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Improving the undergraduate human resource development curriculum in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The Human Resource Development (HRD) curriculum is under-researched at the undergraduate level in tertiary education institutions, particularly in South Africa (SA). This article addresses the need for research on HRD undergraduate education in SA. Using a qualitative case study approach; the researchers interviewed HRD practitioners who have all completed an undergraduate HRD curriculum to determine the deficits in the curriculum under study and what to include in a new HRD curriculum. Findings revealed that the degree title was limited to learning and development only, there were concerns about the faculty that housed the degree, and that the degree replicated lower-level skills certificates. HRD practitioners recommended what to include in a new HRD curriculum that would be relevant and considered credible in practice. The article identifies the implications of the findings for HRD theory, practice, and research. It offers HRD practitioners perspectives on what they consider relevant in an undergraduate HRD curriculum to carry value in the workplace.

Introduction

HRD education at universities is under-explored (Cho and Zachmeier 2015), especially at the undergraduate level (Greer and Collins 2017). Published studies on HRD education are available; however, international research from contexts like South Africa (SA) remains sparse, especially in the curriculum (McLean and Akaraborworn 2015, 213).

This article addresses the need for research on HRD education, mainly undergraduate education in SA, and provides recommendations from Human Resource Development Practitioners (HRDPs) on what should be included in the HRD curriculum to ensure relevance to practice.

Since 1994, the post-apartheid government introduced mechanisms and skills development legislation to transform education and training in SA to reduce poverty, inequality, and unemployment (Reddy et al. 2018), for example, the South African Qualifications Framework (SAQA) and the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). The NQF integrates learning into a single system and ensures equal access and lifelong learning for all citizens to redress past discrimination (CHE (Council on Higher Education) 2013;

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Reddy et al. 2018). SAQA ensures the implementation of the NQF and registers qualifications on the NQF (CHE (Council on Higher Education) 2013), 5). However, the first-generation NQF could not achieve its transformation goal, qualifications proliferated, and the associated outcomes-based education required centralisation resulting in corruption (Keevy and Bateman 2014). Additionally, skills development legislation focused more on regulations than actual skills provision (Reddy et al. 2018, vii).

Following the NQF Act No.67 of 2008 (SA (South Africa) 2021f), SA introduced a revised (third generation) NQF, grouped into three sub-frameworks, namely General and Further Education and Training (GFET), Higher Education (HE), and Trades and Occupations, each with their quality assurance bodies (CHE (Council on Higher Education) 2013). SAQA and the quality assurance bodies oversee the quality of all registered SA qualifications. The NQF (2008) classifies quality-assured national qualifications into ten levels (CHE (Council on Higher Education) 2013, 5). For example, HE qualifications are classified from levels 5 to 10 on the HE Qualifications Sub Framework (HEEQSF), and occupational qualifications are ranked from levels 1 to 8 on the Occupational Qualifications Sub Framework (OQSF) (Reddy et al. 2018, 30). Learners need GFET qualifications (NQF levels 1 to 4) to advance to HE or occupational qualifications. Although the third-generation NQF recognises different learning types and qualification routes (occupational, general, and higher education), progression and articulation between qualifications remain problematic (Keevy and Bateman 2014; Reddy et al. 2018, vi). Those who wish to advance to HE need minimum prescribed achievement on GEFT level 4. Consequently, many previously disadvantaged learners with low-quality GEFT qualifications (level 4) cannot access HE (Reddy et al. 2018, v).

