

**A COMPETENCY-BASED INDUSTRY 4.0 CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK
FOR DEVELOPING HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY
IN SOUTH AFRICA**

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my late father (Fungai Felix Beretu), my mother (Mercy Nyasha Chikumbindi/Chibisa), and my grandparents (Rhodha and Silas Chikumbindi), and to everyone who believed in and supported me during the demanding, often challenging journey to the successful completion of this qualification.

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ABSTRACT

Growing global expectations for higher education to address complex societal and economic challenges have intensified the critique of the responsiveness of university curricula to evolving labour market demands. The emergence of Industry 4.0 has highlighted the limitations of traditional curriculum models, which fail to adequately develop graduate employability capabilities. In South Africa, persistent skills mismatches across key economic sectors further underscore concerns regarding the relevance and quality of graduate talent supply. These challenges highlight the need for contextually responsive, empirically grounded curriculum frameworks that produce future-fit, industry-ready graduates.

In response, this doctoral study focused on Human Resource Management (HRM) graduates as a representative professional cohort, aiming to develop a competency-based curriculum development framework for Industry 4.0 curriculum design to enhance the employability of HRM graduates in South Africa. The study contributes to theory by integrating employability theory, competency-based education, and Industry 4.0 capability requirements into a coherent curriculum design framework tailored to the context of higher education in developing countries. Methodologically, it advances qualitative curriculum research through a sequential design that systematically integrates a structured literature synthesis with empirical insights from academic and professional stakeholders.

Guided by a constructivist philosophical orientation, the study adopted a qualitative research design implemented in sequential phases. Data were generated through a thematic literature review and semi-structured interviews with HRM lecturers from a selected university in the Western Cape and board members of the South African Board for People Practice (SABPP). The thematic literature review utilised the AOSIS and Web of Science databases to synthesise scholarly work on employability, competency development, and curriculum design. Thematic analysis identified key employability capabilities and curriculum design practices aligned with Industry 4.0 requirements.

The integration of theoretical and empirical findings culminated in the development of a curriculum design framework grounded in theory and informed by empirical evidence. Practically, the framework provides higher education institutions, curriculum designers, and professional bodies with a structured tool to guide curriculum renewal and strengthen the employability and future-readiness of HRM graduates in South Africa. Ethical clearance for the study was obtained in accordance with the guidelines of the UNISA Department of Human Resource Management Research Ethics Committee.

Keywords: skills development; professional development; competency-based education; industry 4.0; industry-relevant curriculum; curriculum design; graduate employability; curriculum responsiveness; future-ready graduates; Human Resource Management (HRM); stakeholder engagement; higher education.

OPSOMMING

Groeiende wêreldwye verwagtinge dat hoër onderwys komplekse maatskaplike en ekonomiese uitdagings moet aanpak, het die kritiek verskerp dat universiteitskurrikulums onvoldoende reageer op die veranderende eise van die arbeidsmark. Die opkoms van Nywerheid 4.0 het die beperkings van tradisionele kurrikulums uitgelig, wat in gebreke bly om die indiensneembaarheidsvermoëns van gegradueerdes voldoende te ontwikkel. In Suid-Afrika beklemtoon volgehoue vaardigheidswanpassings die noodsaaklikheid van gegradueerdes met die nodige vaardighede. Hierdie uitdagings beklemtoon die behoefte aan kontekstueel responsiewe en empiries gefundeerde kurrikulumraamwerke wat toekomstige bedryfsgerigte gegradueerdes kan lewer.

In reaksie hierop het hierdie doktorale studie op gegradueerdes in Menslikehulpbronbestuur (MHB) as 'n verteenwoordigende professionele groep gefokus. Die doel was om 'n bevoegdheidsgebaseerde raamwerk vir Nywerheid 4.0-kurrikulumontwerp te ontwikkel om die indiensneembaarheid van MHB-gegradueerdes in Suid-Afrika te verbeter. Die studie lewer 'n teoretiese bydrae deur indiensneembaarheidsteorie, bevoegdheidsgebaseerde onderwys en Nywerheid 4.0-bevoegdheidsvereistes in 'n kurrikulumontwerp raamwerk te integreer, wat van toepassing is op die konteks van ontwikkelende lande in hoër onderwys. Metodologies bevorder die studie kwalitatiewe kurrikulumnavorsing deur 'n sekwensiële ontwerp. Die ontwerp het 'n gestruktureerde literatuursintese sistematies met empiriese insigte van akademiese en professionele belanghebbendes geïntegreer.

Gebaseer op 'n konstruktivistiese filosofiese oriëntering, het die studie 'n kwalitatiewe navorsingsontwerp gebruik wat in sekwensiële fases geïmplementeer was. Data is gegenereer deur middel van 'n sistematiese literatuuroorsig en semi-gestruktureerde onderhoude met MHB-dosente van 'n geselekteerde universiteit in die Wes-Kaap en raadslede van die South African Board for People Practice (SABPP). Die sistematiese literatuuroorsig het die AOSIS- en Web of Science-databasisse gebruik om literatuur oor indiensneembaarheid, bevoegdheidsontwikkeling en kurrikulumontwerp te sintetiseer. Tematiese analise het die identifisering van kern indiensneembaarheidsvermoëns en kurrikulumontwerppraktyke, wat met Nywerheid 4.0-vereistes belyn is, moontlik gemaak.

Die integrasie van teoretiese en empiriese bevindinge het gelei tot die ontwikkeling van 'n teoreties gefundeerde en empiries ingeligte kurrikulumontwerp raamwerk. Prakties bied die raamwerk aan hoëronderwysinstellings, kurrikulumontwerpers en professionele liggame 'n gestruktureerde hulpmiddel vir kurrikulum vernuwing om die indiensneembaarheid en

toekomsgerigheid van MHB-gegradueerdes in Suid-Afrika te bevorder. Etiese goedkeuring vir die studie is verkry ooreenkomstig die navorsingsetiek riglyne van UNISA.

ISISHWANKATHELO

Ukonyuka kolindelo lwehlabathi lokuba imfundo ephakamileyo ijongane nemiceli-mngeni enzima yezentlalo nezoqoqosho kuye kwandisa ukugxekwa kokuba iinkqubo zezifundo zeedyunivesithi aziphenduli ngokwaneleyo kwiimfuno eziguqukayo zemarike yezabasebenzi. Ukuvela kwenguquko entsha yoqoqosho kugxininise imida yeendlela zesintu zokuyila ikharithulam, ezisilelayo ekuphuhliseni ngokwaneleyo izakhono zokufaneleka emsebenzini kwabafundi abagqibayo. EMzantsi Afrika, ukungahambelani kwezakhono okuqhubekayo kumacandelo abalulekileyo oqoqosho kunika ngakumbi iinkxalabo malunga nokubaluleka komgangatho wobonelelo lwabafundi abagqibayo abanetalente. Le miceli-mingeni ibonisa imfuneko yezakhelo zekharithulam eziphendula kwimeko ethile nezisekelwe kubungqina bophando, ezinokuvelisa abafundi abagqibayo abalungele ikamva nabasebenzayo kumashishini.

Ukuphendula oku, olu phando lobugqirha lugxile kubafundi abagqiba uLawulo lweZibonelelo zabantu njengoqeqesho lobungcali olumele injongo yokuphuhlisa isakhelo esisekelwe kwizakhono zoyilo lwekharithulam lwenguquko entsha yoqoqosho, ukuze kuphuculwe ukufaneleka emsebenzini kwabafundi boLawulo lweZibonelelo zabantu eMzantsi Afrika. Ngokwethiyori, isifundo sidibanisa ithiyori yokufaneleka emsebenzini, imfundo esekelwe kwizakhono, kunye neemfuno zezakhono zenguquko entsha yoqoqosho, zibe sisakhelo esinye esihambelana noyilo lwekharithulam elungele imeko yamazwe asakhulayo kwimfundo ephakamileyo. Ngendlela yophando, siphuhlisa uphando lwekharithulam olusemgangathweni ngokusebenzisa uyilo olunezigaba ezilandelelanayo, oludibanisa ngokucwangcisiweyo uhlalutyo lwemithombo lweencwadi kunye nokuqokelelwa kolwazi oluvela kubathathi nxaxheba bezemfundo abazingcali.

Ukukhokhelwa yindlela yefilosofi yokwakha, isifundo samkele uyilo lophando olusemgangathweni oluphunyezwe ngezigaba ezilandelelanayo. Ulwazi luqokelelwe ngohlalutyo olunenkqubo lwencwadi kunye neengxoxo ezinemibuzo evulekileyo nabafundisi boLawulo lwezibonelelo zabantu kwiyunivesithi ekhethiweyo eNtshona Koloni kunye namalungu ebhodi yeSouth African Board for People Practice (SABPP). Uhlalutyo lwencwadi lusebenzisa isiseko sedatha ye-AOSIS kunye ne-Web of Science ukudibanisa uphando lwezenzululwazi malunga nokufaneleka emsebenzini, uphuhliso lwezakhono, kunye noyilo lwekharithulam. Uhlalutyo lwezihloko luvumela ukuchongwa kwezakhono eziphambili zokufaneleka emsebenzini kunye neendlela zokuyila ikharithulam ezihambelana neemfuno zenguquko entsha.

Ukudityaniswa kweziphumo zethiyori nezeempawu zovavanyo lwentsimi kukhokelele ekuphuhlisweni kwesakhelo soyilo lwekharithulam esekelwe kwithiyori kwaye exhaswe bubungqina bophando. Ngokwasemsebenzini, ibonelela amaziko emfundo aphakamileyo, abayili beekharithulam, kunye nemibutho yobungcali ngesixhobo esicwangcisiweyo sokukhokela uhlaziyo lwekharithulam nokomeleza ukufaneleka emsebenzini kunye nokulungelelaniswa nekamva labafundi bezoLawulo lwezibonelelo zabantu eMzantsi Afrika. Imvume yokuziphatha yophando yafunyanwa ngokuhambelana nemigaqo yeKomiti yoPhando lweZimilo yeSebe leHuman Resource Management e-UNISA.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

1.1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The need to produce employable graduates who can function effectively in an ever-changing labour market, characterised by global mobility, uncertainty, technological disruption, and a rapid increase in work-readiness expectations, is a global challenge for higher education institutions (HEIs). Recent global evidence indicates that employers increasingly prioritise adaptive problem-solving, digital fluency, communication competence, and work-integrated experience when recruiting graduates, placing pressure on universities to redesign curricula toward employability outcomes rather than disciplinary knowledge alone (World Economic Forum, 2025; OECD, 2024). These challenges are also present in South Africa, where they are exacerbated by complex socio-economic issues, such as a skills shortage and a high unemployment rate of 31.9% as reported in Q3 2025 (Statistics South Africa (SSA), 2025). These challenges collectively contribute to the ongoing concerns regarding the relevance of the academic programmes as well as widening the discrepancy between graduate competencies and the industry requirements (Aljohani, Aslam, Khadidos & Hassan, 2022; Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), 2021); Wawak, Teixeira Domingues & Sampaio, 2024; World Economic Forum (WEF), 2020). Due to the above challenges, universities that offer professional programmes such as Human Resource Management (HRM) are facing intense scrutiny over their ability to produce employable graduates who can make meaningful contributions to an organisation's performance and the nation's development.

