

**An Independent Review of the Customised Management
Development Programme for the National Research
Foundation covering the Period 2017 to 2021.**

17th– 20th October 2022

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BDAL	Business Driven Action Learning Projects
FMDP	Future Managers Development Programme
LPF	Learning Process Facilitator
MDP	Management Development Program
NMDP	New to Management Development Programme
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NRF	National Research Foundation
SMDP	Strategic Management Development Programme
ToR	Terms of Reference
USB-ED	University of Stellenbosch Business School Executive Education Division

Review Panel

Convener: Prof Frans Maloa



Date: 11/ 01/ 2023

Review panel members:



Prof Albert Wocke

Date: 11/01/2023



Dr Henriëtte Van den Berg

Date: 11/01/2023



Prof Martin Oosthuizen

Date: 17/01/2023

1. Introduction and Context

The NRF undertook a review of the Management Development Programme (MDP), following a five (5) years contract with the University of Stellenbosch's Business School (USB), through its Executive Education division (USB-ED) for the delivery of three levels of the Management Development Programme (MDP). The three levels of the MDP are the Strategic Management Development Programme (SMDP), the New to Management Development Programme (NMDP) and the Future Managers' Development Programme (FMDP). The aim of the review is primarily to determine how effective the programme in its three tiers (SMDP, NMDP & FMDP) has been since its implementation from 2017 until 2021 (2020 exempted).

2. The Review Panel

Having come to the end of the 5-year contract period, the NRF initiated an independent process to review the three programmes offered by the USB-ED. To that end, an independent panel was assembled, consisting of the following members:

Convenor: Prof Frans Maloa (UNISA) (FM)

Review panel members:

- Prof Albert Wocke (Gordon Institute of Business Science: University of Pretoria) (AW)
- Dr Henriëtte Van den Berg (University of the Free State) (HvB)
- Prof Martin Oosthuizen (Southern African Regional Universities Association) (MO)

Scribe: Dr Margaret Steyn (independent) Noteworthy

3. Objectives and Scope of the Review

In terms of the Terms of Reference (ToR), the review panel was mandated to achieve the following:

- ✓ Provide a retrospective view on the success of the NRF Management Development Programmes both in terms of course content and its implementation by the USB-ED and the NRF HR Department against the objectives of the Programme, i.e.:
 - To establish a programme that is relevant to core and current business objectives and activities of the NRF, within a national and global context;
 - To strengthen the NRF's competence in people management, organisational transformation, diversity and change management as well as stakeholder relations;
 - To facilitate and promote the sharing of management and leadership knowledge and best practices, and the application and integration of best practice management and leadership principles in the work environment;
 - To facilitate the realisation of the aspirations of the NRF as contained in its vision and shared values

- ✓ Assess the benefits of the Programme to the NRF as well as the beneficiaries of the Programme;
- ✓ Provide recommendations to improve:
 - The contents of the training provided by the service provider with reference to the programme structure;
 - The implementation/administration of the Programme by the service provider and the support provided to the beneficiaries;
 - The NRF HR's part in the administration/implementation of the Programme.

4. The Review Approach

The standard review approach followed during the last review of the MDP program for 2013 – 2015 review was adopted in the 2022 review. In terms of approach, there was a reliance on primary sources of information gathered through a series of stakeholder interviews. Questions were framed to probe into the specific focus areas outlined in the Terms of Reference for the review panel. Representative groups of interviewees were selected and assembled by the NRF and validated by the review panel (See Annexure 1 for the schedule of interviews). The panel coded each interviewee group and then, next to each set of questions placed the number of the interviewee group that would be asked those questions. To the extent possible, the panel attempted to triangulate by posing the same question to different stakeholders in order to validate responses and/or determine gaps.

The panel also reviewed extensive documentation provided by the NRF as well as material from the USB-ED. Between the primary interviews and the documents, it was possible for the panel to arrive at an understanding of what the programmes had achieved thus far but also to frame recommendations regarding how the NRF could derive more value from these programmes.

PS. The agenda was adapted slightly due to the rearrangement and availability of participants. The original agenda is attached as well as Annexure 2.

5. Structure of the Report

The report is structured as follows: firstly, an overview of the benefits of the SMDP, the NMDP and the FMDP to the beneficiaries and to the NRF is presented. This is then followed by a presentation of the findings and recommendations organised in terms of the key themes that were explored in the interviews:

- Relevance and Customised Design
- Selection Criteria and Process
- Programme Delivery and Faculty
- Administration (USB and NRF)
- Embedding the Learning
- Support System (Moodle, Coaches, Business Sponsors, Mentors, Learning Process Facilitators)
- The Business-Driven Action Learning Project (BDAL)

Each section is structured to discuss both findings and recommendations within each of the above sections relating to a particular theme. For example, the findings and recommendations relating to the BDAL will be presented under the section "The BDAL."

Finally, in the Overall Recommendations section, “strategic” recommendations are presented regarding how the NRF should proceed with the SMDP, the NMDP and the FMDP. These strategic recommendations may or may not duplicate those recommendations presented in the various thematic sections dealing with various aspects of programme design and delivery. These strategic recommendations were deemed to be those, which if addressed appropriately, would make the most difference to the programmes and to the experiences of the participants – to the benefit of the NRF.

