The effectiveness of a short learning programme in organisational development

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Abstract

This study focuses on the evaluation of the Advanced Programme in Organisational Development (ADOP), a one-year short learning programme (SLP) presented by the Centre for Industrial and Organisational Psychology (IOP) at the University of South Africa (Unisa). In contrast to formal degree modules, non-formal or SLPs give lecturers the opportunity to adapt quickly to market needs. The study focused on the results of two evaluations that were completed in 2006 and 2009. The purpose in both instances was to determine the relevance of the programme and especially the extent to which students can and do apply the new knowledge in their work environment. Overall, the results indicated positive satisfaction with the programme, including its contents and delivery mode. However, a number of important aspects emerged which should be taken into consideration in order to improve student satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

Continuous education is important for business. Markets and business requirements change rapidly, and formal academic offerings such as degrees cannot always adapt quickly to market demands. To cater for changing market needs, universities have introduced short learning programmes (SLPs) that focus on market or specific issues or skills demands. Wain (2000, 36 and 39) summarises these needs and points out that current debates on lifelong learning tend to be shaped by discussions of vocationalism and managerialism that are orientated towards the requirements of the market, the global economy and the needs of employers, which are subject to the principle of performability. The SLPs at Unisa are presented within the framework of open and distance learning (ODL). Similar to more formal education, SLPs face the same ongoing struggle in establishing credibility and legitimacy, even when they are of good quality. The success of SLPs in achieving quality education has varied among countries and institutions (Sukati, Esampally and Vilakati 2007).

The characteristics of SLPs within the ODL framework can be summarised as follows (Unisa 2009):

- SLPs include short or advanced courses/programmes, workshops and seminars that do not form part of the Programme Qualification Mix (PQM) of Unisa and exclude learnerships.

- SLPs differ from subsidised, formal academic offerings in that they are often focused on a market or specific issue or skills demand; are dependent on a quick response; and are developed for a specific niche target group.

- SLPs can provide an opportunity to test and develop programmes before they are formalised and can serve as an incubator for formal offerings.

- SLPs can be credit-bearing, that is, they can be linked to a registered qualification and can lead to the award of credits for part of a qualification. Non-credit-bearing courses can carry points that are required for ongoing registration for occupations which are linked to professional councils.

- SLPs are offered on level 5 or higher of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF).

- SLPs can provide students with an access route to formal qualifications.

- SLPs are managed differently from formal academic offerings, and approval for their implementation has to be obtained in a short period of time.

At Unisa, the SLP areas are regulated via the Policy on SLPs, which is aimed at formalising the principles and procedures for the offering of SLPs in order to provide a unified basis for participation by employees. All SLP offerings at Unisa must be approved by Senex in accordance with Section 28 of the Higher Education Act, 1997 (RSA 1997) and must be offered via a recognised structure that is approved by the university. Unisa offers its SLPs by virtue of the Institute Statute in accordance with the Higher Education Act and the *HEQC Framework for Delegated Functions* (CHE 2008).

The need for an SLP in organisational development (OD) was identified in 1998 after discussions with human resource practitioners and after thorough evaluation of existing OD programmes. The market research revealed that there were no formal or non-formal programmes in place at universities. However, a few consultants were presenting OD training courses. The decision was then taken to develop a one-year programme in OD – the Advanced Programme in Organisational Development (APOD) – through the Centre for Industrial and Organisational Psychology (IOP) at Unisa.

According to Sukati, et al. (2007), it is important that ODL institutions continuously evaluate and review their systems to ensure that there are no lapses in quality. With this in mind and to keep abreast with changes, market and student needs, APOD has been formally evaluated twice. The results and subsequent findings are discussed in this article.

THE ADVANCED PROGRAMME IN ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Organisational development is defined as a system-wide and values-based collaborate process of applying science knowledge to the adaptive development, improvement and reinforcement of such organisational features as the strategies, structures, processes, people and cultures that lead to organisational effectiveness (Rothwell and Sullivan 2005). Beckhard's (1969, 9) definition summarises OD as follows: 'Organisational development is an effort (1), planned (2), organisation-wide, and (3) managed from the top to (4) increase organisational effectiveness and health, through (5) planned interventions in the organisation's "processes", using behavioural science knowledge'. A number of researchers, such as Cummings and Worley (2009), and Van Tonder and Roodt (2008) have focused on the required competencies of the OD consultant.