The discipline of HRM has progressed significantly over the past two decades, shifting from traditional employee management to strategic, evidence-based, and technology-enabled HR practices, which have placed new requirements on HR professionals (Ulrich, 2020). Contemporary HR experts are expected to possess robust analytical abilities, interpersonal competence, ethical decision-making, business insight, digital knowledge, and the capacity to align personnel management strategies with the organisation's objectives (Falletta & Combs, 2021). However, research consistently reveals a misalignment between what HRM graduates understand and what HR experts expect (Jackson, 2019; Donnelly & Hughes, 2023). Industry stakeholders often complain that graduates lack the key problem-solving proficiencies, practical knowledge, workplace preparedness, and appropriate awareness required for operational HR practice (Maisiri & Van Dyk, 2021; Seunarin, 2024). This shift reflects the broader repositioning of HR from an administrative support function to a strategic value-creating capability responsible for talent analytics, organisational culture, workforce planning,

change leadership, and ethical governance in digitally enabled organisations (Ulrich, Mayrhofer & Shipton, 2024).

Subsequently, there is an increasing worldwide and nationwide pressure on institutions of higher education to produce graduates who are not only academically knowledgeable but also capable of performing effectively in complex workplace settings (Beretu, 2018). Thus, calling on HEIs to reexamine their curriculum design, pedagogical systems, assessment approaches, and stakeholder engagement strategies to address the surmounting pressure outlined above. This call is strengthened by the worldwide transition toward the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), which requires HR graduates to understand the digital revolution, employee analytics, and hybrid labour models, make algorithmic decisions, and address ethical considerations (Majam & Jarbandhan, 2022; Nafukho, Mansour, & Van, 2024). It is from this viewpoint that higher education is expected to demonstrate responsiveness and alertness through evidence-based curriculum transformation, strengthened industry partnerships, and pedagogical improvement. In South Africa, these pressures are intensified by persistent youth unemployment, uneven digital access, institutional resource disparities, and the need to prepare graduates for both formal and emerging forms of work in a volatile labour market (CHE, 2024; Statistics South Africa, 2025).

In this context, this study is positioned not merely to diagnose graduate competence gaps but to address the deeper process-oriented problem of how HRM curricula are designed, implemented, evaluated, and renewed in relation to professional expectations and contextual demands. The study, therefore, aims to develop an evidence-based, stakeholder-responsive framework to guide universities in strengthening HRM graduate competence through coherent curriculum design, integrated pedagogy, authentic assessment, and enabling institutional conditions. This framework constitutes the central scholarly and practical contribution of the study and is explicitly anticipated from the outset of the research. This chapter thus introduces the study, provides background information, clarifies the problem statement, states the aim and objectives, poses the research questions, presents the theoretical foundation, and provides an overview of the methodology and chapter outline.

1.2 CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The South African higher education landscape has undergone a significant transformation since the advent of democracy in 1994. Policies such as the Higher Education Act of 1997, the National Qualifications Framework Act of 2008, the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training of 2014, and successive restatements of the National Development Plan 2030

stress the significance of producing socially mindful, creative, employable, and meaningful participation in the economy by the graduates (Ivala & Scott, 2019). Despite these policy changes and institutional efforts, the transition from university to the workplace remains a persistent issue for many graduates in South Africa (Council on Higher Education (CHE), 2024). The empirical site of this study was a public university in South Africa offering undergraduate HRM qualifications. To preserve institutional anonymity, the university is not named; however, it may be broadly characterised as a comprehensive higher education institution serving a diverse student body within a resource-constrained and transformation-oriented national context.

The HRM field precisely expects universities to align their programmes with field prospects set by the professional entities such as the South African Board for People Practices (SABPP), the international standards expressed by professional societies such as the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) and the Global Human Resource Competency Network (GHRCN) (Mobarak, 2021). The South African Board for People Practices (SABPP) (2025) provided the HR Competency Model, which emphasises proficiency in ethics, competent practice, management of people, analytics, talent development, labour force planning, worker involvement design, and organisational principles. However, HR employers' feedback frequently exposes that the graduates are inadequately equipped to execute in these areas, specifically when it comes to integrating learned concepts and practice, handling complex organisations, dealing with ethical problems, and using analytical tools (Jackson, Shan & Meek, 2022; Gupta & Mahajan, 2024). Although professional competency frameworks provide valuable external benchmarks, curriculum alignment remains complex because universities must simultaneously balance disciplinary depth, academic autonomy, accreditation requirements, student diversity, and labour market responsiveness.

Additionally, socio-economic disparities exert additional pressure on universities to support students who may lack sufficient exposure to workplace environments, experiential or work-integrated learning, or access to mentors or coaches in their field, and who may end up relying solely on theoretical knowledge acquired in class. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these disparities by disrupting teaching and learning activities, limiting workplace-based learning opportunities, and widening the digital divide (DHET, 2021). Consequently, universities were obliged to implement new teaching modes, such as blended learning, distance instruction, technology-enabled assessment, and online internships, which represent radical changes that constantly redefine the future of HRM education.

Globally, the future of HRM practices is being increasingly influenced by sustainability, digitisation, computerisation, data analytics, staff reskilling, and moral governance (Pandey, Balusamy, & Chilamkurti, 2023). It is significant for the HRM curriculum in South Africa to be progressive and capable of producing graduates who can help organisations navigate these challenges. Nonetheless, existing evaluations of HRM curricula reveal fragmentation, an incompatible alignment with professional requirements, an inadequate understanding of practical involvement, and a limited incorporation of work-based education experiences (Jackson, 2019; Chweu, Schultz, & Jordaan, 2023).

Against this backdrop, the study is situated in a changing, complex setting where universities must demonstrate both awareness and relevance. This study responds to the national obligation to consolidate graduate abilities through an evidence-based curriculum transformation and enhanced partnership between academia and industry. Accordingly, the South African HRM curriculum challenge is not simply one of content updating, but of designing coherent systems that integrate stakeholder voice, pedagogical relevance, assessment authenticity, and continuous renewal.

1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

While graduate employability is widely discussed in higher education scholarship, relatively limited South African research has focused specifically on how HRM curricula are systematically designed, governed, and reviewed to produce professionally competent graduates for contemporary work environments. Despite the increase in HRM programmes in South Africa, a persistent and widely acknowledged gap persists between employers' competence-level expectations and the competence possessed by HRM graduates upon entering the workplace. Employers consistently report concerns about graduate readiness, primarily regarding practical skills, problem-solving capabilities, analytical abilities, professional decision-making, communication, and the capacity to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world contexts (Jackson, 2019; Chweu, Schultz, & Jordaan, 2023; Yong & Ling, 2023). This gap weakens organisational efficiency, hinders the advancement of entry-level HR professionals, and increases the costs of onboarding, retraining, and guidance.

Existing studies frequently diagnose graduate skill gaps but pay less attention to the upstream curriculum processes that generate such outcomes, including stakeholder participation, competence mapping, pedagogical alignment, assessment design, and curriculum governance mechanisms (Tomlinson, 2017; Cook, 2022).

The structural limitations under which universities operate often hinder the responsiveness of their curricula. These limitations comprise inadequate meetings with industry stakeholders, disjointed curriculum evaluation processes, inadequate integration of empirical learning, unreliable implementation of technology-empowered teaching methods, and encounters in developing dependable assessments that not only measure memorisation of theory, but also measure the competence (CHE, 2024; DHET, 2021; Beretu & Charles, 2025). Additionally, curriculum alteration processes often lack a comprehensive framework that aligns with educational goals, professional capabilities, stakeholder expectations, teaching approaches, and organisational support systems. To equip HRM graduates with the proficiencies essential to succeed in modern-day and future workplaces, there is a need for an academically grounded, contextually appropriate, and professionally aligned framework that guides HRM departments in revising, developing, and reinforcing curricula. The framework should be well-versed in realistic data, theoretical perspectives, stakeholder input, and best-practice principles. As a result, many curriculum reform efforts remain fragmented, reactive, or compliance-driven rather than strategically coordinated and evidence-based.

Notwithstanding pockets of modernisation across institutions of higher learning, there is no comprehensive, inclusive framework in South Africa that integrates the design of the curriculum, teaching approaches, industry prospects, professional HR standards, and progressive HRM needs of students. The lack of such a framework allows the ongoing discrepancy between industry expectations and graduate output to persist. Thus, this study addresses the absence of a logical, evidence-based framework to guide universities in developing HRM graduates' competence in line with modern-day professional expectations.

In addition to the absence of an integrated framework guiding HRM curriculum design, universities lack structured, evidence-based mechanisms to evaluate the extent to which HRM programmes are coherently aligned with defined graduate competencies, professional standards, and stakeholder expectations. Curriculum review and quality assurance processes are frequently compliance-driven, episodic, and reliant on narrative self-evaluation, offering limited diagnostic insight into strengths, gaps, and areas requiring targeted intervention (CHE, 2024). The absence of a transparent, systematic evaluative mechanism constrains institutions' ability to monitor curriculum responsiveness, demonstrate competence development, and support defensible accreditation and continuous improvement processes. Consequently, there is a need not only for a guiding framework, but also for an operational instrument capable of translating framework principles into measurable, reviewable, and actionable curriculum evidence. The present study therefore addresses both a conceptual gap (absence of an

integrated HRM curriculum framework) and a practical gap (absence of transparent evaluative tools for continuous curriculum improvement).

1.4 RESEARCH AIM

The aim of this study is to develop a comprehensive, evidence-based competency-oriented Industry 4.0 curriculum development framework to strengthen the employability and professional competence of HRM graduates in South African higher education through the systematic integration of stakeholder expectations, curriculum requirements, professional standards, and contextual influences.

1.5 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

To achieve the research aim, the subsequent objectives were created:

1. To explore existing national and international literature on HRM competence necessities, curriculum design standards, teaching and learning methods, and graduate readiness.
2. To examine the perspectives of HR academics, professional bodies, and other relevant stakeholders regarding the competencies required for effective contemporary HRM practice.
3. To assess the alignment between contemporary HRM curricula and the expertise anticipated by the professional bodies and the employers.
4. To identify the gaps and challenges that constrain the development of work-ready HRM graduates.
5. To develop an integrated, evidence-based framework for enhancing HRM graduate competence and curriculum responsiveness, and to translate this framework into practical evaluative instruments that support curriculum review, quality assurance, and continuous improvement.

1.6 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study is guided by the subsequent overarching research question:

How can HRM graduate competence in South African higher education be strengthened to align more closely with professional expectations and contemporary practice demands?

To address this primary research question, sub-questions were formulated. These sub-questions flow directly from the identified problem of curriculum misalignment and are designed to progressively move from competence identification to framework development:

1. What competencies are required of contemporary HR professionals according to literature and professional standards?
2. What are the perspectives of key stakeholders regarding the current competence levels of HRM graduates?
3. To what extent do existing HRM curricula align with professional, industry, and stakeholder expectations?
4. What contextual factors influence curriculum design, implementation, and student readiness in HRM programmes?
5. What framework can guide universities in improving HRM curriculum design and teaching methods to improve graduate competence?

1.7 THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study is underpinned by an integrated theoretical and conceptual framework that draws on complementary theories to explain how Human Resource Management (HRM) curricula can be designed to enhance graduate competence and employability. The framework combines Constructivist Learning Theory, Human Capital Theory, Competency-Based Education, and the General Systems Theory to provide a coherent lens for analysing curriculum inputs, processes, and outcomes within a complex higher education environment. The integration of multiple theories is deliberate, as no single theoretical lens adequately explains the interplay between curriculum design, competence formation, institutional systems, and labour market outcomes.

Together, these theories inform both the study's analytical orientation and the development of the Integrated Curriculum Development Framework proposed in later chapters.

1.7.1 Constructivist Learning Theory (CLT)

Constructivist Learning Theory posits that learners actively construct knowledge through interaction with their environment, reflection on experience, and engagement with authentic problems (Fosnot, 2013; Vygotsky, 1978). Learning is therefore viewed as a dynamic and socially mediated process rather than the passive transmission of content.

