Internationalization as a Catalyst for Skills Innovation in the Wholesale and Retail Context: A Reflective Case Study

Mxolisi Maphakela
Senior Manager: Research and Strategic Planning (W&RSETA)

Kgaugelo.biko@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The rapid transformation of work, driven by technological change, digitalisation and changing employer requirements, has increased pressure on skills systems to generate and use evidence more effectively. This article examines how international collaboration can contribute to skills innovation through a reflective case study of the South Africa-Thailand Research and Skills Planning Partnership involving the Wholesale and Retail Sector Education and Training Authority (W&RSETA), higher education institutions, government and industry. The study uses documentary analysis of two primary case documents: the W&RSETA briefing document prepared for the Thailand engagements and the subsequent Thailand research tour report. Using a hybrid deductive-inductive thematic analysis, the documents were coded for recurring evidence concerning institutional capability, labour market intelligence, cross-sector collaboration, entrepreneurship, research utilisation and governance. The analysis identified six interrelated themes: international collaboration and institutional capability; labour market intelligence; university-industry-government collaboration; entrepreneurship and employability; research-informed strategic planning; and collaborative governance. The evidence suggests that the value of international collaboration lies less in transferring a foreign model than in creating structured opportunities for comparison, adaptation, knowledge exchange and institutional learning. Building on the cross-theme analysis, the article proposes the International Skills Innovation Partnership Framework (ISIPF), which integrates strategic leadership, collaborative research, labour market intelligence, cross-sector collaboration, innovation and curriculum responsiveness, and institutional learning. The framework extends existing skills ecosystem and Triple Helix perspectives by foregrounding international knowledge exchange and the role of intermediary workforce-development institutions such as SETAs. The article concludes with implications for South African skills planning and the wholesale and retail sector, while recognising that the documentary case does not establish causal effects or statistical generalisability.

Keywords: International collaboration, skills innovation, labour market intelligence, skills ecosystems, organisational learning, wholesale and retail

The Retail and Marketing Review

Volume 22, Special Issue: W&RSETA Research Conference, October 2026, pages 63-78

Doi: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.24101032

CC BY

1. INTRODUCTION

The nature of work is being reshaped by technological change, digitalisation, automation, environmental pressures and changing patterns of production and consumption. These changes affect not only the occupations and skills demanded by employers but also the institutional arrangements through which skills needs are identified, interpreted and translated into education, training and workforce interventions. The OECD (2023) argues that the pace of green and digital transformation requires skills systems that can anticipate emerging needs and support continuous adaptation. The World Bank (2019) similarly emphasises that technological change alters the skills employers seek and increases the importance of complex problem-solving, teamwork and adaptability. For skills systems, the implication is that responsiveness depends increasingly on the quality of labour market intelligence, institutional coordination and the ability to learn from changing environments.

International collaboration provides one mechanism through which such learning can occur. Internationalisation is no longer limited to student mobility or academic exchange. Knight (2003) conceptualises internationalisation as an intentional process through which an international or intercultural dimension is integrated into institutional purposes and functions. In workforce development, this creates scope for comparative learning, joint research, institutional partnerships, curriculum development, employer engagement and knowledge exchange. However, comparative learning does not imply that practices can be transferred unchanged from one national system to another. Phillips and Ochs (2004) caution that policy borrowing and transfer are mediated by institutional context, interpretation and adaptation. International collaboration is therefore potentially valuable when it is treated as a learning process rather than a search for a ready-made model.

These issues are particularly relevant in South Africa, where Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) occupy an intermediary position between government, employers, education and training institutions and the labour market. The Skills Development Act 97 of 1998 (Republic of South Africa, 1998) establishes an institutional framework for national, sectoral and workplace skills strategies and includes SETAs within that architecture.

The White Paper for Post-School Education and Training also envisage a coordinated system in which education and training institutions work with employers and other institutions to meet social and economic needs (DHET, 2013). The role of SETAs consequently extends beyond funding training. Sector skills planning requires credible evidence, stakeholder engagement, research and the capacity to interpret labour market change.

The Wholesale and Retail Sector Education and Training Authority provides a useful case for examining these relationships. Its 2019 briefing document links the Retail Chair at Durban University of Technology to the generation and sharing of sector knowledge, postgraduate research and collaboration with academic and industry stakeholders. It also identifies research and sector partnerships as inputs into Sector Skills Planning and organisational strategy, while highlighting youth unemployment, small-business development, hard-to-fill vacancies, stakeholder participation and technological disruption as sector priorities (W&RSETA, 2019a). The briefing document further identifies the need to strengthen links between education, training and the labour market, develop employability competencies, support reskilling and entrepreneurship, and plan for current and future skills demand.

Against this background, the South Africa-Thailand Research and Skills Planning Partnership provides an analytically useful case. The engagement involved government, universities, research institutions and industry and was explicitly concerned with skills planning, research, labour market information, curriculum responsiveness, entrepreneurship and possible institutional partnerships. The tour report records observations on research and

innovation in labour market planning, demand-led qualification development, work-integrated learning, curriculum review, entrepreneurship support, skills forecasting and retraining. It also records proposed areas of collaboration involving joint research, data-management and forecasting tools, retail innovation, curriculum development, internships, faculty and student exchange, workplace experience and entrepreneurship (W&RSETA, 2019b).

