

Understanding skills development in South African higher education institutions

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Abstract

As part of a critical interpretive research project on skills development in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), the authors attended to the perceptions of Skills Development Facilitators (SDFs) regarding the challenges that HEIs encounter with the implementation of the Skills Development Act (SDA). We contend that apart from any explanations that have thus far been offered for the challenges, the challenges can be blamed on the lack social capital between the Education Training and Development Practices Sector Education and Training Authority (ETDP SETA) and HEIs. We defend our claim by firstly developing a conceptual-theoretical framework with respect to the rationale for and meaning of staff development in HEIs and that of the SDA. We then present the results of a critical interpretive, qualitative inquiry into the perceptions of seven participating HEIs SDFs regarding the challenges that HEIs encounter with the implementation of the Skills Development Act (SDA).

ORIENTATION

Research with regard to the effects of the implementation of the Skills Development Act (SDA) on staff development in South African HEIs is still in its infancy. As a result, there is a dearth of literature in this regard. Only nine publications were found to be vaguely related to the effects of the implementation of the SDA within HEIs. With the exception of Greyling's research (2001) on 'Skills Development in HE', the focus of the research in the majority of these publications was either on other economic sectors in SA or on the attempts made to provide a model for skills planning in South African industries (for example, Adeniji 2002; Le Grange 2004; Von Stapelberg 2006). Some sources note the challenges that HEIs encounter with the implementation of the

SDA, yet they do not indicate why such challenges may occur. Greyling (2001, 3), for example, argues that: '[most] institutions of higher education will battle with reforming and transforming staff development towards national imperatives since conflicts of interest are imminent between the focus of staff development in HEIs and that of national imperatives'. Le Grange (2004, 1) points out that HEIs generally tend to want to recoup rebates from the ETDP SETA based on the skills development levies they have paid, and that, by and large, they do not seek to further the aims of the SDA *per se*. This opinion does not prevail solely in HEIs. Kraak (2004, 4) and Barry (2000, 22) contend that South African organisations are reluctant to integrate their developmental initiatives with the broader aims of the SDA and that they prefer to focus on narrow company-specific staff development needs. Adeniji (2002, 10) and Lee (2002, 4), on the other hand, are of the opinion that private and public organisations are considering the SDA as merely another form of taxation.

It is against this backdrop that the intention of this study was to bring to the surface the underlying social dynamics that Skills Development Facilitators (SDFs) attach to the implementation of the SDA.

The results of our study show that the meaning attached to staff development in HEIs resonates with Social Capital Theory. In somewhat stark contrast, government's epistemological view of staff development in HEIs in South Africa seems to be best understood within the conceptual parameters of Human Capital Theory, where employees are seen as mere replaceable cogs in the institutional machinery. In this article, we intend to defend these two claims as follows: Firstly, we offer a critical interpretative summary of the conceptual and theoretical framework that we have developed both for staff development in HEIs and for the implementation of the SDA. We argue that the rationale for and meaning of staff development in HEIs relates closely with Social Capital Theory whilst government's epistemological inclination towards the implementation of the SDA resonates with Human Capital Theory. Secondly, we report on the results of our critical, interpretive and qualitative empirical investigation into our participating SDF's perceptions with regard to the implementation of the SDA in HEIs. In conclusion, we consider the validity of the inferences that we have drawn.

A CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR CONSIDERING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SDA

After the first democratic elections in South Africa in April 1994, it became a priority for the new government to transform the education system of South Africa (Gibbon and Kabaki 2006, 125; Asmal 2004, 1). Action aimed at the transformation of the education system had, however, gained momentum since the 1970s (Department of Education and Department of Labour 2002, 5). One of the government's most noticeable steps to counter the social-economic deficit of South Africa was the implementation of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) (African National Congress 1994). According to Genis (1997, 2) and Cloete (2005, 7), the RDP served as a blueprint for

further growth and development policies in South Africa. The RDP, spearheaded by the African National Congress (ANC) at around 1992 (Samuel 1996, Foreword) could, in a sense, be viewed not only as a protest against, but also as an alternative to the education and training system of the former apartheid regime. The initial concept of the SDA, the *Green paper on skills development* (Department of Labour 1997), emanated from the RDP under the auspices of the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC), which has a predominantly economic orientation (Cloete 2005, 10; Department of Education and Department of Labour 2002, 5; Samuel 1996, 3; African National Congress 1994).