Within the context of HRM education, constructivism aligns with curriculum design approaches that emphasise experiential learning, problem-based instruction, reflective practice, and critical engagement with real-world organisational scenarios. These approaches are particularly relevant for developing higher-order competencies such as critical thinking, ethical judgement, professional identity formation, and behavioural adaptability (Biggs & Tang, 2011). Constructivism thus supports the study's aim of strengthening graduate competence by fostering deep learning and transferable professional capabilities rather than surface-level knowledge acquisition.

1.7.2 Human Capital Theory (HCT)

Human Capital Theory conceptualises education as an investment that enhances individuals' productive capacities and contributes to organisational performance and economic development (Becker, 1994). From this perspective, higher education plays a strategic role in equipping graduates with skills, knowledge, and attributes that improve employability and labour market outcomes.

In this study, HCT provides a rationale for aligning HRM curricula with national skills priorities and labour market needs. It supports the argument that curriculum design should intentionally develop competencies that enhance workplace effectiveness, professional mobility, and long-term career sustainability. The theory is particularly relevant in the South African context, where graduate employability is closely linked to broader socio-economic development objectives and skills shortages (Marginson, 2019).

1.7.3 Competency-Based Education (CBE)

Competency-Based Education provides an outcomes-oriented framework that integrates clearly defined learning outcomes, aligned assessment criteria, and industry-relevant standards (CHE, 2024). CBE shifts the focus from time-based progression to demonstrated competence, ensuring that graduates can apply knowledge and skills in authentic professional contexts.

In HRM education, CBE enables alignment between academic curricula and the expectations of professional bodies such as the South African Board for People Practices (SABPP), the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), and the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). This alignment enhances the professional relevance, credibility, and employability value of HRM qualifications, while also supporting accountability and quality assurance within higher education (Mulder, 2017).

1.7.4 General Systems Theory (GST)

The General Systems Theory conceptualises curriculum design as a holistic and interconnected system comprising multiple interdependent elements, including institutional structures, academic staff, students, professional bodies, industry partners, and regulatory frameworks (Von Bertalanffy, 1968). GST provides the overarching integrative lens for this study.

Within this systems perspective, curriculum design is understood as an interaction between inputs (such as policy requirements, stakeholder expectations, and environmental conditions), processes (including teaching and learning strategies, assessment practices, and curriculum governance), and outputs (graduate competencies, employability outcomes, and feedback for continuous improvement) (Checkland, 1999). This approach enables the study to account for the influence of technological, legal, political, economic, and social factors on curriculum effectiveness and graduate outcomes.

Conceptual Framework of the Study

Drawing on the theoretical foundations outlined above, the study's conceptual framework is illustrated in Figure 1.1. The framework depicts curriculum design as a dynamic system influenced by environmental variables and stakeholder inputs, mediated through pedagogical and institutional processes, and producing employability-oriented graduate outcomes. The conceptual framework serves as an organising structure for the study by:

- guiding the formulation of research questions;
- informing data collection and analysis strategies; and
- underpinning the development of the Integrated Curriculum Development Framework proposed in the later chapters.

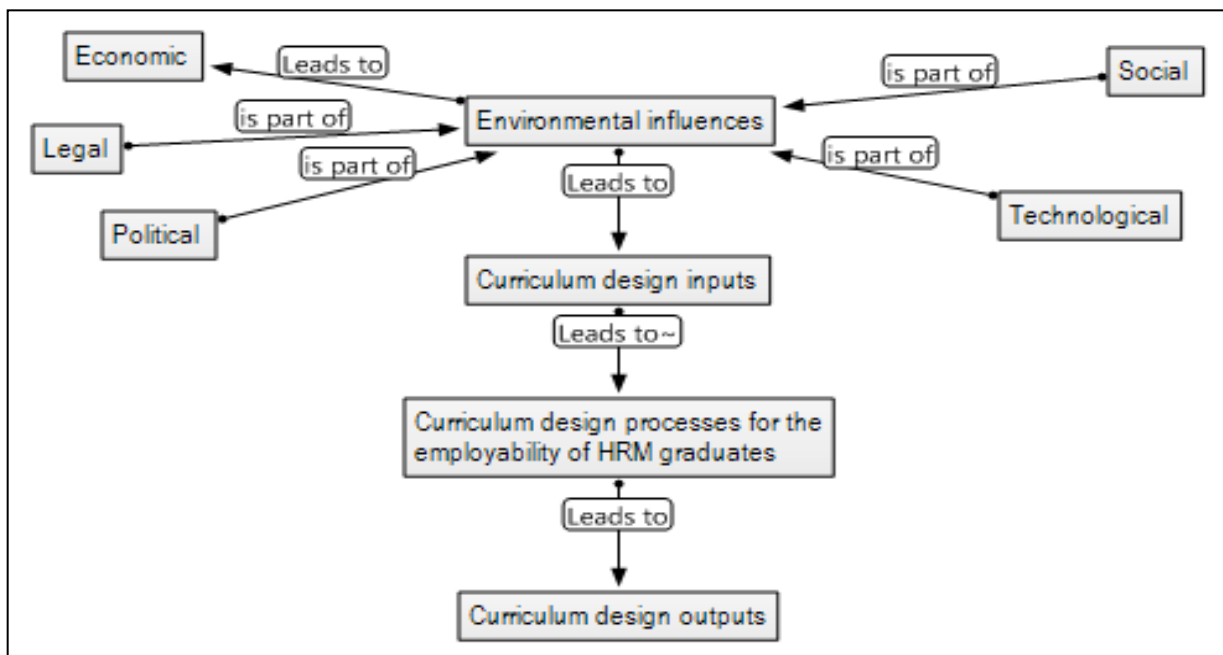


Figure 1.1: Conceptual framework of study

By integrating constructivist learning principles, human capital considerations, competency-based standards, and systems thinking, the framework provides a coherent basis for analysing curriculum design challenges and for proposing a contextually responsive and theoretically grounded solution.

1.8 SIGNIFICANCE AND CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

This study makes a substantive and original contribution to knowledge, practice, policy, and scholarship by addressing the persistent misalignment between Human Resource Management (HRM) curricula and graduate employability requirements in the South African higher education context. Its significance lies not only in diagnosing systemic curriculum shortcomings, but also in developing an integrated suite of theoretically grounded and operational instruments namely, an Integrated Curriculum Development Framework, an HRM Curriculum Scorecard, and an HRM Programme Accreditation Matrix—to support curriculum design, evaluation, and quality assurance in HRM education. The originality of the study lies in combining framework development with operational governance tools that translate abstract curriculum principles into measurable institutional practices.

1.8.1 Contribution to higher education

At the level of higher education practice, this study advances a systems-oriented, competence-driven approach to HRM curriculum design. The Integrated Curriculum Development Framework provides universities with a coherent structure that links curriculum inputs, pedagogical processes, institutional enablers, and graduate outcomes. Unlike traditional curriculum models that focus primarily on content alignment, this framework foregrounds process quality, stakeholder integration, and continuous curriculum renewal.

In addition, the study makes a distinctive practical contribution by developing an HRM Curriculum Scorecard that translates abstract competence and employability principles into measurable, evidence-based criteria. The scorecard enables HRM departments and academic leaders to systematically diagnose curriculum strengths and weaknesses, support internal programme reviews, and guide targeted curriculum improvement initiatives. By shifting curriculum evaluation from a compliance-driven exercise to a developmental and reflective process, the scorecard enhances institutional capacity for evidence-informed decision-making and continuous improvement.

1.8.2 Contribution to the HRM profession

The study contributes to the HRM profession by articulating a clear, empirically validated competence profile for future-fit HR practitioners. Through stakeholder engagement and theoretical synthesis, the research clarifies the technical-digital, strategic-cognitive, and relational-ethical capabilities required for effective HRM practice in contemporary organisations.

Importantly, the study strengthens the interface between academia and professional practice by providing tools that professional bodies and employers can use to evaluate and influence the relevance of the curriculum. The HRM Curriculum Scorecard and the accompanying Accreditation Matrix offer mechanisms through which professional bodies, such as the SABPP, can engage more substantively in curriculum governance, beyond episodic accreditation reviews. This contributes to improved alignment between professional standards, workplace expectations, and graduate capability development, thereby enhancing the professional readiness of HRM graduates.

1.8.3 Contribution to policy

At a policy level, the study provides empirically grounded and operationally useful insights relevant to higher education quality assurance, programme accreditation, and skills development governance in South Africa. By highlighting gaps in curriculum responsiveness

and graduate preparedness, the study informs national debates on the effectiveness of professional qualifications in meeting labour market needs.

The development of an HRM Programme Accreditation Matrix represents a significant policy-relevant contribution. The matrix operationalises curriculum quality and employability alignment into transparent performance levels and defensible evaluative criteria, supporting fair, consistent, and evidence-based accreditation decisions. In doing so, it aligns with the expectations of national quality assurance bodies and strengthens the credibility, comparability, and accountability of HRM qualifications within the National Qualifications Framework.

1.8.4 Contribution to research and theory

From a scholarly perspective, the study makes an original contribution by integrating multiple theoretical lenses including constructivist learning theory, human capital theory, competency-based education, and the General Systems Theory into a unified conceptual framework for employability-oriented curriculum design. Empirical research on HRM curriculum responsiveness in South Africa remains limited; this study addresses that gap through a qualitative, systems-based investigation that foregrounds stakeholder perspectives and contextual constraints.

Beyond conceptual development, the study advances methodological contributions by demonstrating how qualitatively derived frameworks can be translated into applied governance instruments, namely the curriculum scorecard and accreditation matrix. These artefacts extend existing employability and curriculum scholarship by offering tools that are both theoretically grounded and practically actionable. As such, the study provides a foundation for future research to empirically test, adapt, or extend these instruments across disciplines, institutions, and national contexts.

1.9 DELIMITATIONS / SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The study focused on:

- Undergraduate HRM programmes in South African universities, with empirical data collection concentrated in one selected public university used as an in-depth case context.
- Major stakeholders implicated in HRM practice and education, specifically HR academics and representatives of professional bodies, with broader stakeholder perspectives drawn from literature..

- Curriculum practices, teaching approaches, and institutional practices that influence HRM competence.
- Competence requirements appropriate to modern and forthcoming HR practice.

The study did not focus on:

- HRM postgraduate programmes, though some doctrine may be applicable across all levels.
- HRM programmes taught by private colleges, unless acknowledged in the literature.
- The operating practices of institutions outside their responsibility in informing expected competence.

1.10 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section provides an overview of the methodological approach adopted to address the research problem and achieve the study's stated aims and objectives. Given the study's focus on understanding complex curriculum processes, stakeholder expectations, and competence development within Human Resource Management (HRM) education, the research methodology was designed to generate rich, contextually grounded insights that can inform both conceptual development and practical application. A detailed exposition of the methodology is presented in Chapter 5, outlining the key methodological choices and their rationale.

1.10.1 Research paradigm

This study is underpinned by the constructivist research paradigm. Constructivism posits that reality is socially constructed through human interaction, interpretation, and experience, rather than being a single, objective truth. In the context of this study, graduate competence, curriculum responsiveness, and employability are understood as socially mediated constructs shaped by academic practices, professional expectations, institutional contexts, and labour market dynamics.

The constructivist paradigm is particularly suitable for this study, given its aim of developing a framework to enhance HRM graduate competence. Such a framework cannot be meaningfully derived from purely positivist measurement but requires engagement with the subjective meanings and interpretations of key stakeholders involved in curriculum design, delivery, and professional practice. By adopting a constructivist stance, the study captured diverse perspectives, interpreted contextual influences, and generated knowledge that is both theoretically grounded and practically relevant (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Elder-Vass, 2022).