6. Overview of the MDP Programmes

The MDP programmes were offered by the USB at three levels: the Strategic Management Development Programme (SMDP), the New to Management Development Programme (NMDP), and the Future Managers Development Programme (FMDP). The SMDP equates to an NQF Level 7 and the NMDP, NQF Level 6 and FMDP to NQF Level 5. The SMDP was targeted towards senior managers across the NRF. The NMDP was targeted for new and developing middle managers across the NRF. The FMDP was targeted to future managers across the NRF which include supervisors, entry level managers or potential managers.

As stated by the assignment principal (HR Executive & Legal Services),

these programmes were introduced to prepare a leadership pipeline for the various categories or levels of leadership, specifically the three levels of leadership. There is a challenge due to the scarcity of ready leaders, especially in the science environment, and it has been the objective for the leadership development programmes to address this challenge. Even in the sciences, especially in critical and support function roles, we find that there is a dearth of leadership, and the aim of this programme is to prepare the NRF pipeline of leadership. They also support our succession planning process. All people with leadership potential are allowed to enter the programme. The programmes are customised to focus the participants into projects that would be of benefit for the NRF and to resolve real problems and work-related challenges that the NRF might be facing.

7. An Assessment of the Benefits of the MDP Programmes to the Beneficiaries and to the NRF

According to the representatives of the NRF, the organisation has people who have the skills for the job but lack leadership skills and therefore, the MDP programmes were implemented to equip staff members with leadership skills and to assist with identifying potential suitable successors for the succession planning in the organisation.

Since the inception of the MDP program within NRF, the newly redesigned program arranged into three tiers received mixed reactions from participants as related in detail in other parts of the report.

In terms of content and relevance - and the delivery by the faculty, the three programs had different outcomes for participants. The programmes gave participants tools to improve their leadership skills and form well-functioning teams. It familiarises them with the concepts of leadership, especially understanding themselves and how to deal with other people at different levels. Overall, the personal impact of the development programme was highly beneficial and allowed participants to grow in confidence and a willingness to step up to tasks.

However, the impact on the professional skills relevant to the specific jobs of candidates were less pronounced. Some competencies were achieved well but specific NRF skills could be built.

The following comments discuss the benefits of the programmes to the beneficiaries and the NRF, based on the interviews and review documentation such as the USB-ED close-out reports.

- ✓ Creating a shared understanding of the NRF: Due to the distributed nature of the NRF across various major divisions and geographical areas, staff members often lack a holistic and integrated understanding of the organisation. Whereas in the past staff members may have attended different leadership and management development programmes, participation in a common programme that makes use of a group facilitation model (SMDP, NMDP or FMDP) allows potential NRF managers to develop a common or shared language in two senses:
 - A shared understanding or language concerning the opportunities and challenges facing the NRF; and
 - An understanding of the interrelationships between the different parts or business units of the NRF.
- The NRF faces challenges of sustainability and is moving into an area where the structure of the NRF can fund more and revenue is declining in real terms from government. There needs to be creative ways of looking at NRF partnerships and ways to secure more revenue to reach the sort of impact that the NRF could make.
- ✓ Developing a management perspective: Many staff members are highly trained specialists, but they have little experience of management or understanding of management theories, principles and processes. The three programmes helped them to develop this perspective, so that they can view their work and role from a broader, more generalist management perspective, with a strong focus on practical application. Thus, many participants commented that they were able to understand their role, section and the NRF from a different perspective – seeing how their work fits into the larger scheme of the NRF’s strategic direction and business objectives.
- ✓ Development of management competence: In all the interviews, participants indicated that they gained a clearer understanding of essential business concepts and processes such as people, financial and supply change management, and their impact on the work of their division (staff needs, budgeting, acquisition of equipment etc.). Important competencies that were referred to in the interviews are the following:
 - People management and teamwork: Most of the participants agreed that they have little experience or skills in people management and that one of the most valuable aspects of the programme is the opportunity to develop these skills. The constitution of diverse groups, especially by means of the syndicate groups, requires that the participants learn to work with diverse people. However, as is remarked in the discussion of the BDAL later in the report, the groups need to be taught team building and group dynamics early in the programme in order to benefit from this exposure to group diversity in an optimal manner. One of the senior management members also expected a greater level of skills transfer from the personal mastery module to the behaviour of candidates in the workplace, especially with regard to the ability to communicate effectively and to apply conflict management within teams.