The SA government, however, considers HRD a key priority, as evident from the country's HRD Strategy 2010 to 2030 (SA (South Africa) 2021a), the National Skills Development Strategy III (SA (South Africa) 2021b), the National Skills Development Plan 2030 (SA (South Africa) 2021c), and skills development legislation SA (South Africa) (2021d); SA (South Africa) (2021e); SA (South Africa) (2021f). The government follows an interventionist approach to skills development, and employers are obliged, through skills development legislation, to provide compulsory training to the workforce, especially previously disadvantaged individuals [black people], to upskill the nation and to address unemployment and poverty (Meyer and Sloman 2014). Hence, HRDPs must have skills certificates, namely facilitators, assessors, moderators, and diplomas, e.g. the Occupationally Development Education and Training Development Practitioner (ODEDTP) within the OQSF to practice HRD as prescribed by the relevant Sector Education Training Authority (SETA) and Assessment Quality Partners (Skills Portal 2021). Employers carry the cost for employees (trainers) to attain these certificates. Employers must pay the relevant authorities a percentage of their annual turnover in rand value in a skills development levy. Such employers who send their employees to undergo accredited training may claim 20% of their 1% skills levy contribution as part of a mandatory grant. Employers have to adhere to all criteria as stipulated within the Skills Development Levies Act (9 of 1999) and SETA grant regulations as prescribed by the Skills Development Act (97 of 1998) (SA (South Africa) 2021d, 2021e) to enable them to claim the money.

Despite the mechanisms [and legislation] to improve skills levels in SA, unemployment, poverty, and skills shortages are rife (Reddy et al. 2018, 6.). SA has an oversupply of

low or medium-skilled employees, while the economy demands highly-skilled workers (Reddy et al. 2018; iii; Khuluvhe et al. 2022). In 2021, 7.8 million of the 14.9 million SA labour force were unemployed. From 2018 to 2021, only those with degrees (HE) experienced an increase in employment in contrast to those with incompleted and completed certificates and diplomas, 'indicating the value that the SA labour market places on degrees' (Khuluvhe et al. 2022, 13–14).

Except for the skills certificates and diplomas (mostly offered by private providers and not universities), there were no other stand-alone HRD degree qualifications for those wishing to advance their capabilities within HE. Most SA universities, for example, the North-West University (NWU (North-West University) 2021a), University of SA (UNISA (University of South Africa) 2021), University of Johannesburg (UJ (University of Johannesburg) 2021), and University of Pretoria (UP (University of Pretoria) 2021), include HRD or learning and development (L&D) as one or two modules within HRM or Industrial Psychology programmes, on the undergraduate level.

Against this background, the Bachelor of Training and Development (BTD) degree was developed and implemented in 2007 at a public SA HE institution (university). The BTD was a three-year (undergraduate) degree (levels 5 to 7 on the HEQSF) designed to equip employed T&D practitioners without a degree who could not attend classes full-time due to work commitments. To ensure access to previously disadvantaged individuals who did not meet the prescribed entry requirements to HE, the admission requirements for the BTD degree specified that HRDPs who want to do this degree need at least three years of experience in a training environment.

The undergraduate BTD curriculum consisted of unit standards. Therefore, the L&D component in the BTD degree had the same outcomes as those found in ODETDP certificates and with similar content. When the SA NQF's prescribed level descriptors (SAQA (South African Qualifications Authority) 2012) became compulsory for all HE qualifications, we had to remove unit standards from degrees, including those on which the BTD degree, and its curriculum, had been based. Therefore, the BTD degree curriculum needed revision. The BTD resided in the Faculty of Education Sciences. We also had to decide which faculty would be best suited to house a degree in HRD to benefit the programme and the students.

The purpose of the research was to explore the perceptions of HRD practitioners regarding an undergraduate HRD curriculum they had all completed at a SA university to determine what they consider relevant in a new undergraduate HRD curriculum. The research questions were:

(1) What were the deficits of the undergraduate HRD curriculum?
(2) What should be included in a new undergraduate HRD curriculum?

Methodological approach

Research design

This study used a case study design (Yazan 2015). For triangulation, the research used interviews and documents; therefore, a qualitative case study was the most applicable methodology. Consistent with constructivism (Creswell 2009, 8), we used a case study

approach to understand the lived experiences of HRD practitioners within the bounded context of an undergraduate HRD programme in SA.