1.10.2 Research approach

A qualitative research approach was employed to explore stakeholder perceptions, experiences, and expectations regarding HRM graduate competence and curriculum design. Qualitative research is well-suited to studies that seek to understand processes, relationships, and meanings rather than to test predetermined hypotheses. In this study, the qualitative approach enabled an in-depth exploration of how HRM curricula are experienced, interpreted, and evaluated by academics and professional stakeholders.

The qualitative approach also aligns with the study's design-oriented intent, which seeks to develop an empirically informed framework and associated evaluative instruments. By privileging depth over breadth, the study identified nuanced curriculum misalignments, systemic challenges, and context-specific requirements that quantitative methods alone would not adequately capture (Daniel, 2022).

1.10.3 Research design

The study adopted a sequential qualitative research design, integrating a thematic literature review with semi-structured stakeholder interviews. This design was selected to ensure both conceptual rigour and empirical grounding. The thematic literature review provided a comprehensive understanding of existing HRM competence frameworks, curriculum design principles, and employability models, which informed the initial conceptualisation of competence domains and curriculum requirements.

The findings of the thematic literature review were then used to develop the semi-structured interview guides, ensuring alignment between theory and empirical inquiry. Insights generated from stakeholder interviews were subsequently used to refine, contextualise, and validate the emerging framework. This sequential design enabled iterative movement between theory and data, thereby strengthening the credibility and coherence of the study's outcomes.

1.10.4 Data sources

Multiple qualitative data sources were utilised to ensure depth and triangulation of findings. These included:

- **Academic literature:** Peer-reviewed national and international journal articles, policy documents, and professional standards related to HRM competence, curriculum design, employability, and higher education quality assurance.

- **HRM academics:** Academics involved in the design and delivery of HRM curricula provided insights into pedagogical practices, curriculum constraints, and institutional processes.
- **Professional body representatives:** Members of the South African Board for People Practices (SABPP) contributed perspectives on professional standards, competence expectations, and curriculum alignment from a regulatory and industry-facing viewpoint.

The use of these data sources ensured that the study captured perspectives across the education–profession interface, which is central to the research problem.

1.10.5 Data analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, a flexible and systematic method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data. The analysis followed established procedures involving familiarisation with the data, coding, theme development, and interpretation. Both deductive and inductive coding strategies were employed: deductive codes were informed by the theoretical framework and literature, while inductive codes emerged from stakeholder narratives.

The use of ATLAS.ti software supported the organisation, coding, and retrieval of data, enhancing transparency and analytical rigour. Thematic analysis enabled the study to identify recurring competence domains, curriculum alignment gaps, and systemic challenges, which directly informed the development of the Integrated Curriculum Development Framework, HRM Curriculum Scorecard, and Accreditation Rubric.

1.10.6 Trustworthiness and ethics

To ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative findings, the study applied established criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was enhanced through triangulation of data sources and alignment between the literature and empirical findings. Dependability was supported by maintaining a clear audit trail of methodological decisions and analytic procedures. Confirmability was addressed by grounding interpretations in empirical evidence and by maintaining reflexivity throughout the research process. Transferability was facilitated by rich contextual descriptions, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar contexts.

Ethical considerations were addressed in accordance with institutional requirements and the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA). Ethical approval was obtained prior to data

collection. Participants provided informed consent, participation was voluntary, and confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained. These measures ensured that the study adhered to ethical principles of respect, beneficence, and integrity throughout the research process.

1.11 DEFINITIONS OF KEY CONCEPTS

To ensure conceptual clarity, the following key terms are defined:

- **Graduate competence:** The integrated knowledge, skills, behaviours and attributes enabling effective workplace performance (Mulder, 2017).
- **Curriculum responsiveness:** The extent to which academic programmes adapt to social, economic and labour market needs (Moll, 2004).
- **Work-readiness:** The preparedness of graduates to transition into employment with minimal additional induction (Caballero & Walker, 2010).
- **HRM:** The strategic management of people to improve organisational effectiveness (Carbery & Cross, 2022).
- **Competency-Based Education:** An educational approach structured around demonstrated learning outcomes and competence mastery (CHE, 2024).

1.12 OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

Chapter 1: This chapter introduces the study, defines the background, presents the problem statement, outlines the research purpose, explains the theoretical foundations, and provides an overview of the methodology.

Chapter 2: This chapter covers the national and global literature on HRM competence, graduate readiness, curriculum design, and learning and teaching.

Chapter 3: This chapter provides an overview of theories of employability, graduate employability in South Africa, and the challenges associated with it. Additionally, the chapter discusses the development of employability proficiencies in HRM graduates and the design of a curriculum to enhance their employability.

CHAPTER 4: Curriculum design for the employability of HRM graduates

The focus of the chapter is on educational design, curriculum design, and preparedness for the work environment of HRM graduates, including the industrial skills necessary for development. The chapter discusses HRM curriculum design frameworks in higher education. It also discusses curriculum design frameworks and models, industry needs, and the impact of

curriculum design on industry performance. The chapter concludes by presenting a theoretical framework for designing HRM curricula.

Chapter 5: This chapter provides a comprehensive explanation of the research methodology, encompassing design, sampling, data collection, and analysis.

Chapter 6: This chapter presents the empirical findings from interviews and thematic analysis.

Chapter 7: This chapter integrates findings with literature to develop the competence-enhancement framework, an HRM scorecard, and an accreditation matrix.

Chapter 8: This chapter presents the conclusions and recommendations derived from the study's findings. Recommendations for future research are provided to stimulate further research on curricula for industry-fit HRM graduates.

1.13 SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter established the contextual, theoretical, and empirical foundations for the study by articulating the problem of HRM graduate competence not merely as a skills deficit, but as a systemic challenge to curriculum design and governance. The chapter foregrounds the development of an integrated, evidence-based framework as the study's central scholarly contribution, outlining the research aim, objectives, and questions that guide the inquiry. The theoretical foundations, methodological orientation, and structure of the dissertation were presented, positioning the study to progress from diagnostic analysis to framework development and practical application in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2 will focus on the design of HRM curricula in higher education and extend this foundation through a critical review of national and international literature on HRM competence, curriculum responsiveness, employability capability development, and higher education reform.

CHAPTER TWO

HUMAN RESOURCES CURRICULUM DESIGN IN HIGHER EDUCATION

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Higher education plays a pivotal role in equipping graduates with the knowledge, expertise, and competencies necessary for societal advancement, economic growth, and individual empowerment. The curriculum of qualifications offered by higher education institutions is central to higher education, as it establishes what is taught and how it is conveyed (Cotronei-Baird, 2020). This chapter discusses key concepts in higher education curriculum design, with a specific focus on Human Resource Management (HRM) education and graduates' employability. It also explores the chronological, philosophical, and practical foundations of curriculum development, the effect of socio-political settings, and the mixing of global and local viewpoints. In addition to conceptual foundations, contemporary curriculum scholarship increasingly emphasises responsiveness to digital disruption, sustainability transitions, and employability capability development, particularly within professional disciplines such as HRM (UNESCO, 2024; World Economic Forum, 2025).

The chapter therefore moves from general curriculum theory toward a discipline-specific analysis of HRM curriculum responsiveness in South African higher education.

2.2 THE CONCEPT OF CURRICULUM

The term 'curriculum,' which has its origin in the Latin *curro* (I run) or *currere* (running), properly reflects the dynamic, continuing developments that transpire within educational institutions (González, Vanegas & Raesfeld, 2019). The curriculum incorporates the content of learning courses, and the educational methods used to deliver knowledge (Loughlin, Lygo-Baker, & Lindberg-Sand, 2021). Cumming and Rose (2022) highlight that the curriculum involves a continuous cycle of reviewing, planning, developing, implementing, and maintaining.

Contemporary higher education literature also distinguishes between the intended curriculum (planned outcomes), enacted curriculum (what is taught), experienced curriculum (how students encounter learning), and attained curriculum (what is ultimately learned). Misalignment across these dimensions often contributes to weak graduate outcomes.

In the past, the philosophical assumptions, ethnic norms, and political beliefs shaped the curriculum. Ancient curricula, such as those inspired by Plato and Aristotle, employed

philosophical methods in education in ancient Greece (Moscardini, Strachan, & Vlasova, 2022). In the African context, traditional curricula centered on cultural heritage and community development, teaching the skills and values fundamental to the sustainability of society (Mendy & Madiope, 2020). The curriculum reflects societal and political perspectives, shaping the objectives and outcomes of education (Meyer & Norman, 2020).

New curricula were created to change the racially separated systems and foster equity and social change in South Africa after the apartheid regime (Chiramba & Ndofirepi, 2023). Nevertheless, critics contend that post-apartheid curricula have repeatedly maintained Eurocentric aspects, rather than fully incorporating African philosophies, as evidenced by ongoing student activism (Koopman & Koopman, 2023; Stielau, 2023; Steyn, 2024). A stabilised curriculum combining African philosophical views with international best practices is essential for developing graduates who are well-grounded, both locally and internationally competent. In South Africa, curriculum debates are further shaped by calls for decolonisation, multilingual access, epistemic justice, and graduate employability, requiring institutions to reconcile transformation imperatives with international competitiveness.

2.3 THE ROLE OF CURRICULUM IN HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT EDUCATION

The curriculum plays a central and strategic role in shaping the professional identity, competence, and employability of Human Resource Management (HRM) graduates. As HRM has evolved over time, so too has the purpose and orientation of HRM education. Early management paradigms were characterised by mechanistic and efficiency-driven approaches that viewed labour primarily as an input to production. These approaches prioritised control, productivity, and output, with limited attention to employee well-being or human development (Stetz, 2021; Weatherburn, 2020). Contemporary HRM, by contrast, is grounded in human-centred paradigms that emphasise employee well-being, organisational sustainability, ethical leadership, and strategic value creation. This paradigm shift necessitates a corresponding transformation in HRM curricula, moving from narrow, functional training to broader competence-based professional education.

Internationally, HR functions have shifted toward evidence-based decision-making, people analytics, employee experience design, ESG accountability, and workforce agility. Consequently, HRM curricula increasingly need to incorporate analytics literacy, ethical use of technology, and strategic consulting capabilities.

The South African labour context provides a particularly compelling case for examining the role of curriculum in HRM education. The evolution of employment relations in South Africa—from pre-settler agrarian systems of the Khoe-Khoe and San communities, through colonial and slave-based labour regimes, to racially segregated labour practices under apartheid, and finally to a democratic dispensation premised on equity and social justice—has produced a complex and historically layered employment landscape (Ross, 2022; Jones, 2022; Fredriksson & Moritz, 2019). These historical trajectories have shaped contemporary challenges related to inequality, skills shortages, labour regulation, and workplace transformation. An HRM curriculum situated in this context must therefore do more than transmit technical knowledge; it must equip graduates with the ethical, socio-political, and contextual understanding required to manage people responsibly within a historically unequal society.

In response to these changing demands, HRM has increasingly been conceptualised as a strategic and integrative field that encompasses human capital management, strategic HRM, and organisational sustainability (Chourasia & Bahuguna, 2025). This expanded scope reinforces the importance of curriculum as a professionalising mechanism through which graduates develop not only functional HR skills, but also strategic thinking, ethical judgement, and the capacity to contribute to organisational and societal outcomes. Professional bodies such as the South African Board for People Practices (SABPP) further shape curriculum expectations by articulating competency standards that emphasise diversity management, employee voice, governance, and responsiveness to technological and labour market change (SABPP, 2025). Alignment between HRM curricula and such professional standards is therefore critical for ensuring relevance, legitimacy, and graduate employability. Comparable international frameworks, such as the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development Profession Map and the Society for Human Resource Management competency model, similarly emphasise business acumen, people advocacy, ethics, and data-informed practice. This suggests convergence around globally recognised HR capabilities.