The research problem addressed in this article is that international partnerships are often described in terms of activities and exchanges, while less attention is given to the institutional mechanisms through which such partnerships may contribute to research utilisation, labour market intelligence, organisational learning and skills innovation within intermediary workforce-development institutions. The article therefore asks: How does the South Africa-Thailand partnership illustrate the institutional mechanisms through which international collaboration may contribute to skills innovation in the wholesale and retail context?

The article has three objectives: (1) to identify the institutional and workforce-development practices represented in the documentary evidence of the South Africa-Thailand partnership; (2) to interpret how these practices relate to skills innovation, labour market intelligence, organisational learning and collaborative governance; and (3) to develop a conceptual framework that synthesises the case evidence into an International Skills Innovation Partnership Framework (ISIPF). The article makes a conceptual rather than causal contribution. It does not evaluate the effectiveness of the Thailand partnership or claim that observed practices caused particular outcomes. Instead, it uses documentary evidence to identify transferable principles and the institutional conditions that may make international collaboration more useful to skills systems.

TABLE 1: EMPIRICAL DOCUMENTARY DATASET

Document	Role in case	Evidence used	Analytical use
W&RSETA (2019a), Briefing Document for Engagements	Pre-engagement planning document	Institutional rationale; W&RSETA priorities; SSP and research links; MOA; planned engagements; labour-market context	Established the problem context, intended learning objectives and institutional priorities
W&RSETA (2019b), Thailand Tour Report	Post-engagement tour report	Institutions engaged; reported observations; possible collaboration areas; recommendations; conclusions	Provided documentary evidence of reported practices and proposed partnership mechanisms

Source: W&RSETA, 2019a; W&RSETA, 2019b.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTERNATIONALISATION, COMPARATIVE LEARNING AND CONTEXTUAL ADAPTATION

Internationalisation has increasingly moved beyond mobility towards institutional processes of collaboration and knowledge exchange. Knight (2003) distinguishes internationalisation from isolated international activities by emphasising the integration of international and intercultural dimensions into institutional purposes and functions. Applied to workforce development, this perspective suggests that international collaboration is most consequential when it becomes connected to research, planning, curriculum development and institutional learning.

The comparative dimension of international collaboration also requires caution. Phillips and Ochs (2004) show that policy borrowing involves processes of attraction, decision, implementation and internalisation rather than straightforward transfer. The relevance of this insight into skills development is that practices observed in one national system cannot be assumed to produce equivalent effects elsewhere. Institutional mandates, governance

arrangements, labour-market structures and economic conditions shape what can be adapted. International collaboration should therefore be understood as a mechanism for structured comparison and contextual interpretation.

2.2 SKILLS ECOSYSTEMS AND COLLABORATIVE WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Skills Ecosystem perspectives shift attention from the acquisition of individual skills to the relationships and institutional conditions through which skills are developed and used. Finegold (1999) conceptualises high-skill ecosystems as dependent on a supportive environment, ongoing nourishment and interdependence among actors. More recent work by Buchanan, Anderson and Power (2017) similarly emphasises the context in which skills are developed and used and the difficulty of sustaining reform when relevant actors and resources are disconnected. This perspective is useful for this study because SETAs operate at the interface between employers, education and training providers, government and labour-market demand.

A skills ecosystem perspective also changes the meaning of skills innovation. Innovation is not only the creation of a new qualification or training intervention. It can involve changes in relationships, information flows, governance arrangements, curriculum processes and the use of evidence. International partnerships can therefore contribute to innovation when they strengthen the connections through which knowledge about employers, occupations, technologies and training is generated and used.

2.3 ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING AND INSTITUTIONALISATION OF KNOWLEDGE

Organisational Learning Theory provides a second core lens. Argyris and Schön (1978) distinguish between learning that adjusts action within existing assumptions and learning that questions underlying assumptions. For public institutions, the significance is that exposure to new practices does not automatically constitute organisational learning. Knowledge becomes organisationally meaningful when it is interpreted, shared and incorporated into routines, decision-making and governance.

This argument is reinforced by research on learning cultures. Marsick and Watkins (2003) emphasise systems and practices that support continuous learning, dialogue, knowledge creation and the connection between learning and organisational performance. The implication for international collaboration is that a study tour, conference or memorandum of understanding is an input into learning, not evidence of learning itself. Institutional learning requires mechanisms for capturing lessons, assigning responsibility, sharing knowledge and translating insights into action.

2.4 UNIVERSITY-INDUSTRY-GOVERNMENT COLLABORATION

The Triple Helix framework conceptualises innovation through dynamic relationships between universities, industry and government (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff, 2000). This perspective is particularly relevant to skills development because curriculum responsiveness, applied research, work-integrated learning and entrepreneurship often require knowledge from more than one institutional domain. The case examined here also includes SETA participation, which adds an intermediary workforce-development actor to the conventional university-industry-government configuration.

The contribution of the Triple Helix perspective to this study is therefore relational: it helps explain why innovation is unlikely to arise from universities, employers or government acting independently. However, it does not by itself explain how international knowledge is brought into the relationship, interpreted across national contexts and embedded within intermediary organisations. This is one point at which the proposed ISIPF seeks to extend existing perspectives.