Population and sample

We used purposeful sampling to select all the HRD postgraduate students (N = 24). They had already completed the undergraduate HRD curriculum under study. They were simultaneously employed HRDPs with experience ranging from five to ten years, working in various organisations across SA, including government, healthcare, mining, insurance, SETAs, the military, protection services, and as training providers and training consultants, i.e. in private and public sectors. (HRD students study while they work).

Participants' professional titles included HRD managers, HRD senior managers, L&D managers, senior L&D practitioners, L&D specialists, L&D consultants, private training providers, senior curriculum design specialists, and training coordinators. Of the 24 participants, nine were male, and 12 were female, representing both genders. Fourteen participants were between 40 to 50, seven were in their 30s, and three were in their 50s. Most (18) were from the previously disadvantaged group, representing our student cohort.

Data collection

Typical of a case study, we used various sources, including document reviews, open-ended questionnaires, and focus group interviews with participants, to yield rich data and triangulation (Rule and John 2011, 63; Nieuwenhuis 2016a). We reviewed the BTD's internal (IPE) and external programme evaluation (EPE) reports and the Organising Framework for Occupations (OFO) (SA (South Africa) 2013) for the most applicable job profile related to the HRDP. The OFO lists all skills related to the occupation and helps develop curricula that address labour market needs. We also reviewed SAQA's level descriptors (SAQA (South African Qualifications Authority) 2012) (that describe how to write module outcomes of programmes at each level of the NQF to be nationally acceptable and internationally comparable) and the Classification of Educational Subject Matter (CESM) document issued by the Department of Education (SA (South Africa) 2008) to determine how the CESM describes HRD.

Furthermore, we distributed open-ended questionnaires to the study population (N = 24). We attached the curriculum layout of the previous BTD degree and a preliminary structure of the newly envisaged HRD curriculum for comments. The participants completed and returned 13 questionnaires. We followed up on the questionnaires through focus group interviews with the entire group (N = 24). All participants provided informed consent to participate in the study.

Data analysis

Two researchers transcribed the interviews and revised the complete dataset. We used a checklist to analyse the documents, which included suggestions for inclusion in the new HRD curriculum and strengths and deficits in the BTD. We first coded the data separately using Tech's eight steps (organising data into labelled categories) (Creswell

2009, 185–187) before combining the agreed-upon (cross-checked) codes into meaningful themes. We searched for and identified general themes in the entire dataset, known as thematic analysis. We then reviewed all themes, kept those that best answered the research questions, and provided the most meaningful interpretation of the data. We synthesised the document analysis and the analysed interviews to establish final themes. We named the themes and subthemes and used quotations as evidence of these.

We used several procedures to ensure the findings' trustworthiness and credibility (validity) (Creswell 2009; Anderson 2017). Multiple sources (document reviews, focus groups, and individual interviews) ensured the triangulation of findings. Two coders coded and cross-checked the codes, known as 'intercoder-agreement' (Creswell 2009, 191). For credibility (validity), we used member-checking by asking students who participated whether the themes identified were a true reflection of their experiences. We also presented the analysed themes during a class session with 17 of the 24 participants, who consistently provided evidence for the themes. A peer reviewer (other than the researchers) reviewed the data (Creswell and Creswell 2018) and confirmed the themes.

Findings

The findings resulted in two main themes: perceived deficits in the previous BTD degree (with three subthemes) and recommendations on what to include in the new HRD curriculum (with five subthemes) that answer the two research questions.

Theme 1: Perceived deficits in the previous BTD degree

The title (T&D) of the Degree is limiting

Participants considered the title of the BTD limiting since it only reflects the T&D aspect of HRD and excludes the business components of HRD required by employers: The following statements attest to this:

> T&D does not reflect all the components of HRD, for example, organisational development, career development, and training and development.

> HRD is a field on its own, and within the field of HRD, you might have L&D practitioners, but this is only one field within HRD and not the complete scope.

> The degree must be HRD, not T&D – it's also about what employers want, as HRD is more business-oriented.