The emergence of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) has intensified the imperative for curriculum transformation in HRM education. Digitisation, data analytics, artificial intelligence, and platform-based work arrangements have fundamentally altered how HR functions are performed and evaluated. Consequently, HRM graduates are expected to be technologically literate, data-informed, ethically grounded, and adaptable to continuous change (Schultz, 2021). These expectations challenge traditional content-heavy curricula and underscore the need for integrated competence development that combines technical, strategic, psycho-social, and ethical capabilities.

Within this evolving context, the role of the HRM curriculum extends beyond knowledge transmission to encompass the deliberate development of professional competence, identity, and employability. Curriculum design must therefore function as a mediating system that integrates historical context, professional standards, technological change, and labour market expectations into coherent learning outcomes, pedagogical practices, and assessment strategies. This perspective positions curriculum as a central lever through which HRM education can contribute to workforce readiness, professionalisation of the HR function, and inclusive economic development. Within this understanding, the present study advances a systems-based, competence-oriented framework for HRM curriculum design.

This supports the argument that curriculum relevance should be judged not merely by content coverage, but by the extent to which graduates can demonstrate integrated professional competence in authentic workplace contexts.

2.4 EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHIES AND CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

Educational philosophies provide the foundational assumptions that shape curriculum design, teaching and learning approaches, and assessment practices in higher education. These philosophies influence how knowledge is conceptualised, how learning is facilitated, and what forms of graduate competence are valued. As a result, curriculum development is not a neutral or purely technical process, but one deeply informed by philosophical positions on the purpose of education, the nature of learning, and the roles of the learner and educator (Shah & Campus, 2021).

A range of educational philosophies informs contemporary curriculum development. These include utilitarianism, progressivism, behaviourism, constructivism, pragmatism, idealism, and humanism (Singhal, 2017; Bergmark, 2023). Each philosophy offers a distinct lens for understanding curriculum goals, content selection, pedagogy, and assessment. Behaviourism, for example, emphasises observable learning outcomes and measurable behaviour change, often operationalised through repetition, practice, and reinforcement. This philosophy has traditionally influenced competency-based training models where mastery of predefined skills is prioritised.

While behaviourist approaches remain useful for foundational procedural learning, they are often insufficient for complex professional judgement tasks requiring ambiguity management, ethical reasoning, and stakeholder negotiation.

By contrast, pragmatism and progressivism foreground learner-centred education and experiential learning. These philosophies view knowledge as socially constructed and contextually applied, advocating for problem-based learning, reflection, and real-world engagement as central curriculum features (Bingwa & Ngibe, 2021). Such approaches are particularly relevant to professional disciplines like HRM, where graduates are expected to apply theory to complex organisational situations. Idealism, with its emphasis on intellectual development, reasoning, and moral judgement, supports pedagogical approaches such as Socratic dialogue and critical inquiry, which are essential for developing ethical and reflective HR practitioners (Azid & Kiong, 2023).

Humanism further extends this learner-centred orientation by prioritising personal growth, self-actualisation, collaboration, and the holistic development of learners. From a humanist perspective, curriculum design should support autonomy, intrinsic motivation, emotional development, and interpersonal competence, all of which are central to effective HRM practice. Utilitarianism, in contrast, links education directly to societal needs, economic development, and social stability, emphasising the production of graduates who can contribute productively to the workforce and broader society (Iqbal, Khan, & Imran, 2024).

Within the African context, educational philosophies are further shaped by indigenous epistemologies and socio-cultural values. African educational thought emphasises collectivism, relationality, and communal responsibility, often articulated through the philosophy of Ubuntu, which foregrounds interdependence, human dignity, and social cohesion (Balogun & Woldegiorgis, 2024). These perspectives challenge purely individualistic and instrumental views of education, instead advocating for curricula that promote social justice, dialogue, critical consciousness, and resistance to historical and structural oppression (Waghid, 2021). For HRM education, Ubuntu-informed curriculum principles may strengthen relational leadership, fairness, restorative conflict management, and employee dignity—competencies particularly relevant in diverse workplaces.

For HRM education in South Africa, curriculum development must therefore navigate the intersection between global educational philosophies and local epistemological traditions. An effective HRM curriculum should integrate learner-centred and constructivist approaches that support experiential learning and competence development, while also embedding humanist and African philosophical principles that foreground ethical practice, inclusivity, and social responsibility. At the same time, utilitarian considerations require alignment with industry expectations and labour market demands. This philosophical synthesis provides a strong

foundation for the systems-based, competence-oriented curriculum framework advanced later in this study, ensuring that HRM education is both contextually responsive and globally relevant.

2.5 CURRICULUM DESIGN APPROACHES

Curriculum design approaches provide structured ways of conceptualising how curricula are planned, implemented, and evaluated. Hodge (2024) conceptualises curriculum design as a structured yet dynamic process that extends beyond formal instructional planning to include non-formal and informal dimensions of learning. Formal curricula typically consist of explicitly defined learning outcomes, prescribed content, and structured teaching and assessment strategies. Non-formal curricula, by contrast, encompass experiential and co-curricular learning opportunities such as work-integrated learning, projects, and community engagement. Informal or hidden curricula refer to the implicit norms, values, power relations, and organisational cultures that shape student learning experiences in less visible ways (Souto-Otero, 2021). Together, these dimensions highlight that curriculum design is not limited to content selection but involves shaping the broader learning environment in which graduate capabilities are formed. The hidden curriculum is especially significant in HRM education because students may internalise implicit messages regarding authority, diversity, professionalism, inclusion, and organisational power through institutional practices rather than formal teaching.

Curriculum design approaches are often differentiated according to their underlying assumptions about how learning should be organised and evaluated. Technical approaches to curriculum design emphasise a systematic, ordered sequence of activities, typically beginning with the formulation of objectives, followed by content selection, instructional strategies, and evaluation. These approaches are closely associated with aims-based or product-oriented models, where curriculum success is measured by the extent to which predefined outcomes are achieved. Non-technical approaches, in contrast, foreground learning processes, learner engagement, and contextual responsiveness, often prioritising adaptability over strict procedural sequencing.

Bhuttah et al., (2019) classify curriculum design models into three broad categories: aims-based (product) models, interactive and cyclical (process) models, and inductive or deductive approaches. Aims-based models focus on clearly articulated objectives and measurable outcomes, making them attractive in professional education contexts that emphasise accountability and standardisation. Process-oriented or cyclical models, however, view

curriculum development as iterative and responsive, allowing for continuous feedback, reflection, and revision. Inductive approaches typically begin with learning experiences and contextual realities before deriving broader curriculum structures, whereas deductive approaches start with overarching goals or standards and cascade these into curriculum components.

In the South African higher education context, curriculum design cannot rely exclusively on any single approach. The complex socio-economic environment, persistent graduate unemployment, and evolving professional standards require curricula that are both structured and adaptive. Curriculum development must therefore critically balance global best practices with local labour realities, transformation priorities, institutional constraints, and graduate employability expectations.. This includes responding to national skills priorities, professional body expectations, and the diverse backgrounds and needs of students, while simultaneously ensuring coherence, quality, and accountability.

For HRM education in particular, these considerations underscore the limitations of linear, aims-based models when used in isolation. While outcome clarity is essential, employability-oriented curricula also require iterative design processes, stakeholder engagement, and responsiveness to rapidly changing workplace demands. This necessitates an integrative approach to curriculum design that accommodates formal, non-formal, and hidden curricula within a coherent system. Such an approach provides a conceptual bridge to the General Systems Theory lens adopted in this study and anticipates the development of a competence-based, systems-oriented framework that aligns curriculum inputs, processes, and outputs with graduate employability outcomes.

2.6 MODELS OF CURRICULUM DESIGN

Numerous curriculum development models have been proposed in the literature to guide the systematic design, implementation, and evaluation of educational programmes. These models differ in their underlying assumptions about how learning occurs, how curricula should respond to societal and labour market demands, and how improvement should be enacted over time. Collectively, they provide important theoretical foundations for contemporary curriculum design, particularly in professional disciplines such as Human Resource Management (HRM). Although classical curriculum models remain influential, contemporary scholars caution against adopting them uncritically because they were developed in earlier eras characterised by more stable labour markets and slower technological change.

The Tyler model remains one of the most influential foundations of curriculum development. It consists of four interrelated stages: defining educational objectives, selecting learning experiences, organising learning activities, and evaluating outcomes. Although often criticised for its linearity, the model implicitly supports cyclical improvement by positioning evaluation as a mechanism for revisiting and refining objectives and learning experiences (Bhuttah et al., 2019). From an employability perspective, Tyler's emphasis on clearly articulated objectives aligns well with outcomes-based education and professional competency standards. However, its limited attention to contextual complexity and stakeholder engagement constrains its usefulness in dynamic labour markets characterised by rapid technological and organisational change. In HRM education, Tyler's logic remains valuable for competency mapping and constructive alignment, but requires supplementation through stakeholder consultation and periodic labour-market scanning.

Building on Tyler's work, the Taba model adopts a more inductive and teacher-driven approach to curriculum development. Taba places primary emphasis on diagnosing learners' needs before setting objectives, selecting and organising content, designing learning experiences, and evaluating outcomes (Hung, 2022). This model foregrounds educators' professional judgement and enables greater responsiveness to learner diversity and contextual realities. In professional education contexts such as HRM, this inductive orientation is particularly valuable, as it enables curricula to respond to evolving industry requirements, student backgrounds, and socio-economic conditions. However, without explicit mechanisms for continuous stakeholder engagement and systemic feedback, the Taba model may still struggle to ensure sustained alignment with labour market expectations.

The Wheeler cyclical model advances curriculum theory by explicitly conceptualising curriculum development as a continuous and iterative process. Rather than viewing curriculum design as a sequence of fixed steps, Wheeler emphasises ongoing interaction between aims, learning experiences, content organisation, and evaluation, with each cycle informing subsequent redesigns (Palupi, 2018; Prihantoro, 2021). This cyclical logic is particularly relevant in contexts of uncertainty and change, such as the Fourth Industrial Revolution, where curricula must be frequently reviewed and updated. From an employability standpoint, Wheeler's model supports adaptability and responsiveness, yet it provides limited guidance on systematically integrating competing stakeholder expectations and institutional constraints.

The Nicholls five-phase model introduces a strong outcomes-oriented logic, focusing on the formulation of learning objectives, the selection of content and learning experiences, the development of assessment strategies, and the evaluation of outcomes (Nicholls & Nicholls,

2018; Willox, Judd, & Nicholls, 2024). This model aligns closely with contemporary competence-based education frameworks and professional accreditation requirements, making it particularly relevant for HRM programmes. Its emphasis on assessment as an integral part of curriculum design reinforces the principle that learning outcomes must be demonstrable and measurable. However, like earlier models, it tends to treat curriculum development as a bounded process rather than as part of a broader institutional and socio-economic system.

Across all these models, common principles emerge. Each highlights the importance of evaluation, alignment between objectives, learning experiences, and assessment, and the need for curricula to remain responsive to social, technological, and industrial change. At the same time, their limitations become evident when applied to complex professional education contexts. Individually, these models tend to underplay systemic factors such as governance structures, stakeholder collaboration, institutional capacity, and feedback loops that link graduate outcomes to curriculum renewal.