The competency profile of an OD consultant can be summarised and integrated into the following six main areas (Cilliers in Van Tonder and Roodt 2008):

- *Interpersonal awareness*: This implies continuous enquiry into the self and striving towards optimal psychological functioning.

- *Values and belief system*: Consultants ideally operate from a humanistic value system.

- *Interpersonal skills*: This refers to the effective management of the consultant's relationships with the client.

- *Group facilitation skills*: This focuses on opportunities for clients to learn and grow; it involves knowledge of groups, organisations, cultures and diversity, and psychology.

- *General consulting skills*: This includes the general and specific management of the consultancy, joint diagnoses, data analyses, and the design and planning of interventions.

• *Knowledge*: This includes OD theory, appreciation of planned change, action research, approaches to managing change, knowing about available interventions, appreciation of the need for evaluation and institutionalising change programmes.

With the above background in mind, APOD was developed with the following four modules.

Module 1: Dynamics of behaviour

In this module the aspiring consultants are afforded the opportunity to get to know themselves better and to become aware of their influence on other people.

Module 2: Interpersonal and facilitation skills

The participants are taught different interpersonal skills that are essential for group facilitators. The skills focus on applying interpersonal skills during individual interaction with clients as well as on how to act as group facilitators.

Module 3: The process of organisation development

The participants are exposed to an OD model that is based on the principles of process consultation and action research. They are required to complete an OD report, which has to provide an exposition of a total OD project.

Module 4: The link between organisation development, interventions and strategic planning

The current dynamic environment in South Africa makes exceptional demands on any organisation. This module enables participants to determine an organisation's culture and to make plans to change it to suit the new strategy, if necessary. The module enhances participants' skills in acting as strategic planning facilitators.

The tuition is by means of distance education, prescribed work, tutorial letters, assignments and two one-week workshops. Students are required to write two three-hour examinations. An overview of the programme is presented in Figure1.

Contact between students and lecturers is via e-mail, telephone, letters, tutorial feedback letters and two one-week workshops. Although the mode of delivery is still predominantly via distance and correspondence, the introduction of two one-week workshops provides students with the opportunity to learn and practise needed skills and to interact with other students and tutors. The curriculum of the programme was thus developed in such a way as to cover all areas of learner support that are essential for distance learners, namely, learning or academic support, personal support and administrative support (Gatsha and Evans 2010).

APOD students receive their study material and supplementary tutorial letters via post, which enables them to proceed with their learning at home. The study material is prepared in such a way that students have to engage in real-life assignments. For example, they are required to analyse their own profile and compile a development plan. They are also required to conduct individual interviews and facilitate a group process, as well as draw up plans for an OD diagnosis in their organisation and write a proposal in which they give a visual exposition of a logical, practical and workable strategic plan. They are further required to submit assignments based on this practical work. These assignments are used as input for the practical workshops and thus prepare students theoretically and practically.
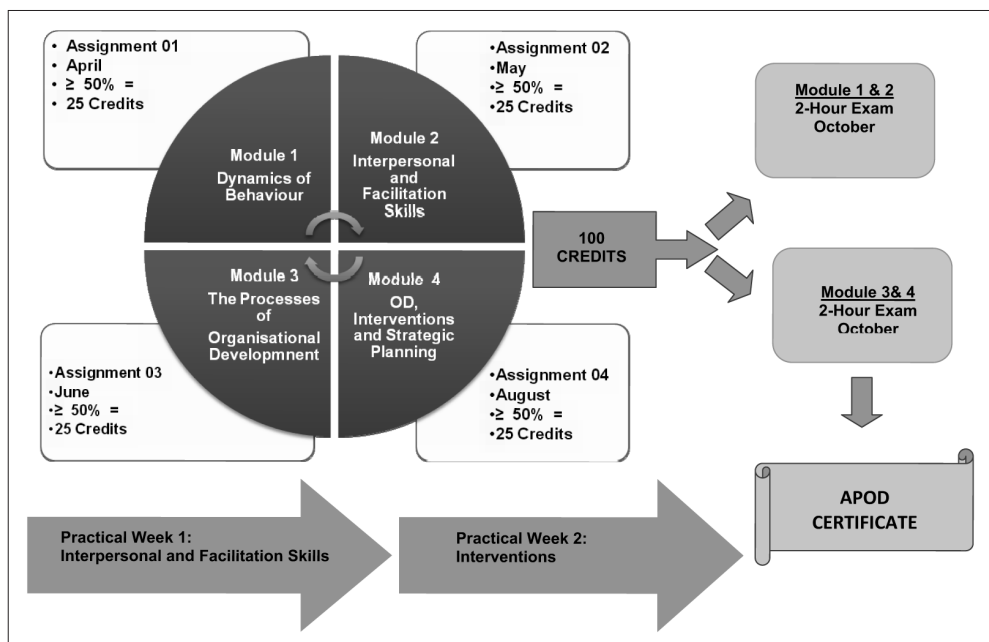