- Business case development: Participants learned how to develop and present a business case for their projects, understanding the importance of stakeholder management, and also knowing how to follow a structured process in terms of assessing the potential of a project in terms of the external and internal environment, and its possible contribution to the NRF.
 - Self-awareness: The programmes developed self-awareness and an understanding of their management style and problem-solving approach amongst participants, helping them to understand their strengths and weakness, their development needs, and the contribution that colleagues with different style and approaches make to teamwork.
 - Stakeholder management: Participants enhanced their ability to relate to stakeholders (internal and external) more effectively, in ways that will build lasting relationships between the NRF and the communities that it serves.
 - Critical capacity: Participants developed the ability to evaluate how consistently management principles and procedures are applied in the NRF and, particularly, in their divisions and sections.
- ✓ Retention and succession planning: During interviews with members of management, reference was made to the challenge that the NRF faces in retaining talented staff. The programmes contribute to retention by identifying potential future leaders, providing them with opportunities for career development, and a structured framework for engaging with senior leadership. However, it was mentioned by one of the executive team managers during the interview that NRF should be transparent in the discussion and implementation of the succession plans.
 - ✓ Contribution to NRF Planning: The design of the programmes, with their strong focus on syndicate learning, especially through the Business-Driven Action Learning Project (BDAL), provides participants with the opportunity to focus on specific challenges facing the NRF, and to make proposals that can be of value to the NRF. This has the potential of creating or promoting critical awareness amongst participants of how the NRF can contribute to the realisation of national developmental goals as set out in the NDP, and particularly to the NSI.

However, while the programmes provide clear benefits to the NRF and participants, the interviews indicated that they have not achieved their full potential. There are various possible reasons for this, a number of which are dealt with in greater detail under the findings and recommendations.

8. Findings and Recommendations

8.1. Relevance and Customised Design

The challenge with all organisational specific programmes is to find the appropriate balance between theory that is required to master the skills and knowledge in the respective field/discipline but customise the content sufficiently to the NRF requirements in the short-term. Too much customisation limits the theoretical content, and too little customisation leads to participants experiencing the content of the modules as unrelated to their organisation. An additional consideration in customisation to the NRF requirements is the correct mix of modules that are generic/standard for a management course, and those modules that are more functional and therefore skills-based. Findings in the MDP programmes cover each program.

There is great appreciation of the impact of the programmes. To most participants the programmes were of great value and fundamental to their growth.

8.1.2. FMDP

8.1.2.1 Positive aspects

The FMDP attendants appreciated exposure and knowledge and application of management concepts. Although the program did not clarify participants role and function NRF wide, as it covers so many topics, but the program assisted them in applying everything they learnt in the team. They found the program to facilitate self-development and to assist participants to adapt to the new knowledge acquired. Participants also liked the role reversal as it gave them a picture to work on better leadership skills. Operations and Project Management, the leadership management module, and the communication module were found to be the most relevant modules and participants enjoyed the assignments.

8.1.3 NMDP & SMDP

8.1.3.1 Positive aspects

The SMDP and NMDP programmes, on the other hand, have assisted participant to reflect on their insights and understanding of the business. Feedback from one of the executive managers reflected and mentioned that a mark in success is when participants realise a shift in their mentality, a change in thinking that drives participant's performance and how the learning is applied back to the business. Participants felt that the programmes were well organised, involved a lot of work, and were stretched out of their comfort zone. Participants were impressed at the focus on personal growth of the program. They believed that those that put energy into personal growth became better managers and contributed to good working environment. Some participants recommended that the course be made a compulsory course for all managers to attend. Participants believed that the skills they learnt were quite modern and they continue to implement them in the NRF which they find to be quite old fashioned in approach.

More of the positive feedback derived from the interviews included the following.

- The action learning project for the SMDP and the NMDP programmes were perceived as hugely beneficial and forced participants to work with colleagues across the organisation which they otherwise would probably not even have met.
- Just from the conversations participants learnt different perspectives and how different business units function within the organisation.
- Participants received a comprehensive list of suggested projects which guided them although some changed as the projects advanced.

However, there were also some short comings experienced in the programmes.

- There seem to have been a few challenges with the naming convention of the SMDP programme. According to one of the participants, the NRF called it Strategic, and Stellenbosch called it Senior Management Training program at the inception of the program. The 'development' aspect in the naming convention was not consistent when it was first introduced to employees at the application to attend training and during the training. However, feedback from the USB confirmed that the program was registered as the Strategic Management Development Programme.

- There were also concerns around what the program intended to achieve. There is an issue of managing expectations around the purpose of the program. Participants raised concerns as to what extent is the program a coaching program focused on personal development within the NRF, 'the more it moves into that, the less it becomes learning that could be articulated'. Participants felt that the focus of the training needed to be spelt out clearly to participants. Participants believed that the organisation should have been upfront about it and the aims.
- Common to all the programmes at all levels was that the content was not customised efficiently. Although they all shared insight, knowledge and application of leadership and management skills at various levels of their offering, they were nonetheless not attuned and contextualised to the NRF sector and environment. NRF is considered a higher education institution and function in the knowledge area and want participants to receive the best. It is believed the program doesn't take them out to experience, it is found within the NRF, it does give them a broader landscape than that which is provided by their immediate work. Perhaps the next iteration should have smaller numbers and move towards that experience. Customise but locating them within the global market, especially for senior managers.