These limitations underscore the need for an integrative, systems-oriented approach to curriculum development. By viewing curriculum design through the lens of the General Systems Theory, the strengths of classical and contemporary models can be synthesised while addressing their shortcomings. In this perspective, curriculum objectives function as inputs, teaching and learning processes as transformational mechanisms, and employable graduates as outputs, all operating within a dynamic environment shaped by industry expectations, professional standards, and societal needs. The proposed framework in this study builds on these foundational models while extending them through explicit stakeholder integration, continuous feedback, and competence-based validation mechanisms, including the curriculum scorecard and accreditation rubric.

Accordingly, the present study does not privilege one classical model, but synthesises their strongest features within a systems-based HRM curriculum framework.

2.7 TAXONOMIES AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

Learning outcomes occupy a central role in curriculum design, teaching and learning strategies, and assessment practices, particularly in outcomes-based and competence-oriented educational systems. Taxonomies of learning provide structured frameworks that help curriculum designers and educators articulate, sequence, and evaluate learning outcomes in

a coherent and progressive manner. Among these, Bloom's Taxonomy remains one of the most widely applied models in higher education.

Bloom's original taxonomy categorises educational objectives into three interrelated domains: the cognitive, psychomotor, and affective realms (Sobral, 2021; Hyland, 2019). The cognitive domain focuses on intellectual capabilities, including knowledge acquisition, comprehension, application, analysis, evaluation, and creation. The psychomotor domain addresses the development of physical and technical skills, which are particularly relevant in applied and professional learning contexts. The affective domain emphasises values, attitudes, motivation, ethical orientation, and emotional engagement, elements increasingly recognised as critical to professional identity formation and workplace effectiveness.

In professional programmes, overreliance on lower-order cognitive outcomes (remembering and understanding) may produce graduates with theoretical recall but weak workplace application. Higher-order outcomes such as analysis, evaluation, creation, and reflective judgement are therefore essential.

While traditional curriculum design has historically privileged the cognitive domain, contemporary scholarship argues for a more balanced engagement across all three domains. The affective domain has gained prominence in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), where employability increasingly depends on attributes such as adaptability, ethical judgement, resilience, collaboration, and lifelong learning orientation (Hyland, 2019). In HRM education, these affective competencies are essential, as graduates are required to manage complex human relations, navigate ethical dilemmas, and operate effectively in diverse, rapidly changing organisational environments.

Building on Bloom's original framework, Bloom's Digital Taxonomy integrates technological considerations into the classification of learning outcomes. This extension reinterprets cognitive processes such as remembering, understanding, applying, analysing, evaluating, and creating with digital tools and platforms (Alaghbary, 2021; Fort & Haniya, 2023). Digital taxonomy frameworks recognise that technology is not merely a delivery mechanism but a cognitive and pedagogical enabler that reshapes how learners access information, collaborate, solve problems, and create knowledge. For HRM specifically, digital outcomes may include interpreting workforce dashboards, evaluating HR analytics, using e-recruitment systems, and managing virtual employee engagement platforms.

The integration of digital taxonomies is particularly relevant for employability-focused curricula, as it aligns learning outcomes with contemporary workplace practices that require digital literacy, data interpretation, virtual collaboration, and technology-enabled decision-making. In HRM programmes, digital taxonomies support the development of competencies related to HR analytics, digital recruitment systems, virtual performance management, and technology-mediated employee engagement.

Taken together, traditional and digital taxonomies provide a comprehensive framework for designing learning outcomes that integrate knowledge, skills, values, and technological capability. When applied systematically, these taxonomies help curriculum designers align learning outcomes with teaching strategies and assessment methods, ensuring coherence across curriculum inputs, processes, and outputs. Within the context of this study, taxonomies of learning serve as foundational tools that inform the articulation and assessment of competencies within a broader systems-based and employability-oriented HRM curriculum framework.

2.8 THE IMPORTANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

Higher education occupies a central position in South Africa's social, economic, and developmental agenda. Historically, universities were regarded as the primary drivers of post-secondary education, tasked with producing advanced knowledge and professional expertise. More recently, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions have gained prominence as complementary providers focused on practical and occupationally oriented skills development (Masinde & Coetzee, 2023). Together, universities and TVET institutions form an integrated post-school education and training system to address skills shortages, enhance employability, and support inclusive economic growth. South Africa's persistent youth unemployment crisis intensifies expectations that higher education should improve labour-market transitions, entrepreneurial capability, and social mobility.

The origins of higher education in Africa, including South Africa, were deeply shaped by European colonial expansion. Universities were established largely to replicate the epistemological traditions, institutional structures, and cultural values of colonial powers, rather than to respond to local socio-economic realities or indigenous knowledge systems. This historical legacy has had a lasting impact on curriculum content, pedagogical practices, and institutional cultures, many of which have remained misaligned with the lived experiences and developmental needs of African societies. However, employability and decolonisation should

not be treated as competing agendas. A contextually grounded curriculum can simultaneously promote epistemic inclusion and workplace relevance.

Following the advent of democracy in 1994, the South African government initiated comprehensive reforms to reposition higher education as a vehicle for transformation, redress, and national development. The Department of Education's White Paper 3 of 1997 articulated a vision for a single, coordinated higher education system that promotes equity, broadens access, enhances quality, and contributes to socio-economic development (Vincent & Chiwandire, 2019). Within this policy framework, higher education was explicitly positioned as a catalyst for human capital development, innovation, and democratic citizenship.

Despite these transformative intentions, scholars argue that progress has been uneven and, in some respects, superficial. Hungwe and Ndofirepi (2022) contend that higher education curricula and institutional cultures remain predominantly Eurocentric, continuing to privilege Western epistemologies and marginalise African ways of knowing. Similarly, Wu and Liu (2021) argue that meaningful transformation requires deeper structural and curricular reform, rather than symbolic policy compliance. These critiques have intensified calls for the decolonisation of higher education, emphasising the need to rethink what knowledge is valued, how it is taught, and whose experiences are reflected in curricula.

In parallel with these debates over transformation, higher education faces growing pressure to respond to rapid technological change and labour-market disruption associated with the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). Advances in digitalisation, automation, and data analytics are reshaping work and professional practice, demanding graduates who are technologically literate, adaptable, and able to engage in continuous learning (Sima et al., 2020; Carstens et al., 2021). In this context, higher education's importance lies not only in expanding access but also in ensuring that curricula are responsive, future-oriented, and aligned with evolving skills demands.

The curriculum emerges as a critical mechanism through which higher education can fulfil its transformative and developmental mandate. Curriculum design determines the knowledge, skills, values, and competencies that graduates acquire, shaping both their employability and their capacity to contribute meaningfully to society. HRM education must balance the incorporation of African perspectives and socio-cultural realities with global professional standards and industry expectations. Embedding decolonial principles, ethical awareness, and contextual relevance alongside digital and strategic competencies is therefore essential if

higher education is to produce HRM graduates who are not only employable but also socially responsive and professionally credible within the South African context.

2.9 CURRICULUM AS A FOUNDATION FOR TRANSFORMATION AND EMPLOYABILITY

Building on the general conceptual discussion in Section 2.2, this section focuses specifically on curriculum as an instrument of transformation and employability within HRM education. At the core of higher education lies the concept of curriculum, which defines not only *what* knowledge is taught but also *how* learning is structured, experienced, and assessed. Curriculum, therefore, functions as a central mechanism through which higher education institutions translate societal, economic, and professional expectations into educational practice (Cotronei-Baird, 2020). In the context of this study, curriculum is viewed as a strategic instrument for developing employable, future-fit graduates, with specific reference to Human Resource Management (HRM) education.

The term *curriculum* originates from the Latin *curro* (to run) or *currere* (a course or pathway), underscoring its dynamic and evolving nature (González, Vanegas & Raesfeld, 2019). This etymological origin reflects the understanding that curricula are not static artefacts but adaptive constructs that must continuously respond to changes in society, knowledge systems, and labour markets. Consequently, educational transformation is frequently assessed through the extent to which curricula remain responsive to social needs and workplace realities.

Contemporary scholarship conceptualises curriculum as encompassing both the substantive content of programmes and the pedagogical and assessment strategies that enable learning. Loughlin, Lygo-Baker and Lindberg-Sand (2021) define curriculum as the integrated design of learning content, teaching approaches, and assessment practices that collectively shape student learning experiences. Similarly, Cumming and Rose (2022) emphasise that curriculum development in higher education is inherently cyclical, involving ongoing processes of review, planning, development, implementation, evaluation, and renewal. This cyclical understanding is particularly relevant in professional disciplines such as HRM, where rapid changes in technology, regulation, and organisational practice necessitate continual curriculum adaptation.

In the contemporary era of technological acceleration and digital transformation, curriculum planning and evaluation have become increasingly critical. Higher education curricula are expected to anticipate and respond to shifting economic conditions, emerging occupational

roles, and evolving skill requirements (Moscardini, Strachan & Vlasova, 2022). From an employability perspective, this requires curricula that integrate disciplinary knowledge with transferable skills, ethical reasoning, digital competence, and lifelong learning orientation. These concerns suggest that curriculum quality should increasingly be evaluated through graduate capability outcomes, stakeholder satisfaction, and adaptability to changing work contexts.

Historically, curriculum development has been deeply influenced by dominant philosophical traditions. Early Western curricula drew heavily on the classical Greek educational philosophies associated with Plato and Aristotle, which emphasised rational inquiry, moral reasoning, and the cultivation of virtuous citizens. In contrast, many African knowledge systems historically embedded curriculum within community-based learning, cultural transmission, and moral education aimed at collective well-being and social cohesion (Mendy & Madiope, 2020). These divergent traditions highlight that curricula are never neutral, but are shaped by prevailing philosophical, cultural, and political values.

Curriculum design is therefore often influenced by the ideological positions of political leaders, policymakers, and dominant social groups (Meyer & Norman, 2020). In South Africa, this influence became particularly evident in the post-apartheid period, when national curricula were restructured to dismantle the legacy of Bantu Education and promote equity, access, and social justice. Although these reforms aimed to reposition education as a driver of societal transformation and economic development, their outcomes remain contested (Chiramba & Ndofirepi, 2023).

Critics argue that many post-apartheid curriculum reforms have retained Eurocentric epistemologies and pedagogical approaches, resulting in limited substantive transformation (Koopman & Koopman, 2023; Steyn, 2024; Stielau, 2023). Persistent student protests and scholarly critiques suggest that the transformative potential of higher education has not been fully realised, either due to insufficient curriculum reform or systemic weaknesses within the broader education system (Cini, 2019; Metelerkamp, Drimie & Biggs, 2019; Mzangwa, 2019). These shortcomings are further reflected in ongoing employer concerns regarding graduate preparedness and work readiness (Amihan & Sanchez, 2023).

Within this context, the curriculum emerges as a critical site for addressing misalignments between higher education outcomes and labour market expectations. For HRM education specifically, this underscores the need to critically evaluate the continued dominance of Eurocentric curricula and to explore integrating African philosophical perspectives alongside

global professional standards. A balanced, context-sensitive curriculum that draws on both African and international knowledge traditions is essential for developing HRM graduates who are ethically grounded, culturally responsive, digitally competent, and capable of operating effectively in both local and global organisational contexts.

2.9.1 Curriculum for the profession and practice of HRM in South Africa

Human Resource Management (HRM) emerged as a formal field of study in response to growing recognition that human factors in organisations are as critical to performance and sustainability as technical efficiency (Stetz, 2021). Early approaches to management, particularly those associated with scientific management, prioritised productivity, standardisation, and control. Frederick Taylor's principles of scientific management framed workers largely as mechanistic inputs into production systems, emphasising efficiency at the expense of human experience and agency. These assumptions profoundly shaped early management education and training, embedding a technicist orientation within organisational practice.