2.5 SYNTHESIS AND ANALYTICAL GAP

Taken together, the literature suggests four propositions that guide the analysis. First, international collaboration can create structured opportunities for comparative learning, but adaptation is necessary. Second, skills innovation is an ecosystem process involving relationships among employers, education and training institutions, government and intermediary organisations. Third, knowledge gained through collaboration becomes valuable when organisations can interpret and institutionalise it. Fourth, innovation is strengthened by interaction across institutional boundaries. What remains less explicit is how these processes can be integrated into a practical model for intermediary workforce-development institutions such as SETAs.

The gap is therefore not a claim that international collaboration, skills ecosystems or collaborative governance are absent from the literature. Rather, the gap concerns their integration around the specific institutional problem of converting international engagement into sustained organisational learning, labour market intelligence and skills innovation. The ISIPF is proposed as a conceptual response to this gap.

3. PURPOSE, RESEARCH PROBLEM AND OBJECTIVES

3.1 RESEARCH PROBLEM

International partnerships are frequently justified in terms of benchmarking, exposure to good practice and relationship building. However, these activities do not necessarily result in institutional learning or changes in skills planning. Within intermediary workforce-development institutions, there is a need to understand the organisational mechanisms through which knowledge obtained internationally can be interpreted, adapted, shared and connected to labour market intelligence, research agendas, curriculum responsiveness and strategic decision-making.

3.2 PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

The purpose of the article is to examine, through a reflective case study, how the South Africa-Thailand Research and Skills Planning Partnership illustrates mechanisms through which international collaboration may support skills innovation in the wholesale and retail context. The objectives are to identify the practices and institutional relationships represented in the case documents; interpret their relevance to skills innovation and evidence-informed skills planning; and synthesise the analysis into the International Skills Innovation Partnership Framework.

3.3 RESEARCH QUESTION

The central research question is: How does the South Africa-Thailand Research and Skills Planning Partnership illustrate institutional mechanisms through which international collaboration may contribute to skills innovation in the wholesale and retail context?

4. RESEARCH STRATEGY AND METHODOLOGY

4.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

The study adopted a qualitative reflective case study design. Case study research is appropriate when a contemporary phenomenon is examined in its real-world context and when the boundaries between the phenomenon

and its context are not easily separated (Yin, 2018). The case is the South Africa-Thailand Research and Skills Planning Partnership, with particular attention to its implications for W&RSETA, sector skills planning and the wholesale and retail workforce-development ecosystem. The study is reflective because it does not seek to test a causal proposition or measure programme effectiveness. It examines what the documentary record reveals about institutional learning, collaboration and potential skills-system innovation.

4.2 EMPIRICAL DATASET AND DOCUMENT SELECTION

The empirical dataset comprised two primary documents produced in connection with the partnership. The first was the W&RSETA Research and Skills Planning Collaboration: Briefing Document for Engagements between South Africa and Thailand, dated June 2019 and prepared for the engagements. The document establishes the institutional rationale for the collaboration, the W&RSETA research and skills-planning priorities, the proposed areas of cooperation with Panyapiwat Institute of Management, background information on the Thai Department of Skills Development, labour-market information and the institutions scheduled for engagement (W&RSETA, 2019a). The second document was the Research and Skills Planning Collaboration: Thailand Tour Report, which records the institutions engaged, observations on Thai skills-planning practices, proposed areas of collaboration, recommendations and conclusions following the tour (W&RSETA, 2019b).

These two documents were selected purposively because they represent complementary stages of the same case. The briefing document captures the intended rationale, expectations and analytical questions before or around the engagements, while the tour report records observations and proposed partnership outcomes following the engagements. Together they provide evidence on both the institutional problem that motivated the collaboration and the practices identified during the engagement. The documents were treated as the empirical dataset; academic literature and public policy sources were used to contextualise and interpret the documentary evidence rather than as substitutes for case evidence.

4.3 DOCUMENTARY ANALYSIS

Document analysis was conducted systematically rather than treating the reports as descriptive background. Bowen (2009) notes that qualitative document analysis requires attention to the purpose, context, content and limitations of documentary sources. The analysis began with repeated reading of both documents to establish familiarity with their structure and purpose. Relevant sections were then extracted into an analytical matrix under five broad evidence domains: institutional capability and partnerships; labour market intelligence and skills planning; education, curriculum and workplace learning; entrepreneurship and employability; and governance, research and knowledge utilisation.

Each extracted passage was coded according to what the document explicitly recorded. Examples of initial codes included joint research, exchange programmes, curriculum review, employer engagement, planning tools, skills forecasting, retail innovation, entrepreneurship support, workplace experience, qualification development, reskilling, stakeholder coordination and research informing Sector Skills Planning. Codes were retained when they were directly supported by the documents and were not inferred solely from the researcher's expectations.

4.4 CODING AND THEMATIC DEVELOPMENT

The thematic analysis used a hybrid deductive-inductive approach. Deductive sensitising concepts were derived from the research question and the core literature on skills ecosystems, organisational learning and Triple Helix collaboration. These concepts directed attention to relationships, knowledge use, institutional learning and workforce

responsiveness. At the same time, the coding remained open to issues that were prominent in the documents but not predetermined by the theoretical framework, including entrepreneurship programmes, retail innovation, qualification review and specific planning tools.