The following modules were not well received:

- The finance course was not tailor made and included a lot of irrelevant work. The peculiarities of the NRF could have been strengthened. The financial strategies of the course even if it did contain more private sector indicators could have been made more relevant to the NRF. Having a broader understanding of things globally would have made it more relevant, looking at funding organisations elsewhere. The financial module could have been simpler for people who are not involved in finance. Some participants believed Financials should be based at basic budget level and for project management. 'Everyone does a budget, but the people you work with and what you do should be taken into consideration so just the basics should be included'.
- The research module was experienced as too academic with little practical application.
- The programmes should have included some benchmarking with other international granting organisations; this is something that could be added to the program. Contextualising the work of the NRF as important research development organisation on the African continent can also add value to the broader understanding of the work of the NRF.
- In addition, the SMDP and NMDP programmes should have covered more content on transformation diversity and on equipping people skills to deal with awkward (challenging) situations. There should have been more toolkit or coping tools provided, especially with topics such as gender bias and racism. Changes recommended by management to the program to increase impact.

8.2. Selection Criteria and Process

There is a need for clarity and consistency with respect to the selection of candidates for participation in the programme. The *MDP Framework Document and Selection criteria* and the *MDP call for nominations 2020* contained limited selection criteria. Essentially, they set out broad recommendations on participation in terms of considerations such as the needs of the business units, the feasibility of the employee participating in terms of the operational needs of units, the availability of the employee, endorsement by their line manager, and the diversity of the group profile. To a large extent these participation criteria are operational considerations, which do have an impact on the selection process, but they are not explicit enough to provide an adequate outline of the selection criteria. During the interviews, most of the programme participants and some managers remarked that they are unclear about the selection criteria, with some commenting that they were informed that it is based on factors such as their performance, their potential as future leaders and the business needs of their units, while others stated their understanding that all “managers” would receive a turn to participate. Some Participants were recruited or nominated by management because they were in the succession planning. While others were self-nominated. Another participant was initially signed up and was supposed to attend the NMPD and was given the FMDP due to age. Some managers commented that selection is not aligned with performance management and succession planning.

In the panel’s view, the fact that the contract with USB-ED commits the NRF to achieving certain participation targets on an annual basis, may impact on the perceived inconsistency in the selection process. Before dealing with specific points, the reports notes that during the interviews, it seemed as if there was a lack of clarity amongst some interviewees as to how the original minimum participation numbers were arrived at, and that there may have been a misconception that the programme was an open programme for those that were available. The panel does note that the Programme Arrangement Documents, as signed by both parties, do specify the minimum participants for each programme. The issue here may be that there was not sufficient consultation, within the NRF and/ or between the NRF and USB-ED, as to realistic participation targets for each programme.

Given the obligation to meet minimum participation targets, the panel notes the following challenge:

- The HR Department at the NRF has struggled to meet the minimum participant numbers. In one year the SMDP only had 8 participants and could not get to the required number of 15 minimum participants, and then had to pay more per person. As a result, at times the organisation had to renegotiate with USB because it could not reach the agreed targets for the programmes. This has been one of the biggest challenges of the programme.

- A more plausible reason is that at a certain point a programme of this nature, and especially the programme tiers that are aimed a senior manager, may reach a saturation point. This is particularly the cases for a relatively small organisation such as the NRF. The panel noted that experience of similar management development programmes suggests that after a programme has been presented (taking into cognisance the number of senior managers in the organisation) most of the suitable senior management candidates will have attended. The implication is that the NRF may run out of a sufficient cohort of suitable people to place on the programme.

The panel makes the following recommendation on participation targets, based on the interview feedback:

- The NRF should consider differentiating between its approach to the provision of the various levels of the programme. There are many entities at the NRF that are in a growth phase with new managers. Thus, there may justification to present the entry-level programme (FMDP) on a more frequent, even annual basis. At the higher levels of the programme, it may be more appropriate to present the programme on a less frequent basis. At all costs, the panel advises against placing staff members into a programme that they are not ready for.

Turning more specifically to the issue of selection criteria, due to the lack of clarity with respect to the selection criteria, the recruitment process in practice is varied. Some executives and line managers follow a strategic process in the nomination of candidates taking into account considerations such as the diversity profile of the programme group and the representation of different business units. However, in other cases the nomination process seems to be quite arbitrary. A recurring theme in many of the interviews with previous participants was uncertainty about the reasons for their selection, and the possible outcomes of their participation. While staff members have the option to accept or decline the nomination, the expectations that they and their line managers have for their participation are not articulated clearly. Clearly, the managers who make the nominations need to brief the candidates about their expectations for their participation in the programme. It should be noted, though, that participants generally do not expect to be promoted because of their participation in the programme and are realistic about the possibilities for their career advancement, confirming their understanding that the primary reason for participating in the programme is to equip them with skills to perform their jobs better.

Another consequence of the uncertainty relating to the selection process, to which repeated references were made during the interviews, is that there is a lack of consistency in the selection of participants to the NMDP and the SMDP with some staff being placed in the wrong programme, or being required to participate, leading to cases of participants being out of their depth, bored with the course content or, at least initially, lacking the motivation to participate. Furthermore, there are staff members who would have benefitted from the programme but were not selected.