For purposes of this investigation, we surmised that the implementation of the SDA was an overtly and unequivocally labour-driven initiative based on the assumption that investment in education and training would lead to the individual's and, ultimately, the country's economic prosperity.

We noted that the first theme that recurred in the body of scholarship with regard to the reasons why the South African (SA) government implemented the Skills Development Act (SDA) concerns the notion that investment in skills development would improve employee productivity which, in turn, would lead to the economic prosperity of individuals, industry and the country as a whole (Cloete 2005, 7–10; Mdladlana 2003, 2; Samuel 1996, 17; Mercurio et al. 2000, 5–12). This line of thought corresponds with the basic tenets of Human Capital Theory.

Human Capital Theory holds that investment in education *vis-à-vis* training leads towards the economic prosperity of the individual and the country at large (Carnoy et al. 2005, 4; Livingstone 2002, 1; Baptiste 2001, 195; Quiggin 2000, 130; Fevre 1997, 1). Carnoy et al. (2005, 4) state that the force of Human Capital Theory in society can be observed in the large sums of money that governments, individuals and taxpayers spend on education annually in almost every country of the world, based on the belief that there is some connection between a better-educated labour force and greater economic prosperity. South Africa is certainly not excluded from this view, because various prominent role players in South Africa stress the hypothetical relationship between investment in education and economic gains (Pandor 2006, 1; Reddy 2004, 40; Mdladlana 2003, 1). Harrison et al. (2004, 24) and Baptiste et al. (2004, 39) contend, however, that the proponents of Human Capital Theory wittingly or unwittingly exclude human behaviour as a key determinant when offering reasons for espousing this theory. Consequently, these proponents usually offer a one-sided view of Human Capital, based upon the perceived economic benefit as the prime value of this theory, while downplaying human behaviour and their interests (Baptiste 2001, 198; Quiggin 2000, 136).

Lin (1999, 29) is convinced that Human Capital Theory is a capitalist scheme embedded in society, where the dominant class calls for investment to be made in human beings so that they (the dominant class) may capture the surplus value generated. As such, Lin (1999, 29) asserts, Human Capital Theory is based on 'exploitative social relations between two classes'. In other words, investment in education becomes

the one-sided individual's, organisation's or State's euphemism (hidden agenda) for economic growth. Schultz (1961, 1), one of the leading proponents of Human Capital Theory, nonetheless writes: '[a]lthough it is obvious that people acquire useful skills and knowledge, it is not obvious that these skills and knowledge are a form of capital, [or] that this capital is a substantial part of a product of deliberate investment.' Moreover, empirical evidence to prove the direct economic relationship between investment in education and economic gains is fraught with errors of logic (Hyde 2006, 4). It is also not clear whether educated people are necessarily more productive or wealthier than uneducated people (Carnoy et al. 2005, 4; Livingstone 2002, 1; Baptise 2001, 195).

Based on the above-mentioned discussion of Human Capital Theory (HCT), we concluded, for the following reasons, that the SA government's epistemological inclination towards the implementation of the SDA is imbedded within HCT's boundaries:

Firstly, the implementation of the SDA promotes the notion that investment in skills development would lead to the economic prosperity of the individual and country at large. The SDA states, *inter alia*, that its purposes are 'to increase the levels of investment in education and training in the labour market and to improve the return on that investment' (Republic of South Africa 2004, 4). Another example is the Minister of Education, Ms. Naledi Pandor's unsubstantiated belief that 'there is compelling evidence that points to the strong relationship between investments in human capital (education, training, health, nutrition) and economic growth and development' (Pandor 2006, 1). *The SDA stipulates that workplace learning must be credentialed* (Republic of South Africa, 1998). The term 'credential' refers to the 'credits' attached to a programme outcome that is pitched on a certain level on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) (Cloete 2005, 22; Layton-Matthews 2004, 11; Mercorio et al. 2000, 157; Department of Education and Department of Labour 2002, 9). By implication, only credentialed learning is believed to have economic value.