Figure 1: Overview of the Advance Programme in Organisational Development

The first practical week is divided into two parts, namely, interpersonal and facilitation skills that teach participants how to facilitate group sessions. The last three days consist of a simulation exercise in which participants have to diagnose an organisation by means of interviews and give feedback to the client. The students have to apply the skills they learned in the first part. Continuous feedback is given to students during the week by skilled facilitators (registered industrial psychologists) who use assessment sheets. The ratio is one facilitator to

about six students. This allows for one-on-one coaching, and maximum student and facilitator interaction.

The second practical week focuses once again on facilitation skills, but in syndicates as part of an organisational diagnoses simulation exercise. The second week focuses on the planning of an OD intervention. Again, a practical case study is used with syndicate tasks. The last day focuses on OD interventions with the emphasis on planning and conducting a team-building session. The same feedback methodology is used, namely, individual and group feedback that is supported by assessment sheets. An objective of the programme is to move away from only theory, which is in line with the trend identified by Mitchell and Le Roux (2010). They formulate the move as a significant trend away from the theoretical discussion on teaching theories in the 1980s, which generally ignored the nature of ODL education and students, towards a more practical approach to teaching university subjects.

The aim of the programme is to train OD consultants, human resources managers, training managers, change agents, personnel consultants and other practitioners involved in or required to facilitate organisational change. The programme emphasises the theoretical basis of OD, with practical opportunities (two workshops) which are provided so that the students can acquire essential skills. The emphasis of the programme is thus on the acquisition of appropriate theoretical and practical skills and it is approached in terms of blended learning. According to Heydenrych and Prinsloo (2010), there is an increased use of blended learning options, including synchronous and asynchronous teaching, learning and support. There is therefore a blurring of the strict separation between conventional and distance education (Tait and Mills 1999).

After presenting the programme for eight years, it was decided to not only focus on trainees' reaction after each workshop, but also to consider the more advanced levels of evaluation according to Kirkpatrick (in Craig 1987, 302).

EVALUATING APOD

Kirkpatrick (in Craig 1987, 302) identifies the following four levels:

- Level 1 – the trainees' reaction;
- Level 2 – the change in trainee learning;
- Level 3 – behaviour change; and
- Level 4 – the results of the organisation.

Level 1 mainly refers to students' reactions directly after attending a training programme. The purpose was to determine how well students liked a particular programme. This was done after each workshop and the input was used for planning the following year's workshops and as a basis to update the modules.

A favourable reaction to a particular training programme is no guarantee that learning has in fact taken place. It is thus essential that learning itself be evaluated during the evaluation phase of training. Level 2 thus focused on the learning itself and whether students had acquired the intended knowledge skills and attitudes based on their participation in the learning event. This was done by assessing the assignments and the exams. This, however, did not necessarily mean that behavioural changes occurred once students were back on the job (Level 3) or that there were positive results for the organisation (Level 4). It was thus decided to evaluate the participants' behaviour change as well as the potential impact on the organisation by means of an electronic questionnaire to all the former students who had participated in the programme.

THE SAMPLE AND SURVEY PROCESS

The e-mail addresses of all past students (2002 to 2009) were obtained for inclusion in the sample. The survey was conducted twice, in 2006 and 2009 respectively. Students from 2002 to 2006 were invited to participate in the first survey and students from 2007 to 2009 to participate in the second survey. In 2006, a 41.3 per cent response rate was obtained and in 2009, a 43.8 per cent response rate was obtained from students who had available and usable e-mail addresses.