The thematic development followed a recursive process informed by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, both documents were read in full and initial notes were recorded. Second, relevant passages were assigned descriptive codes. Third, related codes were grouped into provisional categories. Fourth, the categories were compared across the two documents to identify convergence, complementarity and differences. Fifth, provisional themes were reviewed against the source material to ensure that each theme had sufficient documentary support and was conceptually distinct from the others. Sixth, themes were defined and named to capture the underlying analytical pattern rather than simply reproduce document headings.

The final analysis produced six themes: (1) international collaboration and institutional capability; (2) labour market intelligence; (3) university-industry-government collaboration; (4) entrepreneurship and employability; (5) research-informed strategic planning; and (6) collaborative governance. The themes were not treated as six independent findings. They were subsequently examined as interconnected components of an institutional process through which international engagement may support skills innovation.

4.5 REFLEXIVITY AND AUTHOR POSITIONALITY

The researcher has a professional relationship with W&RSETA and was involved in the institutional environment from which the case documents originated. This insider position provides contextual knowledge of the sector and the partnership, but it also creates a risk that the researcher may interpret institutional intentions or experiences more favourably than an external researcher would. Reflexivity was therefore incorporated into the analysis in three ways. First, the empirical claims in the results section are anchored in the two documentary sources rather than personal recollection. Second, the analysis distinguishes between what the documents report and the researcher's interpretation of its significance. Third, the study does not treat the researcher's organisational position as evidence of partnership effectiveness. The framework is presented as a conceptual synthesis of documentary evidence rather than an evaluation of W&RSETA or its partners.

4.6 CREDIBILITY AND ANALYTICAL DISCIPLINE

Several procedures were used to strengthen credibility. The two primary documents were compared to identify recurring evidence and to avoid relying on a single account. Documentary claims were checked against the wording and context of the source rather than being reconstructed from memory. The coding process was organised around an explicit analytical matrix, and themes were reviewed for internal coherence and distinctiveness. Literature was used to interpret and challenge documentary evidence rather than to create findings that were absent from the case. Finally, claims about outcomes were deliberately moderated because the dataset does not include participant interviews, independent observations or longitudinal performance measures.

4.7 SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

The study has three important limitations. First, the empirical dataset consists of two institutional documents relating to one international partnership. Second, the documents record institutional observations and planned or proposed collaboration but do not provide independent measures of longer-term outcomes. Third, the researcher has an insider relationship with the institutional setting. The study therefore offers analytical and conceptual insights rather than causal

evidence or statistical generalisation. The value of the case lies in identifying mechanisms and propositions that can be tested in future research using interviews, comparative cases and longitudinal evidence.

5. RESULTS

5.1 OVERVIEW OF THE DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

The documentary evidence presents international collaboration as closely connected to W&RSETA's existing research and skills-planning agenda. The briefing document links research and partnerships to Sector Skills Planning and organisational strategy and identifies priorities including youth unemployment, small-business and cooperative development, hard-to-fill vacancies, stakeholder participation and the effects of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. It also identifies competencies such as analytical skills, problem-solving, decision-making and innovation, together with stronger links between education and the labour market, reskilling, entrepreneurship and planning for future skills (W&RSETA, 2019a; Statistics South Africa, 2019).

The tour report records a corresponding set of observations in Thailand. It identifies research and innovation as central to labour market planning, coordinated education and training, curriculum alignment to labour market requirements, entrepreneurship support, work-integrated learning, demand-led qualifications, curriculum review, skills forecasting and retraining (W&RSETA, 2019b). The report also identifies concrete areas for collaboration, including joint research, forecasting tools, retail innovation, curriculum development, internships, exchange programmes and entrepreneurship.

5.2 THEME 1: INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION AND INSTITUTIONAL CAPABILITY

Documentary evidence. The briefing document records an existing Memorandum of Agreement involving W&RSETA, Durban University of Technology and Panyapiwat Institute of Management covering joint research, internships, conferences and student and faculty exchange (W&RSETA, 2019a). The tour report adds proposed areas such as workplace experience, planning tools, qualification development and review, information sharing, joint research on retail innovation and retail trends, and programmes aimed at wholesale and retail management and informal business owners (W&RSETA, 2019b).

Interpretation. The evidence suggests that the partnership was conceived as more than a once-off exchange. The institutional arrangements created channels through which knowledge could potentially move between organisations. However, the documents establish the existence and intended scope of these mechanisms, not their long-term effectiveness. The analytical significance is therefore the creation of institutional architecture for learning rather than proof that organisational capability was improved.

Implication. For the wholesale and retail skills system, international partnerships may be more useful when linked to existing research chairs, sector planning functions, academic programmes and employer relationships. The implication is not that every partnership should replicate the Thai arrangements, but that partnerships should have an institutional home, defined learning objectives and mechanisms for retaining knowledge.

5.3 THEME 2: LABOUR MARKET INTELLIGENCE

Documentary evidence. The briefing document states that W&RSETA uses research, stakeholder consultation and hard-to-fill vacancy surveys to identify sector priorities and strengthen alignment with national imperatives. It also

identifies planning for current and future skills, cross-over occupations and technological disruption as priorities (W&RSETA, 2019a). The tour report records Thai practices involving skills forecasting, planning tools, trend analysis and a strong skills pipeline, and proposes information sharing with the Thai Department of Skills Development on data management and forecasting tools (W&RSETA, 2019b).