Secondly, the implementation of the SDA is an expression of government's exploitative character (see Lin 1999, 29). The SDA enforces, by implication, rules and structures which ensure that industry invests in and prioritises education and training of previously disadvantaged individuals (Republic of South Africa 2004, 5; Mercorio et al. 2000, 23; Samuel 1996, 34). The National Skills Development Strategy (Department of Labour, 2005) prioritises education and training as an instrument to further equity amongst the designated groups in SA, namely '85% black, 54% females and 4% people with disabilities' (Department of Labour 2005, 2). In this regard, it is interesting to note that neither the SDA, nor the documentation of the ETDP SETA, describes how the previously mentioned percentages should be interpreted or applied.

Structures have furthermore been created through this particular legislation to ensure a return on investment in education and training as well as equity. This is to be achieved by: '... sector education and training authorities (SETAs); ... a skills development levy-financing scheme as contemplated in the Skills Development Levies Act; ... [and] the South African Qualifications Authority [SAQA]' (Republic of South Africa 2004, 5). Towards this end, the SDA requires, *inter alia*, the 'appointment by employers of

workplace skills development facilitators' (Republic of South Africa 2004,26) and that employers should consult with employee representatives on matters dealt with in the SDA (Republic of South Africa 2004, 26). Through the above-mentioned legislation, it has since become clear that government is exerting a powerful hold (due to a strong labour lobby) over industry with reference to skills development. Industry is coerced into contributing financially (by paying annual levies) towards investment in education and training. Industry is furthermore required to structure its own internal staff development needs and initiatives according to government's requirements without clear guidance from and debate between government (*vis-à-vis* the ETDP SETA) and HEIs.

Against the backdrop of government's legislative dominance and its epistemological view of training and development (that corresponds with the basic tenets of HCT) and the lack of debate between HEIs and the ETDP SETA, we conclude that the establishment of social capital between HEIs and the ETDP SETA is the link, currently missing, required for the successful implementation of the SDA.

Forms of debate as (social) networks provide the basis for the social cohesion that is central to Social Capital Theory (Field 2003, 12). Social capital can be regarded as the contextual complement to human capital since it is the human interaction and human relationships (especially of trust and tolerance) that endure and enable people to build communities; to commit themselves to one another (Field 2003,1-2); to share with one another (Fukuyama, 1996). Together, these capacities yield results of greater value than would have been possible without human interaction (Crossley 2006, 286; Svendsen et al. 2004, 11–18; Lin 1999, 32).

Field (2003, 8), Grootaert and Bastelaer (2003, 9), Putnam (2000, 19) and Coleman (1994, 314) furthermore postulate that when investment in Social Capital collapses, it could adversely affect the Human Capital value of the individual, organisation and members of a community. The relationship between HEIs and the ETDP SETA shows, however, a clear inclination towards HCT. This is confirmed, amongst others, by Maphumulo and Nkomo (V. B. Maphumulo and T. Nkomo 2005, personal communication.) who indicated that the EDTP SETA is committed to empowering the workers of South Africa in the education, training and development sector and, by doing so '... to keep oiling the cogs of the country's education machinery in this economic sector. As far as Labour is concerned, HEIs is (sic) just another industry.' (ibid.). We therefore contend that the establishment of social capital between HEIs and ETDP SETA members would constitute the contextual compliment to the episteme of human capital that seems to be intrinsic to the SDA. Consequently, we suggest that such social capital may help to determine the extent to which the implementation of the SDA within HEIs will succeed in future.