Table 1: Geographical information

	2006	%	2009	%
Job categories				
OD practitioner	21	26.9	31	38.3
HR practitioner	33	42.3	17	21.0
Other	24	30.8	33	40.7
	78	100	81	
Highest qualifications				
Matric	4	5.1	3	3.7
Advanced development programmes	5	6.4	7	8.6
B-degree or diploma	20	25.6	33	40.7

Honours degree	40	51.3	29	35.8
Master's degree	8	10.3	9	11.1
PhD	1	1.3	-	-
	78	100	81	
Race groups				
Black	38	48.7	55	67.9
Coloured	1	1.3	7	8.6
Indian	4	5.1	4	4.9
White	34	43.6	15	18.5
Other	1	1.3	0	-
	78	100	81	

In both instances an invitation was sent to students with a request to participate, since participation would enable the Centre for IOP to determine whether the programme was still meeting the needs of students and the organisation. The students were informed that the outcome would enable lecturers to adapt the contents to current market and student needs.

Some interesting shifts were noted, such as: a higher percentage of OD practitioners in 2009; more participants with B-degrees or diplomas but fewer with honours degrees; a substantial increase in the number of black African students and a subsequent drop in white students.

DEVELOPING THE SURVEY INSTRUMENT

Considering the purpose of the programme as well as the four levels of evaluation, Table 2 shows the components that were evaluated in 2006 and 2009. The five sections (as listed in Table 2) were evaluated by using a 4-point scale: poor, fair, good and excellent. During the development of the questionnaire, the intent was to focus on both the theory and the practical components as well as on the extent to which OD activities were used in the work environment.

Table 2: Module components evaluated

Module component	2006	2009	Comments and level evaluation
The OD process (extent used in work):			Focuses on related OD activities in the work environment (levels 3 and 4)
Entry and contracting	✓	✓	
Data gathering	✓	✓	
Data analysis	✓	✓	
Data interpretation, report writing & feedback	✓	✓	
Interventions	✓	✓	
Effectiveness of modules 1–4	-	✓	Experience of module contents (level 2)
Effectiveness of practical workshops	-	✓	Experience of workshop (levels 2 and 3)
Programme content and evaluation	-	✓	Overall programme evaluation (levels 1 and 2)
Training services evaluation	✓	✓	Satisfaction with admin support (level 1)
Number of scale questions	22	61	
Number of open-ended questions	2	4	

RESULTS OF THE SURVEYS

The overall results of the comparative dimensions that were measured in 2006 and 2009 are listed in Table 3. These are the only programme components that could be compared between the two surveys.

Table 3: The OD process – extent used in work and comparative results of dimensions – 2009 vs 2006

Dimension	2006 % Agree	2009 % Agree	+/- than 2006 %
Data interpretation, report writing and feedback	83.1	74.8	- 8.3
Diagnoses	70.1	66.7	- 3.4
Entry and contracting	69.6	65.3	- 4.3
Interventions	68.0	64.1	- 3.9
Data gathering	59.8	57.2	- 2.6
Data analysis	58.1	56.0	- 2.1
Overall average	65.7	62.3	- 2.4

Although Table 3 shows a slight decrease in the overall satisfaction score, no significant differences were noted either overall or per statement. It appears that most students mostly used data interpretation, report writing and feedback (74.8%) and diagnoses (66.7%). It also appears that data analysis (interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, observations and archives) was used the least (56.0%).

A more detailed analysis of the results of the questions pertaining to data analysis reveals the following:

- 69.9 per cent often or always used interviews;

- 59 per cent often or always used self-generated action plans, MBO and performance appraisal;

- 58.2 per cent often or always used questionnaires;

- 55.7 per cent often or always used observation; and

- 53.3 per cent often or always used focus groups and archives.

EFFECTIVENESS OF MODULES AND PRACTICAL WORKSHOPS

The results of the effectiveness of the four modules (see Table 4) all showed very high satisfaction scores between 86.5 per cent and 90.7 per cent (good and excellent). The detailed results are listed in tables 5 to 8.