Interpretation. The documents position labour market intelligence as a planning capability rather than simply a statistical product. The connection between forecasting tools, employer information, curriculum review and qualification development is particularly important. The case therefore illustrates a possible shift from collecting information to organising information so that it can inform decisions.

Implication. For W&RSETA and comparable institutions, the relevant lesson is to strengthen the pathway between evidence generation and decision-making. Labour market intelligence has greater strategic value when it is connected to occupational analysis, employer engagement, curriculum review and Sector Skills Planning.

5.4 THEME 3: UNIVERSITY-INDUSTRY-GOVERNMENT COLLABORATION

Documentary evidence. The tour involved government, universities, research institutions and industry, including the Department of Skills Development, Panyapiwat Institute of Management, Suranaree University of Technology, Kasetsart University, Western Digital Thailand and the Asian Institute of Technology. The tour report records proposed joint research, graduate exchange, retail innovation, curriculum development, entrepreneurship and industry-related collaboration (W&RSETA, 2019b).

Interpretation. The evidence is consistent with an ecosystem approach in which skills development depends on relationships across institutional boundaries. It also illustrates a broader configuration than the traditional university-industry relationship because government and an intermediary SETA are involved. The case consequently supports a relational view of skills innovation, while the evidence does not establish the relative contribution of any single actor.

Implication. Research Chairs and sector partnerships can function as boundary-spanning mechanisms. Their value may increase when research is connected to employer-defined problems, curriculum processes and workforce planning rather than being limited to the production of academic outputs.

5.5 THEME 4: ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND EMPLOYABILITY

Documentary evidence. Entrepreneurship is identified as a priority in the briefing document, which links reskilling to employment and entrepreneurship. The tour report records entrepreneurship support as a Thai practice and identifies retail entrepreneurship, the Retailpreneurship initiative and an Employee Franchise Programme among possible areas of collaboration (W&RSETA, 2019a; W&RSETA, 2019b). The report also records work-integrated learning, graduate placement and workplace experience as elements of the Thai approach.

Interpretation. The documentary evidence treats employability as broader than technical training. It connects workplace exposure, entrepreneurship, problem-solving and qualification responsiveness. This is consistent with a skills ecosystem interpretation in which learning is connected to the context in which skills are used.

Implication. For the wholesale and retail sector, skills innovation can include pathways that support employment, enterprise creation and progression alongside conventional occupational training. However, the documents do not

provide evidence of employment outcomes attributable to the partnership; such outcomes would require separate evaluations.

5.6 THEME 5: RESEARCH-INFORMED STRATEGIC PLANNING

Documentary evidence. The briefing document explicitly connects research to the Sector Skills Plan (SSP), organisational strategy and the Annual Performance Plan (APP), while identifying research and stakeholder evidence as inputs to sector priorities (W&RSETA, 2019a). The tour report identifies research and innovation as central to labour market planning and proposes joint research on Fourth Industrial Revolution technologies such as automation and Artificial Intelligence (AI), skills planning and retail innovation (W&RSETA, 2019b).

Interpretation. The case suggests that research capability becomes strategically relevant when it is connected to formal planning processes. This is different from treating research as a separate technical or academic function. The documentary evidence supports the proposition that international collaboration can provide new knowledge inputs into an existing planning system, but it does not establish whether all such knowledge was subsequently implemented.

Implication. International partnerships should therefore specify how knowledge will be captured, assessed and fed into planning cycles. Without this translation mechanism, collaboration risks producing information without institutional uptake.

5.7 THEME 6: COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE

Documentary evidence. The briefing document records the use of a formal agreement between W&RSETA, DUT and PIM and proposes further memoranda of understanding with Thai institutions. The tour report similarly recommends prioritising additional partnership agreements and identifies specific collaboration areas and institutional responsibilities (W&RSETA, 2019a; W&RSETA, 2019b).

Interpretation. Governance emerges as an enabling condition for continuity, responsiveness and impact. Formal agreements can clarify areas of cooperation, but the documents also show that agreements are only mechanisms for collaboration; they do not by themselves establish sustained outcomes. Governance therefore includes the alignment of objectives, roles, resources, accountability and mechanisms for knowledge exchange.

Implication. Sustainable international collaboration in skills development requires governance arrangements that connect international relationships to institutional mandates, budgets, research priorities and sector outcomes. This is particularly important for intermediary institutions whose effectiveness depends on coordination across multiple stakeholders.

TABLE 2: ANALYTICAL CODING PATHWAY FROM DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE TO THEMES

Illustrative documentary codes	Analytical category	Final theme	Interpretive focus
Joint research; exchanges; internships; conferences; workplace experience	Institutional relationships and capability	International collaboration and institutional capability	How partnership structures may create channels for institutional learning
Forecasting tools; trend analysis; data management; skills demand and supply	Evidence and planning intelligence	Labour market intelligence	How labour-market evidence may inform planning and curriculum decisions
Universities; industry; government; SETAs; employer engagement; joint projects	Cross-sector coordination	University-industry-government collaboration	How institutional boundaries may be bridged to support skills innovation

Entrepreneurship support; Retailpreneurship; franchise programmes; work-integrated learning (WIL)	Employment and enterprise pathways	Entrepreneurship and employability	How skills innovation may connect learning with work and enterprise
Research; Sector Skills Plan (SSP); strategic planning; Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) studies; retail innovation	Evidence utilisation	Research-informed strategic planning	How research may inform formal planning processes
Memoranda of Agreement (MOAs); Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs); roles; collaboration areas; proposed agreements	Institutional governance	Collaborative governance	How formal and relational governance arrangements may support continuity

Source: W&RSETA, 2019a; W&RSETA, 2019b.