Participants indicated that the term T&D only reflects the ODETDP certificates mainly offered by private training providers and felt more at ease with the designator HRD:

> Too much T&D orientated and no more coverage than occupational qualifications provided in the L&D environment. Focus more on the HRD field and not just one component thereof (L&D).

> [The BTD] does not empower HRD practitioners to transcend from ODETD practitioners (transactional HRD) to HRD managers (strategic HRD).

Participants also found the absence of 'HRD' within the SABPP (South African Board for People Practices) (2020) HR National Competency Model and the reference to only L&D within the HR Management System Standards Model problematic:

> [There is] no professional body that recognises HRD rather than L&D as a profession. The SABPP should include HRD, not only L&D.

> For the industry to succeed in skills development, it must invest in HRD.

Location of the BTD degree

Participants were concerned that the Faculty of Education Sciences (F-ES) housed the BTD. They argued that a degree with an 'education focus' does not carry credibility in the (HRD) workplace. If employers notice that F-ES issued their degree, it leaves the impression that they are teachers:

> The degree should not be in F-ES; they confuse it (training) with education. When employers look at your degree and see your education, they think you are a teacher.

> [The degree] should be in the faculty of Management and Economic Sciences because the Faculty of Education Sciences focuses on Education and Schooling and is perceived as such in the industry.

The CESM document similarly categorises HRD underneath Business Commerce and Management Sciences, confirming participants' statements that the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences would better fit the HRD degree.

A replication of lower-level ODETDP certificates and diplomas

Participants felt that the curriculum of the BTD mainly consisted of T&D modules (L&D component) and was a replication of the ODETDP certificates. Participants indicated that the L&D modules did not challenge higher-order thinking and that the theoretical underpinning was *weak*, and that these modules within the BTD did not reflect the full spectrum of HRD:

> The ODETDP modules are merely a regurgitation of SAQA-prescribed material relating to lower-order level programs. They do not provide higher-order thinking or challenge the mind to create new knowledge. The relevance of these modules stops at the application level for the 'doer' of the training job, not for an HRD professional. These merely relate to the training function.

> The old curriculum was a repetition of the OD ETDP NQF Level 5 diploma work. Do not necessarily omit the modules but change the outcomes to be different from those already established in the NQF Level 5 modules.

The IPE reports similarly indicated that the outcomes in the study material (L&D modules) did not reflect higher-order cognitive skills expected at the higher education level.

Participants added that diplomas and certificates are essential for elementary L&D practitioners but that HRD professionals (managers) need to have a degree in HRD:

> The ODETD should be a base-level qualification for L&D practitioners and degrees and postgraduate degrees for HRD professionals and HRD managers.

> It's all about credentials and experience. Organisations want to see the applicable qualifications to determine if an individual is suitable to train/educate adults. It is also a reputational risk for organisations to use unskilled trainers.

Theme 2: Recommendations on what to include in a new undergraduate HRD curriculum

SA training legislation and statutory structures

Participants and the EPE recommended a first-year- module covering all the SA skills development legislation, statutory systems created by such legislation, and national skills development strategies:

> T&D legislation should be included.
> Skills development legislation in the workplace.

> Training legislation benefits skills development by providing several institutional structures and funding mechanisms, such as SAQA and National Skills Fund.

Training-related aspects (L&D component)

Most participants indicated that a new undergraduate HRD curriculum should still include training aspects found in the training cycle but be more theoretically grounded.

> These modules relate to T&D practices in the workplace and should be kept and transferred to the newly proposed curriculum.

Furthermore, practitioners indicated that one needs critical reflection on the training-related aspects (L&D component) to ensure that it is not a mere replication of the ODETDP certificates:

> As a trainer, these modules [L&D component] will be relevant; however, for an HRD manager or practitioner, the other modules (not L&D) would add more value as the role is more than traditional T&D.

> These modules relate to T&D practices in the workplace and should be kept and transferred to the newly proposed curriculum. The L&D modules provide the theory to the ETD [Educational Training and Development] practices; these modules feature in my day-day activities.