Table 4: Results of Modules

Group	Count	Mean	Poor (%)	Fair (%)	Good (%)	Excellent (%)
Module 1	80.5	3.20	0.3	9.7	59.3	30.6
Module 2	81.0	3.28	0.1	9.0	53.1	37.7
Module 3	80.3	3.20	1.2	11.0	53.9	33.8
Module 4	80.1	3.20	1.1	12.1	52.8	34.0
Overall averages	80.4	3.22	0.8	10.7	54.4	34.0

Table 5: Results of Module 1 – dynamics of behaviour

Question	Count	Mean	Poor (%)	Fair (%)	Good (%)	Excellent (%)
The skills needed by OD consultants	81	3.40	0.0	4.9	50.6	44.4
The phases of OD	81	3.30	0.0	8.6	53.1	38.3
The explanation of the concept of OD	81	3.20	0.0	4.9	70.4	24.7
Compiling your own development plan	79	2.92	1.3	20.3	63.3	15.2
Overall averages	80.5	3.20	0.3	9.7	59.3	30.6

It is interesting to note from the results in Table 5 that a number of students appear not to have been so comfortable with compiling their own development plans. The first purpose of this section was to determine whether the OD consultant had already developed the skills to be able to conduct career self-management and to further develop those skills (Coetzee and Schreuder 2010). The second purpose was to develop the student's intrapersonal awareness, which implies continuous enquiry into the self and striving towards optimal psychological functioning (Cilliers 2008). Rothwell and Sullivan (2005) summarise the need for personal development of OD consultants as what you do not know about yourself (refer to quadrants 2 and 4 of the 'Unknown to self' quadrants of the Johari window). This can reduce the professional effectiveness of OD consultants as well as their quality of life.

Table 6: Results of Module 2 – interpersonal and facilitation skills

Question	Count	Mean	Poor (%)	Fair (%)	Good (%)	Excellent (%)
The facilitation process	81	3.37	1.2	6.2	46.9	45.7
The explanation of facilitation	81	3.31	0.0	8.6	51.9	39.5
The micro skills	81	3.22	0.0	9.9	58.0	32.1
Problem-solving & decision-making	81	3.22	0.0	11.1	55.6	33.3
Overall averages	81	3.28	0.3	8.9	53.1	37.7

Again, all of the above results were very good. This module provided most of the theoretical background for the first practical workshop and appears to have been one of the contributing factors of the success of the first workshop. This is discussed in the next section.

Table 7: Results of Module 3 – the process of OD

Question	Count	Mean	Poor (%)	Fair (%)	Good (%)	Excellent (%)
Entry and contracting	81	3.31	0.0	9.9	49.4	40.7
Feedback	81	3.28	0.0	8.6	54.3	37.0
Joint action planning	80	3.25	2.5	5.0	57.5	35.0
Diagnoses/data gathering	79	3.24	1.3	10.1	51.9	36.7
Interventions	80	3.16	1.3	11.3	57.5	30.0
Models	81	2.98	2.5	21.0	53.1	23.5
Overall averages	80.3	3.20	1.2	11.0	53.9	33.8

In comparing the results of the modules, Table 7 still shows very positive results; however, it appears that a larger number of participants experienced some of the results as fair. This might indicate that participants experienced the application of the process as more difficult. The last question referred to models, and appears to be the area where students needed the most development. Models are used in OD to make sense of what might seem, after an initial data-gathering step, to be nothing more than a massive buzzing state of confusion (Howard 1994). This is thus an important area for students to master because models serve as a compass to guide managers and consultants as they lead or facilitate change efforts (Rothwell and Sullivan, 2005).

Table 8: Results of Module 4 – link between organisational development, interventions and strategic planning

Question	Count	Mean	Poor (%)	Fair (%)	Good (%)	Excellent (%)
The strategic planning framework	80	3.36	1.3	6.3	47.5	45.0
Envisioning (vision, mission & operating philosophy)	80	3.26	0.0	12.5	48.8	38.8
Environmental assessment/SWOT analysis	81	3.25	0.0	11.1	53.1	35.8
Stakeholder analysis	80	3.20	1.3	10.0	56.3	32.5
Values scan and assessing organisational culture	80	3.18	1.3	10.0	58.8	30.0
Implementation of plans, first re-evaluation, re-planning and evaluation	80	3.16	1.3	12.5	55.0	31.3
Team building (GRPI model)	80	2.98	2.5	22.5	50.0	25.0
Overall averages	80.1	3.20	1.1	12.1	52.8	34.0

The results of Module 4 are again positive, although the largest number of the participants experienced the results as poor and fair (13.2%). This module focused more on intervention strategies which are largely unfamiliar to most of the students. Brown (2011) lists at least 70 different types of interventions which the OD consultant can apply. These include interventions on the level of the individual, teams, intergroups and the total organisational system. This appears to be the reason why a number of students expressed the need for additional training in interventions (as is highlighted below).