In the following paragraph we describe the nature of staff development in HEIs, showing that the conceptual and theoretical basis of staff development corresponds with Social Capital Theory, in contrast to that of the SDA, which corresponds to HCT.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING STAFF DEVELOPMENT IN HEIS

Staff development is a traditional, well-established function within HEIs and, in contrast to SA government's epistemological inclination towards the implementation of the SDA which is imbedded within HCT's boundaries, it seems to find its epistemological home in Social Capital Theory: Scholarly research about staff development dates back to the 1970's (Bitzer and Kapp 1998, 11). Authors such as Le Grange (2004, 91), Fraser (2005, 158), Brew (1995, 4 and 91) and Webb (1996, 1) maintain that the vision of staff development extends well beyond the mere improvement of skills. Staff development is usually understood in terms of processes, structures and programmes that are aimed at harmonising individual and institutional interests towards mutual growth. According to Crossley (2006, 286), Svendsen et al. (2004, 11) and Field (2003, 12), this line of thought corresponds with the Social Capital Theory.

None of the definitions of staff development offered by the authors quoted above attempt, to base the value of staff development on the acquisition of monetary wealth or to provide the individual with a credentialed certificate or qualification. In line with social capital thinking, staff development in HEIs is valued for its processes of debate and interaction in the quest for skills and knowledge (Blackwell et al. 2003, 11; Svendsen et al. 2004, 11). Beardwell (2003, 169), for example, gives an account of development activities such as focus group discussions at the De Montfort University in the United Kingdom (UK). Shahnaz et al. (2005) report on a case study at the Bowling Green State University (Ohio) of the development needs of 92 departmental chairs. These two case studies show that the departmental chairs believed that the most successful staff development interventions were round-table discussions or off-campus speakers from other higher education institutions (Beardwell 2003, 169; Shahnaz et al. 2005, 588). Similarly, Blackmore et al. (2006, 373–387) report on an interview survey that was conducted with 18 leaders in academic staff development at universities in the English Midlands. They found that these academic leaders 'learn informally and "socially", seek and use feedback, usually of an informal kind' (Blackmore et al. 2006, 377). The research of Kapp and Frick (2006) reveals trends similar to those discussed so far. Their survey (completed by representatives of the academic staff development units at ten universities) and subsequent web analysis revealed that the academic staff development approach between 1995 to 2005 changed mainly from a train-and-release approach towards an emphasis on the learning process *per se* (Kapp et al. 2006, 6). Frick (2007, 1), Knight et al. (2006, 317) and Steyn (2004, 217) furthermore emphasise that the means of learning acquisition in HEIs is fundamentally driven by the concept of self-regulated learning rather than by learning enforcement which depends on designated facilitators.

The case studies referred to above suggest that staff development has been focusing specifically on the learning process that occurs during debate, networking, support, guidance, critical reflection etc, activities – all of which relate closely to the

basic tenets of Social Capital Theory. What is of particular interest is, firstly, that no mention is made in any of the above-mentioned case studies regarding the length of time it takes for learning to occur or regarding the proper recording of such learning processes. We therefore wish to highlight the lack of official recording and archiving of informal development in HEIs for the following reasons: for rebate purposes, the SDA acknowledges only the recorded education and training interventions of a HEI. Secondly, in none of the above-mentioned case studies are informal learning strategies reserved for academic members of staff in HEIs only. They are, instead, available to all categories of staff.

This conceptual and theoretical framework provides one possible way of researching staff development in HEIs and the implementation of the SDA. The qualitative research that we report on in the following section show that the reasons for the challenges that SDFs encounter with the implementation of the SDA could be ascribed to:

- a perceived dissonance between the underlying theoretical rationale for staff development in HEIs and that of the SDA; and/or
- a lack of social capital that exists between the ETDP SETA and HEIs.

OUR QUALITATIVE RESEARCH PROJECT

Purpose of the enquiry

We wanted to gain a comprehensive, qualitative understanding of the SDFs' perceptions (refer to population and sampling below) regarding the rationale for the implementation of the SDA and that of staff development in HEIs, as well as the match or mismatch between them in order to shed light on the challenges that HEIs encounter with the implementation of the SDA. To this end the aims of our study were:

- to determine whether a difference between the underlying theoretical rationale for staff development in HEIs and that of the SDA was perceived to exist and/or
- to discover whether a lack of social capital existed between the ETDP SETA and HEIs.