The OFO (2013) similarly indicates that the L&D component is relevant in practice

Economics, business management, and strategic HRD

Participants considered Business Management (BM) in the new proposed HRD curriculum as a strength:

> Include BM modules to provide a clearer understanding of management practices. Very important for my role as an L&D manager.

> Although some of us are already in management positions, BM is key to our personal development and career progression.

One participant indicated that HRDPs should be equipped more with 'economic, strategic and management knowledge'. The EPE report also recommended that the new HRD curriculum include Economics. Participants regarded a module in Economics as essential in the new HRD curriculum:

> The linkage between HR management training and organisational strategy implementation to ensure growth makes economics important.

> Understanding economics is crucial for a training professional

Two participants suggested that the new HRD curriculum should include Strategic HRD (instead of Strategic HRM). Students argued that HRD should be majored in, not HRM.

Adult learning

Participants suggested that adult learning (AL) should feature in the new HRD curriculum:

> AL should provide a good perspective on the difference between andragogy and pedagogy, which is needed when looking at the design, delivery, and evaluation of L&D.

> All my learners are adults, so this applies adequately to my environment.

The CESM document also includes AL as an element of HRD (SA (South Africa) 2008).

Career psychology

The EPE on the BTD and participants suggested the inclusion of Career Psychology in the new HRD curriculum:

> Career psychology is beneficial to HRDPs in understanding career guidance in the workplace.

> Psychology is imperative in education and training as it helps ETDPs understand humans in the workplace.

Discussion

There were several deficiencies in the BTD degree, namely the title was limited to T&D; the programme housed within F-ES was not preferable; the training-related aspects (L&D component) within the BTD did not present the full spectrum of HRD; the T&D modules (L&D component) did not have the required theoretical depth. Some HRDPs found the absence of HRD within the SABPP (South African Board for People Practices) (2020) HR National Competency Model and the reference to only L&D within the HR Management System Standards Model problematic. HRDPs recommended that the new HRD curriculum include SA Training Legislation and Statutory Structures; Training-related aspects (L&D component); Economics, Business Management, and Strategic HRD; AL and Career Psychology. The document analysis supported the findings.

The researcher observed findings associated with context concerning HRD practice and its effect on HRD curricula. In contrast to the UK, where training in the UK only recently reached a wider audience (Harrison et al. 2021), training in SA had gained a broad audience since 1994 (when training in SA workplaces became compulsory). HRD practitioners in our research considered a degree in HRD essential to effectively fulfill their roles in practice. This finding aligns with the SA context that requires high-level skilled workers and a labour market that values degrees (Khuluvhe et al. 2022, 13–14).

Implications for HRD theory, practice, and research

HRDPs would appreciate undergraduate HRD curricula that are higher-level, credible, and with more content than merely L&D to prepare them for a rapidly changing workplace and broader senior HRD management roles. SA employers would value the higher level and variety of skills and flexibility of such HRDPs to ensure organisational sustainability and growth within a changing post-COVID global context. Such HRDPs are needed to upskill the SA nation to address national skills shortages and unemployment and benefit society through improved employment opportunities and sustainable livelihoods.

This research enables comparative research on HRD education within an international context, including SA. This research may assist in building curricula in the future to prepare HRDPs to work within a global context. Researchers in other contexts could use similar participants (senior HRDPs whom completed undergraduate HRD programmes and have ample HRD experience) to establish if similar results emerge.

Limitations

The students had several discussions with the researcher to confirm the findings; these were not transcribed or included in the research. The study was qualitative and focused on one university, limiting the findings' generalisability.

Conclusion

The article addressed the need for research on HRD education and the undergraduate curriculum from SA. By providing information on the knowledge taught in an SA undergraduate HRD programme and the requirements of HRD practitioners, the study also contributes to the current conceptualisation of HRD in SA and, consequently, the HRD field. The recommendations will benefit HRDPs, employers, society, and the nation, as well as international HRD academics and researchers.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

Helen Meyer is an associate professor and program leader of Human Resource Development in the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences at the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University, South Africa.

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