The human relations movement, catalysed by Elton Mayo's Hawthorne studies conducted between 1924 and 1933, marked a significant epistemological shift by foregrounding social relations, motivation, and worker well-being (Weatherburn, 2020). This transition laid the intellectual foundations for HRM as a discipline concerned not only with efficiency, but also with engagement, morale, and organisational culture. These paradigmatic shifts have direct implications for HRM curricula, which must reflect evolving understandings of work, employment relations, and the role of people in organisations.

In South Africa, the profession and practice of HRM are inseparable from the country's complex labour history. Indigenous systems of work and social organisation, such as those of the Khoekhoe and San communities, were fundamentally disrupted by European settlement from 1488 onwards and the introduction of enslaved labour from Angola in 1658 (Ross, 2022; Jones, 2022). Subsequent mining-led industrialisation entrenched exploitative labour practices, including migrant labour systems characterised by precarity and racialised inequality. During the apartheid era, labour legislation institutionalised racial discrimination, shaping employment relations and management practices along rigid racial lines (Fredriksson & Moritz, 2019).

Although the post-1994 democratic dispensation introduced progressive labour legislation and emphasised equity, fairness, and worker rights, the legacy of apartheid continues to influence workplace relations and HRM practice. Importantly, HRM curricula in South Africa have been

criticised for remaining largely grounded in Eurocentric theories and management models that do not sufficiently reflect local socio-historical realities (Nukunah & Eccles, 2023). This misalignment raises critical questions about the relevance of HRM education in addressing South Africa's unique employment challenges, including inequality, skills shortages, labour conflict, and transformation imperatives.

From a curriculum perspective, this context necessitates the deliberate incorporation of African perspectives on work, leadership, community, and employment relations. Indigenous knowledge systems and African philosophies, such as Ubuntu, offer alternative lenses for understanding people management, collective responsibility, and ethical leadership. Embedding these perspectives within HRM curricula can enhance contextual relevance while complementing globally recognised HRM frameworks.

Contemporary HRM has evolved into a multidimensional professional field encompassing strategic HRM, human capital management, organisational development, and talent analytics. Karman (2020) argues that HRM professionals must possess the capability to identify employee strengths, diagnose development needs, and strategically mobilise human potential across organisations. These expectations signal a shift from administrative HR roles toward strategic partnership and value creation, which must be reflected in curriculum content and learning outcomes.

In South Africa, the South African Board for People Practices (SABPP) plays a central role in defining professional standards for HRM. The SABPP competency framework emphasises ethical practice, leadership, analytics capability, technological integration, and strategic alignment with organisational goals (SABPP, 2025). Aligning HRM curricula with these professional standards is essential for ensuring graduate readiness and professional credibility. In addition, future HR practitioners require competence in ESG reporting, employee wellness strategy, inclusion leadership, people analytics, and managing hybrid workforces.

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) further intensifies curriculum demands by reshaping how HRM is practised. Digitalisation, artificial intelligence, people analytics, and remote work require HRM professionals who are technologically literate, data-informed, ethically grounded, adaptable, and resilient (Schultz, 2021). Consequently, HRM curricula must extend beyond traditional functional knowledge to integrate digital competence, systems thinking, change management, and socio-emotional skills. The rise of generative AI further requires HR graduates to understand algorithmic bias, responsible automation, digital ethics, and human–technology collaboration.

Taken together, these historical, professional, and technological dynamics underscore the need for an HRM curriculum that is context-sensitive, future-oriented, and professionally aligned. In the South African context, this requires curricula that simultaneously address historical inequities, reflect local labour realities, align with professional standards, and prepare graduates for digitally enabled, globally connected workplaces. Such a curriculum orientation provides the foundation for the competence-based framework contribution later in this study.

2.9.2 Educational philosophies grounding curriculum development

Curriculum development and delivery are fundamentally shaped by pedagogy, understood as the study of teaching and learning theories, values, and practices that inform how knowledge is constructed and transmitted (Anderson, 2020). Pedagogical orientations influence not only teaching methods, but also curriculum goals, content selection, assessment practices, and assumptions about the learner. Truss and Anderson (2023) observe that pedagogical approaches vary significantly across institutions and educators, shaped by professional experience, institutional culture, disciplinary norms, contextual conditions, and modes of delivery.

Educational philosophy provides the theoretical grounding for curriculum development. Singhal (2017) identifies several dominant educational philosophies that continue to influence curriculum design, including utilitarianism, progressivism, behaviourism, constructivism, pragmatism, idealism, and humanism. Each philosophy embodies distinct assumptions about knowledge, learning, and the purpose of education, with direct implications for curriculum structure and pedagogical practice.

Behaviourism emphasises observable and measurable learning outcomes, privileging repetition, practice, reinforcement, and performance-based assessment. Within professional education, this philosophy has historically informed competency checklists and standardised assessment practices, but has been criticised for underemphasising critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and contextual judgement.

Pragmatism and progressivism, by contrast, foreground learner-centred and experiential approaches to education. These philosophies emphasise learning through problem-solving, inquiry, and real-world application, making them particularly relevant to professional disciplines such as HRM that require integrating theory and practice (Bingwa & Ngibe, 2021). From a

curriculum perspective, these orientations support project-based learning, work-integrated learning, and reflective practice.

Idealism emphasises intellectual engagement, abstract reasoning, and the pursuit of truth through critical dialogue and reflection. Pedagogical strategies associated with idealism, such as Socratic questioning, foster deep conceptual understanding and ethical reasoning, which are essential for developing reflective and principled HRM practitioners (Zhang, 2023; Azid & Kiong, 2023).

Humanism prioritises the holistic development of learners, emphasising personal growth, self-actualisation, emotional intelligence, and social interaction. In curriculum design, humanistic philosophies support collaborative learning, learner autonomy, and the development of interpersonal and intrapersonal competencies that underpin employability and leadership effectiveness (Singhal, 2017). Utilitarian approaches, in turn, position education as a mechanism for societal development and stability, linking curriculum outcomes to broader economic and social objectives (Bergmark, 2023).

While many of these philosophies originate in Western educational traditions, African educational philosophies offer complementary and contextually grounded perspectives. African philosophies of education emphasise collective learning, social responsibility, and community development, in contrast to the individualistic orientation often associated with Western models (Anani-Bossman & Tandoh, 2023; Balogun & Woldegiorgis, 2024). Central to these philosophies is the principle of Ubuntu, which foregrounds relationality, mutual care, and shared humanity.

Post-colonial educational perspectives further advocate for critical engagement, intellectual emancipation, and the interrogation of dominant knowledge systems that perpetuate inequality and exclusion. Waghid (2021) argues that education should cultivate deliberative engagement, critical reasoning, and ethical responsibility, enabling learners to challenge oppressive structures and contribute meaningfully to a democratic society.

For HRM curriculum development in South Africa, these philosophical perspectives are not merely abstract ideals but practical guides for curriculum design. Integrating learner-centred, experiential, humanistic, and communitarian philosophies can enhance the relevance, inclusivity, and ethical grounding of HRM education. Such integration supports the development of graduates who are not only technically competent but also socially responsive, ethically grounded, and able to navigate complex organisational and societal contexts. These

philosophical foundations directly inform the curriculum models and competence-based framework. For this reason, no single philosophy is sufficient for HRM curriculum design. Effective programmes typically combine behavioural clarity, experiential learning, ethical reflection, human development, and contextual responsiveness.

2.9.3 Curriculum design for higher education

Addressing graduate employability in volatile and uncertain contexts requires purposeful curriculum transformation. Zhao and Watterston (2021) argue that curriculum design should be context-aware, producing graduates who are competent in innovating and contributing to economic development. Categorisation of curriculum can be formal, which is explicit, or non-formal, which is implicit/hidden (Souto-Otero, 2021). Coskun Yasar and Aslan (2021) articulated that curriculum meanings have shifted from focusing on subject content and teaching approaches to encompassing hidden aspects that contain experiences not explicitly planned. Sigþórsson (2019) and Hodge (2024) identified the intended, implemented, attained, and hidden curricula, highlighting the gap between planned learning and what students learn.

Bhuttah et al. (2019) propose a common curriculum development model that incorporates design, implementation, and evaluation. Technical methods focus on the design process, whereas non-technical methods emphasise outcomes, often illustrated through models of products and processes. In South Africa, the curriculum design models comprise product, interactive, cyclical, and process representations (Setyosari, Kuswandi & Ulfa, 2023). Deductive and inductive methods complement these structures, offering various strategies for solving graduate employability. Table 2.1 summarises the major curriculum development models.

Table 2.1: Curriculum development models

Curriculum development models	Description
Objective/academic model	Ralph Tyler proposed the objective/academic model in 1949, which is centered on specific, measurable aims that denote expected learning outcomes regarding observable behaviours (Adirika & Okolie, 2017).
Interactive/instructional strategies model	Adirika and Okolie (2017) noted that Hilda Taba, in 1962, presented an interactive model in which the developer follows a particular order within the curriculum elements, starting from

Curriculum development models	Description
	any item and allowing the learning context to determine the development method. Her model includes seven jointly interactive factors, beginning with a diagnosis of learner needs and proceeding to the formulation of objectives, content development, organisation of the content, selection of the expected learning experiences, and formulation and evaluation of learning outcomes.
Cyclical model	In 1971, Wheeler developed and expanded the ideas proposed by Tyler, who laid the groundwork for most curriculum prototypes (Adirika & Okolie, 2017). Wheeler suggested five correlated stages that present the curriculum development process as an ongoing activity, continually changing as new practices or materials become available. The model begins with the definition of objectives or goals, followed by the selection of learning experiences and content, the organisation of these, and concludes with an evaluation.
Process model	The curriculum development model concerns how learners acquire knowledge and how they advance and grow (McPhail, 2021). Thus, students are perceived as active participants in the production of knowledge and the improvement of understanding, rather than passive recipients.
Deductive model	Posillico et al. (2022) view the deductive model as linear, prospective, and follows logical steps, involving the formation, design, execution, and evaluation of ideas. In the deductive method, the curriculum planner selects goals and purposes, while educators design educational strategies. Then, in cooperation with curriculum planners and instructors, they design the assessment methods.
Inductive/naturalistic and temporal model	The inductive technique is a learner-centric method grounded in the principle that students are more willing to study when they are enthusiastically engaged in the educational process.

While these models offer useful design heuristics, their practical value depends on contextual adaptation, stakeholder participation, and alignment with graduate capability outcomes.

2.9.4 Tyler's principles of curriculum development

Ralph Tyler's principles of curriculum development (Tyler, 1949) represent one of the earliest systematic attempts to conceptualise curriculum design as a coherent and purposeful process. Tyler's model is structured around four core questions: (1) What educational purposes should the institution seek to attain? (2) What educational experiences can be provided to attain these purposes? (3) How can these educational experiences be effectively organised? and (4) How can the effectiveness of these educational experiences be evaluated? These four elements which are purposes, experiences, organisation (methods), and evaluation form the backbone of Tyler's rational approach to curriculum design. Tyler's model also strongly influenced modern constructive alignment approaches in which intended outcomes, teaching activities, and assessment tasks are deliberately coordinated.

Compared with later curriculum models, Tyler's approach is often characterised as linear and objectives-driven. However, subsequent theorists have adapted and extended his ideas to accommodate greater complexity and responsiveness. For example, Wheeler's cyclical model reconceptualises curriculum development as a continuous, circular process in which aims, learning experiences, content, and evaluation are interdependent and constantly refined through feedback (Dutt & Gandhi, 2024). Similarly, Taba's grassroots model emphasises inductive curriculum development, advocating that curriculum design should emerge from teachers' and learners' experiences rather than be imposed through top-down objectives. These models critique the rigidity of purely objective-based approaches by foregrounding iteration, reflection, and contextual responsiveness.