Methodology

Our research employed empirical as well as non-empirical studies. Firstly, we employed a non-empirical data analysis that consisted of a philosophical analysis, conceptual analysis, policy analysis, theory building and a critical-interpretivistic review of the scholarship, which formed the broader research framework (refer to note 1) of this study (see theoretical and conceptual framework in the previous section). The non-empirical data analysis led to the development of open ended interview questions (refer research instrument) which we used for individual interviews, as well as for focus group discussion purposes. Our assumption was that individual interviews as well as group interaction would generate a widening of responses and that it would activate details of perspectives and release inhibitions that may otherwise discourage our participants

from disclosing important information. The individual interviews, as well as the focus group discussion produced data rich in detail that would have been difficult to achieve with other research methods, because our participants built on each other's ideas and comments to provide in-depth and value-added insights (Nieuwenhuis 2007, 90).

Research design

A participatory research design (Denzin et al. 2005, 11) was followed to capture the empirical data with the participant SDFs as outlined in the purpose of this study, which was subsequently mirrored against the critical-interpretivistic analysis of the non-empirical data.

The subjects: population and sampling

We conducted interviews with a convenience and criterion-based purposeful sample (Toma 1999, 546) of seven full-time Skills Development Facilitators (SDFs), each responsible for the implementation of the SDA at one of the seven HEIs in the Gauteng Province of South Africa. Because the selected participants are all full-time SDFs in their respective HEIs, the sample is homogeneously focused. As such it reduces variation, simplifies analysis and facilitates group interviewing. It is also a convenience sample, because the research was limited (due to time, money and logistical constraints) to HEIs in the Gauteng province only. Finally, it is a criterion-based sample, because the selected participants all meet the criterion of Skills Development Facilitator in a Higher Education institution in Gauteng, South Africa.

The research instruments

The following research activities were carried out at the seven research sites:

- semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with individual SDFs and a focus group discussion with all the SDFs,
- discussions on and a thorough reading of the staff training policies and related documentation that are – for strategic reasons – usually deemed to be of a confidential nature and, consequently, not generally accessible to members of the public.

We formulated a set of semi-structured interview questions based on our conceptual-theoretical framework about the rationale for and meaning of (a) staff development in HEIs and (b) the implementation of the SDA. The semi-structured questions were as follows:

- What do you think is the nature of and rationale for staff development in HEIs?
- What do you think is the nature of and rationale behind the implementation of the SDA? and
- How do you, as a SDF, perceive the effects of the implementation of the SDA in HEIs in South Africa and why?

Probing, follow-up questions depended entirely on the nature and direction of the discussions and are not documented here.

After the completion of the individual interviews, a focus-group interview (consisting of all the participating SDF's) was conducted to reflect and collectively build on the data obtained during our interaction with each individual SDF.

Ethical aspects

The documentation received from SDFs as well as transcriptions from interviews were treated with the utmost confidentiality. The interviewers informed the SDFs that they could opt out whenever they felt uncomfortable with the proceedings. None of the interviewees decided to withdraw.

Validity and reliability

The entire sample participated. Data gained during individual interviews and the focus group discussion were analysed by one researcher. The analysis was done according to Miles's and Huberman's (1994) guidelines for qualitative data analysis (drawing and verifying of conclusions). Besides this, two academics who were not drawn from the above-mentioned HEIs, but who were thoroughly conversant with the SDA, were requested to assist us. Our analysis and subsequent interpretation of the data were independently scrutinised and commented upon by Professor Elsie (Liz) Greyling from the University of Johannesburg and Professor Nico Sauer from the University of Pretoria. In addition, the semi-structured focus group interview questions, as well as the interpretation of the data gathered during this focus group discussion, were developed with their assistance.