In light of the above observations, the following recommendations are presented:

- The panel recommends that the NRF develops explicit selection criteria that address aspects such as the following:
 - Leadership competencies: As future leaders, participants in the programme should be expected to display qualities that are commensurate with the competencies that the NRF expects of its

leaders. This means that the NRF should be clear on its desired leadership competencies, which should correlate with its values statement. Based on these competencies, the qualities that potential participants in the programme should exhibit should be articulated, taking into account qualities such as the following:

- Purpose – ability to articulate a vision and goals for personal development and the development of the NRF and/ or their section.
- Motivation – the desire to play a leadership role.
- Confidence – the belief that they are able to make a difference.
- Centeredness – the ability to focus on projects, and to manage themselves.

While the programmes may help participants to develop such qualities, they are unlikely to have an effect if the participants who are selected but do not exhibit such qualities to an adequate extent.

- . Track record: Candidates' performance and work experience can be used to assess the extent to which they display the required leadership qualities and are at a stage of their development where they can benefit optimally from the programme. In terms of leadership qualities, their track record also provides important insight into their strategic insight, problem-solving capabilities, and relationship to colleagues.
- . NRF priorities: The NRF's strategic direction, its strategic goals, the types of competences and skills that it needs to achieve, the staffing needs in specific divisions and sections, as well as its desired organisational culture and diversity profile, are also important considerations in guiding the selection of candidates.
- Pre-assessment process that includes profiling of incumbents should be part of the programme, and possibly should become a formal part of the selection process. The USB-ED does not do pre-assessment, as this is the responsibility of the NRF. A proper pre-assessment, with appropriate feedback to the participants, will provide a foundation from which they can start working and start developing their capabilities and capacity.

8.3. Programme Delivery and Faculty

From a delivery perspective, the USB-ED faculty were highly regarded by the programme participants. There was general consensus that the faculty were outstanding and came across as knowledgeable experts in their respective fields. Faculty members were seen as facilitators of conversations not as lecturers.

USB-ED reiterated their commitment to quality which manifests in a number of ways. For example, the USB-ED Learning Process Facilitator engages with programme participants "in the moment" to assess quality of faculty and demonstrated a preparedness to remove faculty members from the programme where complaints were registered by participants.

The USB also produces a report, for the NRF, following each study school with feedback on the participants themselves in terms of their participation, concentration levels and engagement.

The structure of delivery in the form of study schools was deemed appropriate. The assignments are not academic they are practical. The assignments test their leadership, management, insight and ability. Participants required to do something practical in the business. There is a feedback loop which facilitates feedback on the assignments, personal insight and what participants will do going forward.

However, the faculty members could benefit from guest lectures by more diverse presenters, including presenters with PhD qualifications especially in modules such as research management and the research module. Inviting senior executives of the NRF to present guest lectures in relevant modules can enrich the programme and increase the customisation of the course content. This might also address the feedback that the research module is too academic and of little practical use in the workplace. USB facilitators with more practical research experience might assist to increase the practical applicability of the content. Including facilitators with a PhD can strengthen the impact of the programme.

8.4. Administration (USB-ED and NRF)

In terms of the administrative aspects of the programmes, the USB-ED was rated highly. They were perceived to be responsive and the logistics around programme delivery were well organised. The USB's dedicated resource for logistics and administration was perceived to support participants appropriately. Participants also had access to the administrator via emails and cell phone. There was consensus that the USB faculty members are accessible and supportive. At the end of each study school, participants are invited to evaluate the logistics and experience and comments are generally very positive.

It was evident, though, that there were a number of shortfalls, administratively, on the part of the NRF. Whilst the issues discussed below fall under other headings, it was felt that they are not "substantive" and are merely administrative issues that can be addressed with more efficient administrative processes. USB-ED staff discussed regular feedback to the NRF representatives, but the feedback is generic and not specific enough to give feedback to line managers of participating candidates. Line managers of candidates mentioned in the interviews that they would prefer more feedback about the progress of candidates. The flow of feedback from USB-ED to the line managers of candidates can be enhanced by clarifying the nature of feedback required and the communication channels that will be used to provide feedback.

These include:

The Training facilities for both the SMDP and the NMDP before they were offered online.

- The organisation of in-person contact sessions could have been organised better, such as holding them in Pretoria, which is where most participants are located. However, it was easier when participants went away, and then no expectation of office work existed, unlike now while it is online. Some participants felt that maybe online work without being away from work creates an extra level of stress, which makes it unreasonable.
- The one-on-one session between participants and their coaches, intended to take place a year after participants had completed the programme, did not take place.
- Sessions took place with the participants and the USB
- The Coaching Council is a platform for the NRF coaches but not enough NRF coaches participate.
- Feedback on assignment topics for the BDAL is not always forthcoming from the NRF and delays are experienced

It is therefore recommended that:

- ✓ The NRF needs to ensure that the NRF leadership 'comes to the party' and responds, for example, to BDAL requests in a timely manner
- ✓ The NRF ensures that the one-on-one session between coaches and participants takes place a year after the participants complete the programme.

- ✓ The NRF impresses upon its leadership to attend the Coaching Council meetings.

Finally, the review panel's engagement with the NRF's Reviews and Evaluations team was an extremely positive one. The administration of the review process was well handled with interviews schedule and documentation provided well in advance of the review process itself.