6. DISCUSSION

The six themes should not be read as six separate benefits of internationalisation. Their significance lies in the relationships among them. The case documents show an institutional chain in which research and collaboration generate or expose new knowledge; labour market intelligence provides a basis for interpreting skills demand; cross-sector relationships connect evidence to education, employers and government; entrepreneurship and curriculum responsiveness provide potential channels for translating knowledge into skills-system interventions; and governance arrangements create the conditions for continuity.

This interpretation is consistent with Skills Ecosystem perspectives, which emphasise interdependence among actors and the institutional contexts in which skills are developed and used (Finegold, 1999; Buchanan, Anderson and Power, 2017). The case adds an international dimension to this ecosystem logic. International collaboration introduces an additional knowledge environment through which institutions can compare practices, question assumptions and identify possible alternatives. The value lies in the quality of the institutional learning process, not in the foreignness of the practice.

The analysis also complements Organisational Learning Theory. Argyris and Schön (1978) emphasise that organisational learning involves more than acquiring information; it involves changes in how organisations interpret situations and act. The case therefore points towards a distinction between exposure and institutionalisation. A study tour, memorandum of understanding or exchange programme is exposure. Organisational learning occurs when lessons are debated, adapted, documented, assigned to organisational processes and incorporated into future decisions.

The case further extends the relevance of the Triple Helix perspective. Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff (2000) explain innovation through interactions among university, industry and government. The South Africa-Thailand case involves these actors but also places an intermediary workforce-development institution at the center of the relationship. The SETA is not merely another stakeholder; it has a coordinating role in sector skills planning and can connect research, employer demand, policy and training interventions. ISIPF therefore retains the relational logic of the Triple Helix while adding two elements that are particularly important for intermediary skills institutions: international knowledge exchange and institutional learning.

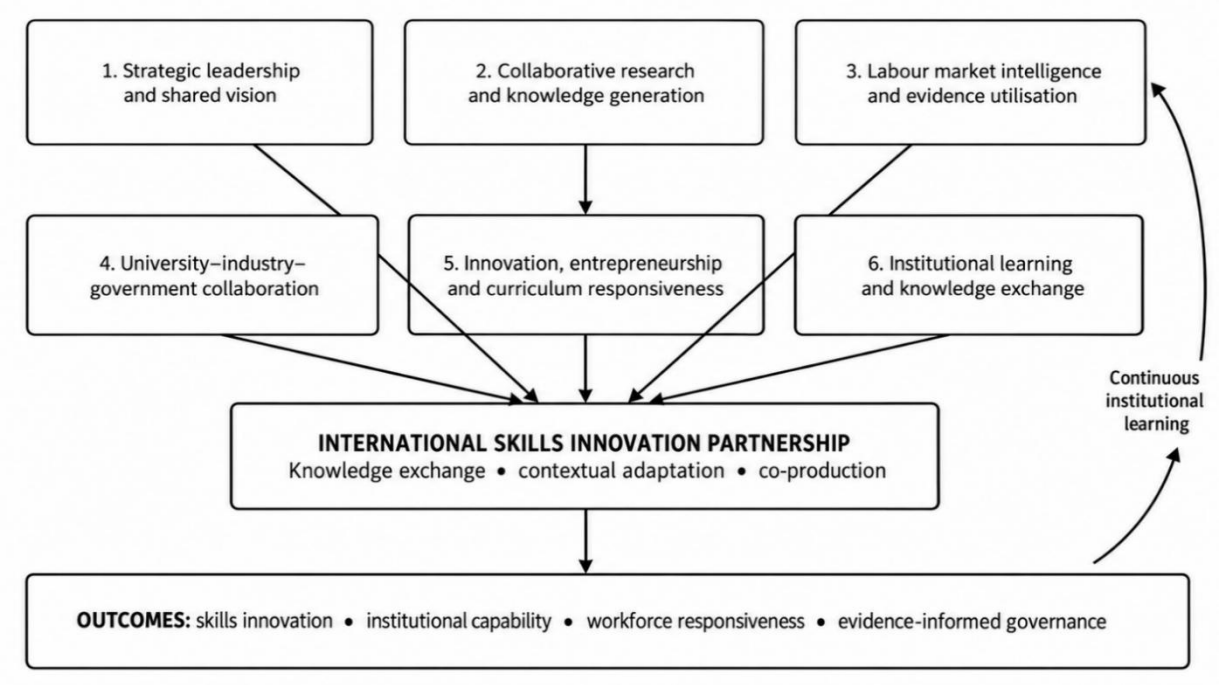
The discussion also reinforces the importance of contextual adaptation. The documents identify Thai practices as possible sources of learning, but the briefing and tour reports frame the collaboration in terms of responding to South African wholesale and retail priorities. The appropriate analytical conclusion is therefore not that Thailand provides a superior model. Rather, the case illustrates how international engagement can be used to identify practices that warrant further investigation and adaptation. This distinction is important because the evidence does not support a causal comparison of the two national skills systems.