Data analysis

Interview, discourse and content analysis of the raw data (interview transcriptions and the skills development-related policy documentation received from the SDFs) was done independently by one of the researchers on *Atlas.ti*TM - a computer-based system for analysing qualitative research data. The two above-mentioned independent academics (professors Greyling and Sauer) subsequently scrutinised and commented on our analysis and interpretation of the data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

With respect to the first broad question of the research, namely the nature of and rationale for staff development in HEIs, the findings were as follows:

Staff development in HEIs focuses mainly on furthering the individual staff member's academic knowledge and concomitant intellectual skills. This is done with a view to improving the effectiveness, efficiency and quality of Higher Education programmes.

Towards this end, HEIs have implemented employee performance management systems as a means of capturing the ETD needs of employees. Performance management systems are, however, not implemented to meet management's interests unilaterally; it seems, instead, to be a process of enhancing, *inter alia*, a culture of learning in HEIs. Two of the seven participating SDFs in the group argued, however, that their respective HEI supported their staff development practices even though these practices were not necessarily perceived as being of much benefit to the HEIs where they were employed. This finding demonstrates that the intent of staff development is, firstly, to meet the interests of both the individual staff member and the HEI. Secondly, it demonstrates that the intent of staff development is to enhance a culture of learning in HEI's. This clearly resonates with the basic tenets of Social Capital Theory.

In contrast all seven SDFs perceived the implementation of the SDA to be predominantly labour-oriented and to be driven from a labour imperative associated with manual and/or tangible skills, such as artisan skills and practical manual skills. One SDF stated:

Why is it called the Skills Development Act? (Laughs) because it's labour driven and labour was [always] talking from the background where people from designated groups needed skills like artisan skills (P32: RT2: 10, 55–60).

The message conveyed above is that the SDA focuses predominantly on enhancing the individual's capacity for acquiring tangible skills associated with labour in the production chain, thus indicating its close reliance on Human Capital Theory, but not on the intangible skills that accrue from the kind of scholarly interaction that is customary in HEIs. This is not only confirmed by the strong labour influence in the ETDP SETA (which is the designated SETA for all HEIs), but also by the fact there is, at present, still only one ETDP SETA-appointed skills adviser who is supposed to be responsible for all HEIs in all nine provinces in South Africa.

Our research shows that HEIs, as such, value *the process of learning* as being of key importance to staff development, and not, necessarily, one of the outcomes of learning, namely the certification that the person usually receives after the successful completion of a study programme. One SDF, in fact, stated:

Learning in itself is a process that cannot be placed in a linear or static box. The credentials that a person receives after completing a learning intervention and/or qualification are only as good as the depth and meaning of the learning and insights gained in the actual process. It is in the process of learning that an individual assimilates new concepts and insights, and undertakes reflection and self-evaluation. In the absence of high-quality experiential and relevant learning, the attainment of credentials just for the sake of receiving a certificate or commendation, becomes meaningless.

Informal development is considered the most appropriate method of learning in HEIs (predominantly for academic employees). All the SDFs emphasised that informal

development practices (i.e. round-table debates, networking, conference attendance, mentoring, coaching, etc.) aim to pursue learning through a self-motivated process of interaction and reflection by and among individuals as a means of generating the kind of knowledge that is key to HEIs' employee development. Informal development practices are, however, difficult to capture, mainly because it is a self-managed process and primarily paid for by the individuals' (specifically academic staff) own development funds.

Considering that six of the seven participating SDFs explicitly mentioned that the rationale for staff development was aimed at enhancing the quality of education, and not towards economic gains (individual or HEI), the underlying theoretical intent of HEIs' staff development practices seems to resonate closely with Social Capital Theory. All SDFs pointed out that the nature of HEIs' education, training and development (ETD) practices was self-determined and that their HEIs all support continuous learning which, in turn, is believed to lead to continuous education improvement. HEIs' support for continuous learning is, therefore, perceived as the action that precedes their performance management. As the summarised reasons below show, this finding locates staff development in HEIs, *per se*, within the epistemological boundaries of Social Capital Theory:

- the rationale for HEIs' staff development practices is portrayed as an imperative to enhance quality service (not necessarily for economic gain only),
- the nature of staff development is self-motivated – staff development practices are perceived of as being of value to the HEI's learning processes (not just as an act of continuous learning),
- the majority of learning falls within the informal development category,
- identifying employees' ETD needs are perceived of as being the logical action that should precede the management of their academic performance.