8.5. Embedding the Learning

On a general level, the NRF should have and communicate a clear understanding of the value proposition of the programmes, so that their contribution to the NRF's strategic objectives is explicitly understood and endorsed by the executive leadership. This is an important pre-condition for other more specific strategies for embedding the learning from the programmes. In other words, in order to measure the impact of the programmes, their objectives and learning outcomes need to be stated more specifically. Reference to objectives such as raising the level of management expertise and dealing with diversity problems are too vague to allow for the assessment of the programme's impact.

For NRF to obtain value from the programmes, it is critical to purposively monitor their impact in terms of the extent to which the learning is being embedded within the organisation. However, it seems that some of the recommendations from the previous review were implemented. This required that the programmes be integrated into human resource planning and implementation, in terms of personal development planning and performance management.

On the whole the evidence from the interviews suggests that the NRF has not adopted some of the recommendations from the previous review, specifically the feedback and implementation of the projects derived from the BDAL component of the program. There has been some level of the integration of the learning from the programme into personal development planning and the performance management system. Thus, there is a broad belief that the programmes are adding value, with the leadership often remarking during the interviews that they could see positive changes in the participants (though some were not as convinced about the positive impact of the programme), and participants pointing to changes to the way in which they interact with colleagues and manage teams. But the evidence is anecdotal. There is no formal system or process to promote the integration of learning into employees' performance and development plans.

However, beyond the level of individual development, the NRF is not realising the full potential of the programmes to contribute to organisational learning, in terms of opportunities to consider and implement proposals from BDAL assignments. In general, participants were disappointed by the level of feedback that they received in terms of the possibilities for applying their work within the NRF. There should at least be communication with programme participants and the NRF in general, around the process for considering the insights and recommendations from BDAL projects, so that the NRF Exec may indicate what they have found useful and what could be take forward. The discussion in the section on the BDAL elaborates on this matter.

8.6. Support System (Moodle, Coaches, Business Sponsors, Mentoring & Learning Process Facilitators)

Consistent with the findings of the previous review of the NMDP and MDP, the participants were enthusiastic about the support provided by the Learning Process Facilitators on both programmes. The LPFs

were critical for the success of the programmes and provided invaluable support in both formal and informal ways to support the learning.

The overall administrative support provided by the USB was good and also contributed to the success of the programmes. However, the following areas presented some challenges especially for the FMDP programme:

- Learning Management System
- ✓ The on-line support system Moodle had mixed results and although it functioned well for limited roles such as downloading assignments, it was difficult to navigate and not user friendly. Programmes such as Moodle have the capability to enhance and support blended-learning approaches through on-line discussions and faculty interactions. Such approaches are useful in increasing the notional hours of a programme and enabling higher learning in the classroom context when participants have already completed the fundamental theory online.

Some of the specific challenges for the FMDP program included the following,

- Participants were not able to download and save electronic content. Since some content was not downloadable, it meant one had to be always somewhere where they could connect to the internet.
- The workbooks were pdf and did not provide background.

The proposed use of coaches

- ✓ The proposed use of coaches to support the participants caused a degree of confusion about the objectives of their roles. The design of the programme called for immediate managers to assume the role of workplace coaches for the participants. The panel believed that this approach was incorrect as the role that was described was more of a mentoring role and that mentorships work best when the mentor is not directly supervising the employee. An additional concern was the lack of preparation and support given to the managers that had assumed the coaching roles. The combination of role confusion and lack of support meant that the coaching component of the programmes was largely neglected.
- ✓ Participants generally all agreed that they did not receive sufficient support from their units when they were on the programme. There was a universal desire to see the workload adjusted for the duration of the programmes to support the participants. The panel felt that this is an area for further consideration but with the understanding that pressure is an integral part of the learning process of management programmes.

8.7. The BDAL

The Business-Driven Action Learning Project (BDAL) was a core component of both the NMDP and the SMDP. The BDAL was intended as the main customisation component of the respective programmes. It was also intended to teach the participants team dynamics. However, the review panel felt that the BDAL achieved some success but also failed to achieve some of its intended outcomes in other areas. The positive components of the BDAL were that Several projects undertaken as part of the group assignment have been practical for both individuals and the organisation.

Many participants who were interviewed expressed their sense of pride and accomplishment in the outcomes their group achieved, more so if the BDAL proposals were implemented.

Positive comments on the Business-Drive Action Learning (BDAL) Projects:

- Mostly, apart from some individual cases where a project has dug into a practical issue such as leave management, they are related to one of the core NRF organising frameworks of the transformation impacts of excellence and sustainability and the organisation they want to be.
- There is a general appreciation that people who have been on the BDAL projects teams and who came from different units have established good contacts which have proved useful later in other projects. As a result of such contact and networking of individuals within the groups, projects have been executed successfully. There are many small examples of facilitation of cross business unit communication.
- For the last three years the organisation has been deploying an enterprise resource planning system which rose from a group who made a practical recommendation to that effect.
- SAEON has been the recipient of major infrastructure funding and SAIAB was a partner in that. One of the new managers attended the course, and was able to improve their business language, strategic thinking and was able to develop a successful proposal.
- The organisation has had many proposals from the participants, such as the Wellness Programme. For those who need it, there is a better environment than there was before. Another successful project was the One NRF.