On this basis, the principal contribution of the study is conceptual. ISIPF brings together the mechanisms identified across the six themes into a framework that treats international collaboration as a process of institutional capability building. Its distinctive proposition is that international engagement creates value when six interacting conditions are present: strategic leadership; collaborative research; labour market intelligence; cross-sector collaboration; innovation and curriculum responsiveness; and institutional learning. These conditions form a cycle rather than a linear sequence.

7. INTERNATIONAL SKILLS INNOVATION PARTNERSHIP FRAMEWORK (ISIPF)

7.1 RATIONALE AND STRUCTURE

The International Skills Innovation Partnership Framework is developed from the cross-theme synthesis rather than being presented as a direct representation of the Thai system. It is a conceptual framework for thinking about how international collaboration can be designed, governed and institutionalised within workforce-development systems. Figure 1 presents the six pillars as interconnected components surrounding an international partnership process, with skills innovation, institutional capability, workforce responsiveness and evidence-informed governance as the principal outcomes.



Source: Author's conceptual synthesis of documentary analysis and supporting literature.

FIGURE 1: INTERNATIONAL SKILLS INNOVATION PARTNERSHIP FRAMEWORK (ISIPF)

7.2 PILLAR 1: STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP AND SHARED VISION

International collaboration requires leadership that connects the partnership to institutional and sector priorities. In this case, the briefing document links the collaboration to research, Sector Skills Planning, technological disruption and wholesale and retail priorities (W&RSETA, 2019a). Leadership therefore provides the strategic rationale and protects the partnership from becoming an isolated activity.

7.3 PILLAR 2: COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH AND KNOWLEDGE GENERATION

Research provides a mechanism for converting partnership relationships into knowledge. The case identifies joint research on the Fourth Industrial Revolution, skills planning and retail innovation as potential collaboration areas (W&RSETA, 2019b). The framework places collaborative research at the center of knowledge generation but emphasises that research should be connected to sector priorities and decision-making.

7.4 PILLAR 3: LABOUR MARKET INTELLIGENCE AND EVIDENCE UTILISATION

Labour market intelligence connects knowledge to workforce demand. The case documents identify skills forecasting, planning tools, trend analysis, employer information and sector research as relevant mechanisms. ISIPF therefore distinguishes evidence generation from evidence utilisation: intelligence becomes strategically valuable when it informs planning, curriculum review, programme implementation, qualification development and workforce interventions.

7.5 PILLAR 4: UNIVERSITY-INDUSTRY-GOVERNMENT COLLABORATION

The fourth pillar adapts the Triple Helix logic to the skills-development environment by explicitly including intermediary institutions such as SETAs. The purpose is not simply to increase the number of partners but to establish complementary roles: universities contribute research and knowledge production; employers contribute demand-side intelligence and workplace contexts; government contributes policy direction and system coordination; and intermediary institutions connect these contributions to sector skills planning.

7.6 PILLAR 5: INNOVATION, ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND CURRICULUM RESPONSIVENESS

The fifth pillar captures the translation of intelligence into skills-system responses. The case documents identify demand-led qualification development, curriculum review, work-integrated learning, entrepreneurship and retail innovation. The framework therefore treats skills innovation as a process of continual adjustment between labour-market intelligence and learning provision.

7.7 PILLAR 6: INSTITUTIONAL LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

The final pillar addresses the sustainability problem. Knowledge from international partnerships must be retained and made accessible through research dissemination, staff development, communities of practice, documentation, governance processes and future planning. This pillar creates a feedback loop: what is learned through the partnership informs subsequent research questions, leadership priorities and engagement strategies.

7.8 WHAT ISIPF ADDS TO EXISTING FRAMEWORKS

ISIPF does not claim to replace Skills Ecosystem Theory or the Triple Helix. It integrates elements of both while addressing a different analytical problem. Skills Ecosystem Theory explains interdependence among actors in skills formation, while Triple Helix explains innovation through university-industry-government interaction. ISIPF adds an explicit international learning mechanism and places an intermediary workforce-development institution within the architecture. It also makes evidence utilisation and institutionalisation explicit: the framework asks not only who collaborates, but how knowledge generated through collaboration is translated into planning, curriculum, programme implementation, research and governance.

The framework therefore contributes a practical middle layer between broad theories of systems and the operational design of international partnerships. Its proposition is that international collaboration becomes more likely to contribute to skills innovation when it is deliberately connected to leadership, research, labour market intelligence, cross-sector collaboration, translation mechanisms and organisational learning. This proposition should be tested in future empirical studies rather than treated as established causal evidence.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 FOR SETAS AND INTERMEDIARY WORKFORCE-DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTIONS

International partnerships should be linked explicitly to institutional research agendas and Sector Skills Planning (SSP) priorities. Each partnership should have defined learning questions, knowledge-capture mechanisms, responsible institutional owners and a post-engagement implementation plan. SETAs should also strengthen the connection between labour market intelligence, research outputs and decisions about programme implementation, qualifications, occupational priorities and workplace learning.