With respect to the second broad question of the research, namely the nature of and rationale behind the implementation of the SDA, the main findings were:

- The rationale for the implementation of the SDA lies, foremost, in the fact that government intended to implement it to redress past imbalances caused during the apartheid era. The participating SDFs perceive redress, however, as two different, yet interrelated, remedies:
- the SDA's redress activities should prioritise the development of designated employees in HEIs and
- HEIs should invest in providing credentialed staff development programmes for designated employees.

There is little doubt among the participating SDF's that government, by implementing various structures inside and external to HEIs (e.g. the ETDP SETA) intends to govern (by remote control, if need be) HEIs' staff development practices with the aim of ensuring that redress activities deploy along the lines (including timelines) that government wants it to deploy.

With respect to how the participating SDFs may perceive the effects of the implementation of the SDA in HEIs, the main findings were as follows:

HEIs' ETD needs differ from national ETD imperatives. The participating SDFs view HEIs' staff development practices as dealing with the development of all employees towards meeting institutional needs, whereas the SDA deals almost exclusively with the development of designated employees' skills-related needs. One SDF stated the effect of this dissonance as follows:

I feel a certain sense of disquiet, even anxiety, about the dissonance between the skills emphasis of the DoL [Department of Labour], basically dictating . . . standards for which we are held accountable.

The dissonance between institutional (e.g. HEIs) and national (e.g. ETDP SETA) ETD needs relates mainly to a difference in rationale. As demonstrated below, this dissonance leads to most, if not all, of the difficulties that SDFs experience with integrating the requirements of the SDA in their respective HEIs:

- The development of systems to capture HEIs' employees' ETD practices is costly. In addition to the cost of developing these systems, there is also the high cost of the ongoing maintenance of such systems (based on regulatory changes).
- The planning and reporting time frame set in the SDA, differs significantly from the HEIs' actual ETD time frames.
- Informal learning practices are the least recorded category of learning in HEIs. Since informal development is not regarded as 'structured learning' (because it is not rigorously planned and since it takes place in faculties and departments – oftentimes on a voluntarily basis – by HEIs' employees) it is reasonable to understand that this form of development is not easily recorded (or recordable), hence there is little or no reflection of it in HEIs' WSPs and ATRs. The inability to capture the informal development practices of HEIs could lead to HEIs' forfeiting their levy grant, based on the principle that all ETD practices should be properly planned and officially recorded in order to apply for a levy grant (although HEIs find it almost impossible to record informal development).
- At present, the ETDP SETA also does not offer meaningful feedback to HEIs regarding their submitted WSPs and ATRs. The ETDP SETA structures furthermore do not support HEIs (as demonstrated in §1.1 above, there is a lack of skills advisers dedicated specifically to the needs of HEIs).

The aforementioned dissonance and difficulties that SDFs encounter with the integration of the SDA have the effect that HEIs tend to submit their Workplace Skills Plans and Annual Training Reports solely to recoup their levy grants.

An appraisal of the SDA in relation to HEIs

We conclude, against the background of our findings, that the SDA is largely inappropriate for HEIs in South Africa at the present juncture, for the following reasons:

It is clear that Human Capital Theory is the underlying rationale for the SDA, driven initially by organised labour and then by the government, compelling HEIs to invest in credentialed skills development based on the assumption that the investment will lead to the prosperity of the investor and the country at large. Government, with the implementation of various structures (i.e. skills committees) and templates (i.e. WSP and ATR), seems to compel HEIs to consider their employees as mere cogs in a production line.