However, there were also some short comings experienced in the program.

- There was a general feeling that although many projects have been good, more projects need to be integrated into the practice. However, the implementation of projects tends to be ad-hoc, some are useful while others are not. A more structured and strategic way of thinking and what the projects would be would help.
- Participants believe that better feedback from the NRF would be of benefit to themselves and to the organisation. Some participants claim that they received little feedback from senior executive management. Participants expressed the need for EXCO to see more of the analysis of what is happening for the whole organisation within the BDAL projects, and also find out from participants on their recommendations for how the findings of the projects could have a beneficial impact on the organisation – in other words, what they would like to see more of and what would help them. There were many good projects that were put together by enthusiastic people that could have kick started something into the organisation in a more formal way but did not. According to some participants, the project outcomes could have been better leveraged and put into action. Some participants mentioned that they did a project on mental health, their survey group produced strong evidence as well as literature to support the findings which showed it was necessary and would have given a tenfold return on investment. However, as the group presented at the end, no-one from top executive management attended the meeting.

- More responsiveness to the projects would be appreciated as well as greater interaction from the sponsors. Sometimes participants delved into a project that needed to be ‘shoehorned’ into specific categories. More input and engagement could have been provided by the sponsors that would have benefitted some of the projects.
- Some participants do complain that not all projects were taken on board and that they do not know why this is the case. The panel does understand that it is not always possible to take them on board, predominantly because of finances.
- Communication within the organisation with regards to the execution of the projects could have been improved. There was a concern that the coordination of requests within the NRF for surveys and information capturing was disjointed. Such requests may have received more constructive responses, if there had been a general communication within the NRF that informed staff on the intention of the information requests.
- As useful as the projects are that candidates work on, at the moment they focus more on administration support roles. Senior managers expressed the wish that more projects or proposals address issues related to the NRF as a granting entity, which includes impact assessments. The value of the BDAL projects will be optimised if it can address issues such as NRF partnerships and the sustainability of the NRF as a granting agency.

The panel came to the following conclusions with regards to the BDAL process:

- ✓ The value of action learning is greatest when both the organisation and the participants benefit. However, the NRF and USB need to decide whether the primary outcome is a solution to NRF challenges, or whether the primary objective is the achievement of learning outcomes for participants. Both are possible but there needs to be an emphasis placed on either of the outcomes, not both. An emphasis on solutions is most suitable for more senior managers or those managers that are shortly to undertake more strategic roles, while an emphasis on learning the action learning techniques is more suitable for new managers that require team working and networking skills. The evaluation of the BDAL projects needs to reflect this emphasis.
- ✓ The selection of topics for the BDAL projects should be more focussed if the outcome is an implementable proposal for the NRF and this should be carefully considered for the senior/experienced manager programme.
- The key is the integration of the overall project. One of the executive management participants mentioned that they were not convinced that the projects were drawing on the expertise of the overall management of the NRF, many have their own strengths. Maybe integration between the business units needs more work to break down barriers.

8.8. Assessments and Feedback

With respect to the validity of the assessment process, the learning process facilitator from the USB-ED confirmed that use is made of an assessment rubric for both the individual assignment and the BDAL – and

that both of these assessment guidelines are included in the briefing document which is handed to the participants at orientation. Faculty discuss the criteria and outcomes for the assignments in detail during the study schools, and faculty are responsible for marking the assignments for which they are responsible, with faculty working together to set the topics for integrated individual assignments.

The module evaluation forms provide for feedback on the clarity of the assignment requirements and the fairness of the requirements in relation to the programme objectives.

Many participants expressed concern about the rule that a participant who fails one or two modules has to repeat all the modules of the programme. From a pedagogical perspective it does not make sense that learning that were successful should be repeated unless the content of the module changes significantly (which is clearly not the case).

Some participants chose not to repeat the course and then have to repay the NRF according to their contractual agreement. 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 to write a supplementary exam or afforded an opportunity to complete an assignment towards completion of the program where 1 or 2 modules are concerned, or recognise the modules passed as completed modules.

The BDAL assessment rubric is based on the BDAL structure to ensure that the business-driven action learning methodology has been achieved. The assessment of the BDAL is based on the following:

- ✓ 70% of the mark is for the formal academic document which is marked by USB-ED
- ✓ 30% is based on the presentation to panel

The panel is made up of both USB-ED members and NRF executives, who are briefed on the presentation criteria upfront. The criteria are made available to the participants before the final presentations so that they can prepare appropriately. They cover:

- Use of multimedia,
- Flow and logic,
- Application of business models,
- Presentation approach;
- Team cohesion and,
- The potential application within the NRF.

Feedback from the USB-ED faculty on assignments was provided on time – in terms of the SLA, 2 weeks after submission – however, the feedback was not always considered to be useful. It was also observed by the panel that there is a lack of spread of marks and that marks are concentrated in the 70s range. In attempting to offer an explanation for this, it was suggested that this was due to the assistance, high levels of support for the participants, the structured approach to the assignments and, generally, a high calibre of students as all participants have a reasonable level of education and in some cases, PhDs. However, on the basis of those same arguments, it can also be argued that students should have achieved even higher marks.

