



27 March 2023

**To:** **Dr Patrick Nonjola**  
Director: Reviews and Evaluation, RISA

**CC:** **Prof Frans Maloa (UNISA)**  
Convenor: Independent Review of the Customised MDP

## **MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME (MDP) REVIEW FINAL REPORT – MANAGEMENT RESPONSE**

The National Research Foundation would like to thank the RISA Directorate for initiating the independent review of the organisation's MDP, as well as the appointed independent panel led by the convenor, Professor Frans Maloa. The final report was presented to the Corporate Executive at its meeting on 15 February 2023, and the findings and recommendations were broadly welcomed.

As required, this document contains NRF's Management Response to the review panel.

### **Overall Findings and Recommendations (Extracts from Pages 20 – 25 of the Report)**

#### **Finding and Recommendation 1**

Whilst the participants found tremendous value in the programmes, it was clear that the **NMDP and the SMDP are not sufficiently differentiated**. The programmes were supposed to have been designed according to the Leadership Pipeline (Charan & Drotter) principles, but the panel found significant overlap between the content of the two programmes. In their current forms, it is not feasible for a candidate to go through both programmes as he/she progresses in their career.

#### **Management Response 1**

The finding and its recommendation are acknowledged and largely accepted. There is also a concern that the SMDP programme does not adequately cater to those in senior management levels, as the level is not sufficiently designed to meet the complexity levels required by the level including executive management development, which is currently not addressed.

Post this review outcome, which coincides with the end of the 5-year contract term with USB-EB, the new service provider needs to demonstrate believable and validated level differences as had been intended using the Charan & Drotter Leadership Pipelines principles, which, according to the framework developers; leaders progress through six key transitions, or "passages", in order to succeed, as demonstrated in the figure below:



According to the model, senior leaders in the organisation should mentor more junior managers through each leadership transition, to ensure that they're using the appropriate skills for their current level. Staying "stuck" without the right skills, even if the manager progresses upward, can cause leaders to stagnate, become ineffective, and, ultimately, fail.

The current delineation and regrouping of the levels of work through the review of the NRF position nomenclature will assist the prospective provider and the NRF to ensure that any new development programmes are tailored to meet the specific levels of work competencies and duly differentiated.

## Finding and Recommendation 2

Whilst the USB-ED faculty were highly rated by the participants, there is a need for them to further customise their teaching material and specifically the examples they use to reinforce learning. There is need to inject more relevant practical examples. There was an emphasis on commercial and, in certain instances, American case studies that participants did not find relevant or useful. The greater **customisation** of the programme should explore examples and case studies that are relevant to the South African science system, and the nature of the NRF as a state-funded organisation.

Some reflection from the management team is that in the beginning things were quite generalised in the application of content. However, there were concerns about the customisation for a knowledge organisation. The space evolves each year, so how is the customisation evolving to keep up with this remains a challenge. Everyone comes to knowledge management from a different perspective. It is complex and what the course has struggled with for several years.

## Management Response 2

There is an acknowledgement that the programme is not as customised as it was purported to be, particularly around making the course content to be relevant to the South African science system, and the nature of the NRF as a state-funded organisation. It must however be noted that to customise a development programme to that extent could also prove quite expensive in monetary terms as well as very challenging in one-of-a-kind learning material development. The aim should be to develop broadly differentiated levels of work targeting programme, with a normal foundational management knowledge for each level but customised to the NRF environment through cases studies, assignments, targeted delivery by internal experts on certain NRF specific and significant areas of peculiarity/interest and specific modules targeting the understanding of the NSI and the NRF operating environment as a granting science system. The extent of customisation will be explored and defined for the next round of programmes.

### Finding and Recommendation 3

There is a need for consistency, a formalised process and transparency regarding the **selection of candidates** as well as transparency around the **contractual obligations**.

### Management Response 3

The rigid contractual agreement made a consistent selection process difficult. Deviating from the selection criteria has resulted from a desire to meet the minimum enrolment numbers or pay a higher fee per participant, resulting in exorbitant course costs. It will be ascertained that the annual pool of potential candidates and the planning, including ensuring that all potential candidates are duly enrolled for the programmes, to avoid having to make inconsistent adjustments aimed at meeting the programmes target numbers. It will also be ascertained that the contractual structure allows for sufficient flexibility by the service provider.

### Finding and Recommendation 4

Given the disparate nature of the various NRF divisions, there is a need for **team building interventions** and more effective **induction programmes** to help develop and foster a common understanding of the organisation. Most of the participants only developed a holistic view of the NRF during the programmes. The programmes should be building on this understanding that would have been created by induction and team building.

### Management Response 4

The request to reintroduce the Corporate Induction programme to address amongst other important organisational reasons, the above, has been submitted for the approval of the Corporate Executive. Upon approval, the Human Resources division will engage various stakeholders to ensure a wide-reaching programme that addresses wide ranging onboarding and induction matters. The ongoing development of the OneNRF approach will also strengthen the understanding and may as well be targeted as part of some of the development programmes content, as a form of enculturation to be considered for the programme customisation dimensions.

