RESPONDENT ORGANISATION.

3.1	What are the three most common skills gaps in your organisation?
	3.1.1 High-level occupations (managers and professionals)
	3.1.2 Mid-level occupations (technicians, associates, artisans, and clerical workers)
	3.1.3 Lower-level occupations (plant operators and elementary workers)

SECTION 4: CHANGE DRIVERS AND FUTURE SKILLS

INFORMATION RECORDED SEPARATELY FOR EACH RESPONDENT ORGANISATION.

4.1 Please identify up to three major change drivers in your organisation. What are the implications of these change drivers for skills development in your organisation?

4.2 How have these and any other change drivers affected the kinds of skills your organisation will need in the future?

SECTION 5: NEW AND EMERGING OCCUPATIONS

INFORMATION RECORDED SEPARATELY FOR EACH OCCUPATION AND RESPONDENT ORGANISATION.

5.1 New and emerging occupations in the sector

5.1.1 Occupation

5.1.2 Six-digit OFO code (full list provided)

SECTION 6: NEW AND EMERGING SKILLS GAPS IN THE SECTOR

INFORMATION RECORDED SEPARATELY FOR EACH RESPONDENT ORGANISATION.

| 6.1	New and emerging skills gaps in the sector

SECTION 7: PRIORITY EDUCATION AND TRAINING INTERVENTIONS

INFORMATION RECORDED SEPARATELY FOR EACH RESPONDENT ORGANISATION.

7.1	List the top three priority education and training interventions for the sector (Training intervention, Description)

SETA EMPLOYER INTERVIEWS: PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Notes

Notes

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