The following recommendations are being forwarded:

- USB to provide more detailed and meaningful feedback and suggestions on how the assignments could have been improved.
- USB to utilise the full range of marks
- USB to consider external moderation of marks

9. Overall findings and developing themes

9.1. Customisation

There seems to be a disconnect between the MDP programmes and the core business objectives of the NRF.

1. There is limited number of proposed and Identified projects through the BDAL that were implemented to realise the core function of the NRF. For example, projects that have been recognized and achieved some levels of success include the soft skill project such the Employee Wellness project.
2. The identified projects seem to exist parallel to the daily operational activities of the NRF. As a result, participants experience the need to expand extra effort and time investment separate them from their daily operational duties. It would have been ideal that projects were directly linked to what incumbents were doing on a daily basis to realise customisation and immediate impact.
3. The projects seem to be an additional cost to the NRF since budgetary concerns have been raised by management for implementation of some projects proposed through the BDAL group project assignment.
4. The individual assignments that have more positive feedback from participants were those that improved soft skills especially within the SMDP and the NMDP. Some of the technical modules that are supposed to link to the core function of the NRF for example, the Research management module were not at the expected standard. The financial management module seems not aligned to the core function of the NRF. It is more of a generic and not attuned to the strategic and operational activities of the NRF.

9.2. Quality Assurance

- According to the USB-ED management, the international accreditation of the business school is one of the best in the country. The USB-ED applies and refer to international accreditation of the Business school's wide accreditation bodies as a reference to the quality of the tuition offered. However, it is not clear what specific measures and benchmark criteria are relevant to the customised programmes developed and implemented for the NRF.
- Participants in the program expressed concerns about articulation to a university qualification as an incentive to completing a year's study. Although as per the SLA between the parties (USB-ED and NRF) the MDP programmes are meant for the organisation, there is nonetheless a growing concern that skills and competencies gained are not necessarily transferable/articulated outside the organisation. The question remains whether the participants who commit a large amount of time and energy to complete the programme, and commit to pay back the course fees to the NRF if they leave before the end of the workback period, at least deserve an accredited qualification that build their CV's and articulate to further training opportunities especially in the light of the national priority placed on articulation of learning and development opportunities according to the Draft

articulation policy of the Department of Higher Education and Training.

- Besides there is a concern that for a lot of colleagues, the program is an event and does not build a continuation or encourage sessions with other colleagues stimulating a continuous process.
- There is no annual report on the training that occurred.

9.3. Uncertainty in Selection criteria and sustainability of student participation

- The selection criteria is not sustainable in guaranteeing the right number of candidates to attend all the programmes to completion over the contractual period of 5 years. There is a great chance that the demands for the MDP program in future may be affected by the growing concern about accreditation of the program outside the NRF.
- Lack of implementation of executed projects within NRF could also affect future commitment of staff to undertake such training.
- There is potential of word-of-mouth as a deterrent that could affect future attendance as employees communicate and share experiences.
- The structural issues that the organization cannot do much about i.e., promotional opportunities or financial incentives may also affect subscription to such training.

9.4. Inadequate Feedback platforms

- There is limited and dedicated feedback structures between NRF and the USB-ED and within the NRF itself as the host. Any issues arising from the Program is discussed with the Human Resources department. However, the USB-ED as the service provider delivers training to students but there is no follow-up. The divisions and the executive management teams do not have access to the Annual training report on the challenges and adopted action plans adopted during the year.
- there seems to be no tracking of projects and their implementation except for acknowledging completion of training through a graduation ceremony for the NMDP and SMDP.
- There are no formal Forums with all the stakeholders represented where the Annual Report and action plans could be discussed.
- The only structure that seems to be active between the USB-ED and the NRF is the feedback loops (interacts with the syndicate groups and the participants), also the coaching council, which is for line management. The USB-ED talks to line management and explain how things are going. However, as alluded by the USB-ED, there needs to be a good balance between the project and the work focus. This is also the steering comm where we sit and talk about what is working and what isn't.

10. Overall Recommendations

Recommendations have been made throughout the course of the report, within the various sections. The recommendations below have been extracted from those sections as they are considered to be the most strategic and, if addressed appropriately, should ameliorate the programmes significantly. They are as follows:

- ✓ Whist 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.

- ✓ 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.

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

- 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.
- 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 program. 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 program where 1 or 2 modules are concerned.

- What remains a challenge for both the SMDP and the NMDP is/was the BDAL component of the program. 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 programs in the long term.
- 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.

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 program. The hard-core part of the programme may be left to the on-the-job training (i.e. Induction and orientation program) within the organisation for now. This is because the NRF may understand its daily operational and strategic intent more than an outsider could do.

11. ANNEXURES



ANNEXURE 1: DRAFT PROGRAMME FOR THE EVALUATION OF THE MDP

ANNEXURE 2: ORIGINAL DRAFT PROGRAMME FOR THE EVALUATION OF THE MDP