### Finding and Recommendation 5 - 7

Having invested time and money, the NRF needs to make better use of the **BDAL recommendations**. It is also important to close the loop by providing feedback to the project teams and informing them whether the NRF will be implementing their recommendations – or not. **Business Sponsors** also need to understand expectations of their roles upfront prior to engaging with students on the BDAL project. Finally, where USB-ED requires input from Business Sponsors into the BDAL topics, **responsiveness** is necessary.

Recurring aspects that should be considered regarding the viability of the programme:

Only a very few projects have been implemented and unless participants see more visible action around the project and acknowledgement of the people who have done the project work, they will lose credibility around the project. It doesn't need to be the whole project, maybe just some elements could be implemented. Sometimes the management of a facility takes one and runs with it but the rest of the NRF knows nothing about it. There needs to be more visibility about the projects and what is happening to them.

What remains a challenge for both the SMDP and the NMDP is/was the BDAL component of the programme. It is advised that the management consider if the SMDP could be capped due to its limited success in the number and nature of the BDAL projects in terms of implementation of projects. There is a level of frustration that such a huge amount of work has been done and is not used. Some participants believe that there is no strategy behind this. The USB-ED also had less control since the projects were controlled from the NRF's side. It is the USB-ED understanding that only a very few have been implemented and unless participants see more visible action around the project and acknowledgement of the people who have done the project work, they will lose credibility around the project. Unless sufficient funding is raised by the organisation, the SMDP and NMDP may not be viable programmes in the long term.

### **Management Response 5 - 7**

The department of Training and Organisational Development has compiled a list of all BDAL project topics for the last 5 - 7 years. This has aided in ensuring that no topics to be researched are duplicated, as well as assisting new syndicate groups in selecting some findings and recommendations from the topics where they were left off. While it is acknowledged that projects such as ERP, Employee Wellness, and so on were the result of MDP work, OneNRF was also a result of MDP work. Some people believe that the organisation took too long to find the OneNRF's building blocks because the recommendations made were not tested for adoption.

However, as the name implies, one of the primary goals of the BDAL project is to train participants in a process for developing creative solutions to complex problems faced by individuals, groups of people, and organisations. It instils confidence in participants and allows them to deal with team dynamics and interpersonal relationships. The primary goal of the development programme is to develop participants capability and competence. The projects are a spinoff which can be implemented dependent on the budget priorities and relevance and not all projects can be implemented at one go.

It is recommended that presentations that respond to strategic challenges and have value, be prioritised and allowed to be presented in forums other than the academic, mark-bearing process of the programme. These could be presented to MDs, Heads of Specific Functions, and, where applicable, Corporate Executives in order to garner the necessary attention and pave the way for piloting prior to implementation. If the proposed solutions meet the high-level requirements for implementation, the syndicate group that developed the project should be recognised and rewarded in ways that demonstrate appreciation and acknowledgement of the hard work put in.

Leadership at all levels, including business sponsors and coaches, should be seen to support these projects and give them the attention they require, otherwise, the organisation risks losing employees' interest in devoting their time to commitments such as enrolling in an MDP programme.

### **Finding and Recommendation 8**

The FMDP seems viable for its strength in introducing future managers to aspects of management. However, one of the challenges was if a participant fails 1 or 2 modules they cannot repeat the failed modules and must redo the entire programme. Some chose not to do so. It is suggested that the terms and conditions be revised. It is not clear and the rationale behind such a decision as institutions of higher learning do afford students an opportunity to write a supplementary exam or complete an assignment towards fulfilment and completion of the programme where 1 or 2 modules are concerned.

## Management Response 8

Since the current USB-ED programme is coming to an end after the 2023 Graduations, a tendering process to find a new service provider will ensure that this aspect is one of the course principles that will be addressed.

## Finding and Recommendation 9

It was noted by the panel and participants that the faculty teaching on the programmes does not sufficiently reflect the diversity of South Africa and the transformation requirement in science and academia in South Africa. Future reviews of the programme must include this factor into design and delivery.

## Management Response 9

The new service provider must not only win the tender on relevant tendering points, but it must also commit to a diverse pool of facilitators and lecturers. This, however, is not under the NRF's control and must be handled by the bidding institutions and their academic staff at the time of programme launch.

## Conclusion

Overall, it was evident from the interviews that the participants had a more positive appreciation of modules that relate to soft skills than the core functions within the NRF. The training component that is customised efficiently remains a concern at all levels of the MDP programme. The hard-core part of the programme may be left to the on-the-job training (i.e. Induction and Orientation programme) within the organisation for now. This is because the NRF may understand its daily operational and strategic intent more than an outsider could do.

The current USB-ED MDP programme is in its final year, and during the course of 2023, the organisation will source a new service provider to provide a revised management development programme that will address all of the concerns raised in the current, departing programme.



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