The semantic value of the term ‘skills’ as perceived in the SDA, refers mainly to manual, tangible, taught skills. Even the name of the Skills Development Act privileges the above-mentioned notion of ‘skills’, *per se*. By contrast, Social Capital Theory underlies and provides the epistemological drive behind HEIs’ staff development practices. HEIs’ core function of education, as expounded by its academics (the majority employee category), does in fact apply informal development practices such as interaction, networking, relationships of trust (core logic of Social Capital Theory) as a means of generating knowledge to break conventional (academic) standards and not to be subordinated to such standards. We therefore argue that the SDA should – at most – be applied to serve the needs of the support staff members in HEIs who are inclined to work towards reaching certain standards of performance (including the needs of those academic staff members who may need to acquire some or other practical skill (i.e. in administration or Information Technology)).

The participating SDFs use the term ‘all’ – referring to designated and non-designated employees – as the common denominator in all seven of the HEIs in the research study. If HEIs were to follow the government’s instructions regarding the development of designated employees, they might have to discriminate against non-designated employees. This means that HEIs would have to exclude non-designated employees from contributing to the effectiveness and efficiency of HEIs. Due to the nature of their core business, HEIs will struggle with the implementation of the SDA because there are top achievers from all cultures, genders and races in HEIs. Favouring the skills development of one top achiever over that of another could make the SDA irrelevant to HEIs.

GENERAL CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The above-mentioned findings demonstrate that the underlying theoretical intent of the implementation of the SDA resonates with Human Capital Theory for the following reasons: HEIs are encouraged to invest in ETD based on the assumption that credentialed learning will guarantee economic returns. Lin (1999, 29) asserts however, that Human Capital Theory is based on: ‘exploitative social relations between two classes’. The somewhat exploitative characteristic of government (viewed within the context of

Lin's (1999, 29) postulation), is already visible in HEIs in South Africa as can be seen in the appointment of SDFs, the implementation of committee structures, the legally required submission of Workplace Skills Plans (WSPs) or Annual Training Reports (ATRs) to the ETDP SETA and HEIs' payment of a 1 per cent payroll levy. In all seven participating HEIs, a SDF was either appointed or nominated after the implementation of the SDA; all seven HEIs submit their WSPs or ATRs directly to the ETDP SETA; all seven HEIs established committee structures (as consultation mechanisms regarding ETD practices) after the implementation of the SDA and, lastly, HEIs submit their WSPs and ATRs to the ETDP SETA with the aim of recouping their mandatory levy grant rebate which is equal to 50 per cent of the 1 per cent levy amount (1% of payroll) (Republic of South Africa 2004, 1).

The SDA is largely inappropriate for HEIs in South Africa at the present juncture. Since its inception, the SDA has, firstly, been privileging a labour-oriented and labour-driven imperative associated with tangible and/or manual skills (such as artisan skills and practical manual skills) based on the assumption that investment in skills would lead to the economical prosperity of the individual (previously disadvantaged by unfair discrimination in particular) and, ultimately, the country. The SDA does not, specifically, apply to learning that occurs as a consequence of social practices—HEIs' predominant way of staff development (academia in particular).

Although the majority of HEIs want to promote the aims of the SDA, they cannot promote them fully owing to the almost total lack of social capital between HEIs and the ETDP SETA to address the aforementioned conceptual disjuncture and associated problems that HEIs encounter with the integration of the SDA within its staff development ambit.

We conclude that the challenges that HEIs encounter with the implementation of the SDA will remain largely unresolved, unless a deliberate effort is made to create Social Capital between HEIs and the ETDP SETA. Research confirms that when there is a free flow of communication among parties so that they gain a mutual understanding of what needs to change and how the change will be implemented in a plan of action, people are more open to accepting and coming to grips with such changes (Randell and Bitzer 1998, 143). The establishment of a community of practice to further interaction between the ETDP SETA and SDFs at HEIs could lead to the accrual of Social Capital that would, in turn, facilitate mutual collaboration (Field 2003, 1 and 45) to address the challenges that HEIs may encounter with the implementation of the SDA.

Note 1: For this study, our research framework includes our comments on the epistemological intersection between interpretivism and critical theory, as well as the relationship we pointed out between Human Capital Theory and Social Capital Theory.

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