The effectiveness of the two workshops indicates an adequate balance between theory and practice (90.1%). However, only 66.7 per cent of the respondents felt the time that was allocated for the two workshops was 'just right', while 24.7 per cent felt it was too short. These results are much higher than the satisfaction level of 72.1 per cent that was obtained by students in the study by Gastha and Evans (2010) among distance learning students in Botswana. The open-ended question regarding the workshop gave very mixed results, with a number of students

expressing the need for follow-up workshops. The students seemed to need skills and knowledge in the following areas:

- performance management;
- job evaluation;
- change management;
- organisational design;
- developing interventions; and
- teamwork.

All of the above are not covered in the programme and can be considered as an opportunity to develop a more advanced programme or some specific training courses.

PROGRAMME CONTENT AND EVALUATION AND TRAINING SERVICES

Overall, 82.7 per cent of the respondents were satisfied with the programme's content and evaluation methods. An important point is that 91.3 per cent of them agreed that the training objectives were achieved and 85.0 per cent agreed that they could apply their new knowledge and skills back on the job. The last component that was analysed, namely the training services evaluation, also obtained a high satisfaction score of 81.7 per cent. However, two aspects of concern emerged:

1. Only 57.0 per cent of the students were satisfied with the communication between the Centre's administration and themselves.

2. Only 53.2 per cent of students were satisfied with the Centre's administration.

This is in contrast to the very positive feedback where 98.7 per cent of the respondents found the programme relevant with respect to their needs and 97.4 per cent agreed that the lecturers were knowledgeable and professional.

DISCUSSION

The results of the two evaluations (especially the 2009 evaluation) indicate a very positive evaluation of all four levels. It is interesting to note that although the student profile changed from the first to the second evaluation, which is typical of Unisa's student profile (Ntshoe 2010), the high satisfaction levels were maintained.

According to Gatsha and Evans (2010), learner support consists of three subsections, namely: (1) learning or academic support; (2) personal support; and (3) administrative support. From the results of the evaluation, it appears that the students were mostly satisfied with the learning, academic and personal support. Both the results of the effectiveness of the modules, practical workshops and programme content were evaluated as very positive. The majority of the students agreed that their training objectives were met; however, it appears that one pillar of learner support (administrative support and communication with the Centre) should be investigated and adjusted.

It is important to note from the evaluation the extent to which some of the training activities were used extensively at work, such as data interpretation, report-writing, feedback and diagnosis. However, activities such as data-gathering and data analysis, which require more specialised skills, were used to a lesser degree. Although both these activities were covered to some extent in the theoretical and practical training, it appears as if students were not as involved with these techniques as with most of the other measured techniques. Both data-gathering and data analysis were mostly done by industrial psychologists with at least a B-degree in statistics, which is not the level required by this programme. The results thus confirm that less attention can be given to some data-gathering and data-analysis skills, but more emphasis should be placed on models.

Although most students were satisfied with the effectiveness of the two workshops, it appears that an additional follow-up workshop would satisfy the additional training needs of students.

In summary, it is proposed that the following will enhance the performance of students and promote the application of the skills and knowledge they learned during the programme in their work environment:

- Add additional information on organisational modules to Module 3.

- Organise follow-up workshops, especially in the areas of data gathering and data analysis.

- Investigate and improve the administrative support students receive. It may be a good idea to also provide students with access to *my*Unisa as this will improve communication between students and the Centre as well as the availability of study material. The *my*Unisa platform is a learning management system for academic collaboration and study-related interaction. The system was developed to supplement and enhance academic interaction and improve communication between Unisa and its students (Mbatha and Naidoo 2010).

- Consider changing the programme's name from Advanced Programme in OD to Programme in OD, because most of the basic organisational development

skills and theory are covered in the programme. Consideration can then be given to developing a more advanced programme to focus on high-level organisational development interventions.

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