8.2 FOR UNIVERSITIES AND RESEARCH CHAIRS

University partnerships should move beyond commissioned research towards joint problem definition, applied research, curriculum development, workplace learning and knowledge exchange for improved programme implementation. Research Chairs can serve as boundary-spanning structures that connect sector evidence, academic expertise and employer needs.

8.3 FOR INDUSTRY

Employers should be engaged as knowledge partners rather than only as recipients of training. Industry participation can strengthen the identification of emerging occupational requirements, curriculum relevance, workplace learning and applied research priorities.

8.4 FOR GOVERNMENT AND SYSTEM-LEVEL STAKEHOLDERS

Policy and funding arrangements should encourage sustained institutional partnerships and the sharing of labour market intelligence across the skills system. Evaluation frameworks should distinguish between partnership activity, institutional learning and actual workforce outcomes so that international collaboration is assessed on more than the number of visits, agreements or exchanges.

8.5 FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future studies should test ISIPF through comparative cases involving multiple SETAs and international partnerships. Interviews with government officials, academics, employers and learners could examine whether the mechanisms identified in this documentary case are experienced in practice. Longitudinal research could then assess whether international partnerships lead to changes in research utilisation, curriculum responsiveness, labour market intelligence and workforce outcomes.

9. CONCLUSION

This article examined the South Africa-Thailand Research and Skills Planning Partnership as a reflective case of international collaboration in the wholesale and retail skills-development context. The documentary analysis identified six interrelated themes: institutional capability, labour market intelligence, university-industry-government collaboration, entrepreneurship and employability, research-informed strategic planning, and collaborative governance. The evidence indicates that the partnership was designed to connect international learning with existing South African priorities in research, Sector Skills Planning, retail innovation, employability and technological change.

The central argument is that international collaboration should not be evaluated only by the number of engagements, agreements or exchanges that it produces. Its potential value lies in whether it creates mechanisms through which knowledge can be interpreted, adapted, shared and embedded in institutional processes. This interpretation is consistent with the literature on skills ecosystems, organisational learning and collaborative innovation, while also highlighting the role of intermediary institutions such as SETAs.

The International Skills Innovation Partnership Framework is proposed as the article's principal conceptual contribution. ISIPF integrates strategic leadership, collaborative research, labour market intelligence, cross-sector collaboration, innovation and curriculum responsiveness, and institutional learning into an interconnected model. Its contribution lies in making the pathway from international engagement to institutional learning and skills innovation explicit and in positioning SETAs within the university-industry-government relationship.

The study remains deliberately cautious about the outcomes. The evidence consists of two institutional documents and does not establish that the partnership caused improvements in workforce performance or institutional effectiveness. The framework should therefore be treated as a conceptual proposition emerging from the case, not as a validated causal model. Its value will depend on future testing across different institutions, sectors and international partnerships. For South Africa's wholesale and retail skills system, the case nevertheless provides a useful basis for moving the conversation from international exposure towards structured institutional learning and evidence-informed skills innovation.

REFERENCES

Argyris, C. and Schön, D.A. (1978). *Organizational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Bowen, G.A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), pp.27-40. https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), pp.77-101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

Buchanan, J., Anderson, P. and Power, G. (2017). Skill ecosystems. In: Warhurst, C., Mayhew, K., Finegold, D. and Buchanan, J. (eds.). *The Oxford Handbook of Skills and Training*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.444-465. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199655366.013.21.

Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) (2013). *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training: Building an Expanded, Effective and Integrated Post-School System*. Pretoria: DHET.

Etzkowitz, H. and Leydesdorff, L. (2000). The dynamics of innovation: From National Systems and 'Mode 2' to a Triple Helix of university-industry-government relations. *Research Policy*, 29(2), pp.109-123. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0048-7333(99)00055-4.

Finegold, D. (1999). Creating self-sustaining, high-skill ecosystems. *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, 15(1), pp.60-81. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxrep/15.1.60.

Knight, J. (2003). Updated definition of internationalization. *International Higher Education*, 33. https://doi.org/10.6017/ihe.2003.33.7391.

Marsick, V.J. and Watkins, K.E. (2003). Demonstrating the value of an organization's learning culture: The dimensions of the Learning Organization Questionnaire. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 5(2), pp.132-151. https://doi.org/10.1177/1523422303005002002.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2023). *OECD Skills Outlook 2023: Skills for a Resilient Green and Digital Transition*. Paris: OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/27452f29-en.

Phillips, D. and Ochs, K. (2004). Researching policy borrowing: Some methodological challenges in comparative education. *British Educational Research Journal*, 30(6), pp.773-784. https://doi.org/10.1080/0141192042000279495.

Republic of South Africa (1998). *Skills Development Act 97 of 1998*. Pretoria: Government Printer.

Statistics South Africa (2019). *Quarterly Labour Force Survey, Quarter 1*: 2019. Pretoria: Statistics South Africa.

World Bank (2019). *World Development Report 2019: The Changing Nature of Work*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

W&RSETA (2019a). *Research and Skills Planning Collaboration: Briefing Document for Engagements between South Africa and Thailand*. Centurion: Wholesale and Retail Sector Education and Training Authority.

W&RSETA (2019b). *Research and Skills Planning Collaboration: Thailand Tour Report*. Centurion: Wholesale and Retail Sector Education and Training Authority.

Yin, R.K. (2018). *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*. 6th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.