Despite these differences, Tyler's principles remain foundational to contemporary curriculum thinking, particularly when interpreted through a systems lens. The General Systems Theory (GST) provides a conceptual bridge that reconciles Tyler's structured logic with the flexibility of cyclical and inductive models. GST views curriculum development as an interconnected system comprising inputs, processes, outputs, and feedback loops. When mapped onto Tyler's model, curriculum objectives function as system inputs; learning experiences and teaching strategies represent core processes; graduate competence and employability outcomes constitute system outputs; and evaluation serves as the feedback mechanism that informs system adjustment and renewal.

This systems-based interpretation aligns closely with the proposed HRM curriculum development framework advanced in this study. Within the framework, clearly articulated HRM graduate competence profiles, derived from professional standards, stakeholder expectations,

and contextual labour-market demands, serve as the primary curriculum inputs. These inputs are informed by societal needs, professional requirements, and cultural context, reflecting Tyler's insistence that curriculum purposes should be socially grounded (Comaroff, 2024; Lebopa, Excell, & Van As, 2024). In the South African context, this alignment is particularly significant, as curriculum objectives must respond simultaneously to transformation imperatives, employability challenges, and professionalisation of HRM practice.

The second and third stages of Tyler's model, which concerns the selection and organisation of learning experiences, correspond to the process dimension of the systems approach. In the proposed HRM framework, these processes include stakeholder-integrated curriculum co-design, pedagogies that deliberately integrate theory and practice, and the embedding of digital, strategic, and relational competencies within learning activities. While Tyler originally emphasised structured learning experiences aligned to objectives, contemporary applications require these experiences to be adaptive and sensitive to the hidden curriculum. The hidden curriculum may unintentionally reproduce power dynamics, exclusionary practices, or misaligned professional norms, thereby creating gaps between intended and actual outcomes (Kärner & Schneider, 2024; Grant, 2018). A systems-oriented curriculum development framework explicitly acknowledges these implicit influences and incorporates reflective and adaptive mechanisms to address them.

Evaluation, the fourth component of Tyler's model, assumes heightened importance within both GST and the proposed HRM framework. Rather than functioning as a terminal activity, evaluation is conceptualised as a continuous feedback loop that assesses not only content mastery but also competence application, professional behaviour, and employability outcomes. This cyclical feedback function is consistent with Wheeler's model and reinforces the need for ongoing curriculum responsiveness. In the HRM framework, evaluation extends beyond traditional academic assessment to include stakeholder feedback, graduate performance data, and input from professional bodies, thereby strengthening the alignment between curriculum intentions and workplace realities.

Recent global developments further underscore the relevance of a systems-based interpretation of Tyler's principles. The COVID-19 pandemic and accelerated technological change have disrupted traditional modes of curriculum delivery, exposing the limitations of static, content-heavy curriculum models (Ratten, 2023). These disruptions have underscored the need for curriculum frameworks that are resilient, adaptable, and able to respond to uncertainty. When Tyler's principles are integrated with the General Systems Theory, they

provide a structured yet flexible foundation that supports continuous adaptation while maintaining coherence and alignment.

In summary, while Tyler's curriculum model differs from cyclical and inductive approaches in its original formulation, its core principles remain highly compatible with contemporary systems-based curriculum design. By situating Tyler's objectives—experiences—organisation—evaluation logic within a broader systems framework, this study leverages the strengths of multiple curriculum models. This integrated approach directly informs the proposed HRM competence development framework, ensuring that curriculum design is purpose-driven, process-oriented, outcome-focused, and continuously refined through feedback. Such alignment is essential for developing HRM graduates who are not only academically prepared but also professionally competent and employable within a complex and evolving South African labour market.

2.9.5 Nicholls' five phases of curriculum design

Nicholls' model of curriculum design offers a structured yet flexible approach to curriculum development that builds on earlier objectives-based frameworks while explicitly foregrounding outcomes and evaluation. According to Nicholls' five-phase model, curriculum design proceeds through: (1) the formulation of learning objectives, (2) the identification and development of learning experiences aligned to these objectives, (3) the determination of learning content required to support the attainment of objectives, (4) the design of assessment strategies that validly measure achievement of the objectives, and (5) the evaluation of the effectiveness of learning experiences and content in achieving the stated objectives (Willox, Judd & Nicholls, 2024). Unlike purely linear interpretations, Nicholls' model explicitly recognises that learning outcomes influence and reinforce each phase of curriculum development, thereby strengthening its alignment with outcome-based education principles.

When compared with Tyler's curriculum model, Nicholls' approach demonstrates both continuity and progression. Like Tyler (1949), Nicholls places learning objectives at the center of curriculum design and emphasises alignment among objectives, learning experiences, content, and evaluation. However, Nicholls advances this logic by more explicitly integrating assessment as a distinct and central phase, rather than subsuming it within evaluation. This emphasis anticipates contemporary concerns with constructive alignment and accountability in curriculum design. In contrast to Wheeler's cyclical model, which highlights continuous iteration across all curriculum components, Nicholls' model maintains a more structured sequence, while still allowing feedback from evaluation to inform curriculum refinement.

Compared to Taba's inductive, teacher-driven approach, Nicholls' model occupies a middle ground by combining top-down clarity of outcomes with flexibility in instructional design and evaluation.

Viewed through the lens of the General Systems Theory (GST), Nicholls' five phases can be readily conceptualised as components of an interconnected curriculum system. Learning objectives function as system inputs, defining the intended knowledge, skills, values, and behaviours that graduates are expected to demonstrate. Learning experiences and curriculum content represent the core processes through which these objectives are enacted. Assessment strategies serve as mechanisms for measuring system performance, while evaluation operates as a feedback loop that informs system adjustment, improvement, and renewal. This systems-based interpretation reinforces the notion that curriculum development is not a static sequence of steps but a dynamic, adaptive process responsive to contextual influences and performance outcomes.

This systems-oriented understanding aligns closely with the proposed HRM competence development framework advanced in this study. Within the framework, clearly defined HRM graduate competencies derived from stakeholder expectations, professional standards, and labour-market demands serve as curriculum inputs, echoing Nicholls' emphasis on explicit learning objectives. These objectives extend beyond technical knowledge to include digital competence, strategic thinking, ethical judgement, and relational capability. The selection of learning experiences and content within the framework is guided by the need to integrate theory with practice, ensuring that HRM students engage with authentic workplace scenarios, digital HR tools, and problem-based learning activities that reflect real organisational contexts. Nicholls' explicit focus on assessment design is particularly relevant to the proposed HRM framework. In professional disciplines such as HRM, assessment practices play a critical role in signalling what counts as valued learning. Nicholls' insistence on aligning assessment with learning objectives supports the shift away from traditional examinations towards more authentic forms of assessment that evaluate applied competence. Within the HRM framework, this alignment is operationalised through portfolios of evidence, workplace-based projects, simulations, and reflective assessments that capture not only cognitive mastery but also behavioural and ethical competence.

The model's emphasis on evaluation as a final phase further reinforces its compatibility with systems thinking and continuous improvement. Evaluation in Nicholls' model does not merely assess learner performance, but also examines the effectiveness of curriculum design choices, teaching strategies, and assessment methods. In the HRM framework, this evaluative function

is extended to include feedback from employers, professional bodies, alumni, and graduates, ensuring that curriculum effectiveness is judged against employability outcomes and professional readiness. This is especially relevant in HRM programmes where authentic assessment methods such as simulations, case analyses, portfolios, and workplace projects may assess competence more effectively than traditional examinations.

Nicholls' model also provides a useful platform for integrating Bloom's taxonomy and its subsequent digital expansions. Bloom's original taxonomy (1956) categorised learning objectives into cognitive, psychomotor, and affective domains, providing a structured framework for articulating expected learning outcomes. More recent digital adaptations extend these domains to encompass digital literacy, online collaboration, and technology-enabled problem-solving (Alaghbary, 2021; Husain, 2023). While curriculum design has historically privileged the cognitive domain, growing evidence suggests that the affective domain—encompassing attitudes, values, ethical orientation, and emotional intelligence—plays a critical role in graduate employability and professional effectiveness (Hyland, 2019). Nicholls' model, with its emphasis on explicitly formulated objectives and aligned assessment, provides a robust mechanism for elevating affective learning outcomes to equal status with cognitive and psychomotor goals.

In summary, Nicholls' five-phase model represents a structured yet adaptable curriculum design approach that bridges objectives-based and systems-oriented thinking. When integrated with the General Systems Theory, the model supports a holistic view of curriculum development that links inputs, processes, outputs, and feedback in a coherent system. This integration directly informs the proposed HRM curriculum development framework by ensuring that learning objectives, pedagogical strategies, assessment practices, and evaluation mechanisms are coherently aligned to develop work-ready, ethically grounded, and digitally competent HRM graduates. Through this systems-based application, Nicholls' model contributes to a curriculum design approach that is both theoretically grounded and practically responsive to contemporary professional and labour-market demands.

2.9.6 The Taba approach to curriculum design

The Taba (1967) model of curriculum development emerged as a significant extension and critique of Tyler's objectives-driven approach, placing greater emphasis on teachers as central agents in curriculum design. Whereas Tyler's model is often characterised as top-down and institutionally driven, Taba advanced a grassroots approach in which curriculum development begins at the classroom level and is informed by learners' and educators' lived experiences

(Bhandari, 2025). This shift reflects a more inductive philosophy of curriculum design, where curriculum structures evolve from identified needs rather than being imposed solely through predetermined objectives.

Taba's model follows a systematic, step-by-step process that begins with diagnosing learner needs. This initial phase requires curriculum designers to analyse learners' backgrounds, abilities, socio-cultural contexts, and future professional demands. The process then proceeds to the formulation of curriculum goals and objectives, followed by the selection of content that is relevant to those objectives. Subsequently, content is organised in a logical and progressive sequence, learning experiences are selected, learning activities are organised to support effective engagement, and the curriculum is evaluated to determine its effectiveness. Although sequential in presentation, Taba's model allows for feedback between stages, enabling curriculum refinement in response to evaluation outcomes. In widening-access institutions, Taba's diagnostic orientation is particularly valuable because student preparedness, language background, digital access, and prior exposure often vary significantly.

When compared with Tyler's model, Taba's approach diverges in its starting point and its emphasis on agency. While Tyler prioritises societal and institutional goals as the primary drivers of curriculum objectives, Taba foregrounds learner needs and teacher expertise as foundational inputs. In contrast to Nicholls' outcomes-focused model, which explicitly integrates assessment as a central phase, Taba places stronger emphasis on the pedagogical process and the organisation of learning experiences. Compared with Wheeler's cyclical model, Taba's approach retains a structured progression but implicitly supports iteration through ongoing diagnosis and evaluation. Collectively, these distinctions position Taba's model as particularly responsive to contextual and experiential factors in curriculum development.

Viewed through the lens of the General Systems Theory (GST), Taba's curriculum model can be conceptualised as a dynamic system in which learner needs function as primary inputs, curriculum design and pedagogical practices operate as processes, and learner development and employability outcomes constitute system outputs. Evaluation acts as a feedback mechanism that informs system adjustment and continuous improvement. This systems-based interpretation highlights the compatibility of Taba's inductive approach with adaptive curriculum design, particularly in contexts characterised by diversity, inequality, and rapidly changing labour-market conditions.

This alignment is especially relevant to the proposed HRM competence development framework. In the South African context, HRM graduates are expected to navigate complex employment relations, socio-economic disparities, and organisational transformation agendas. Taba's emphasis on diagnosing learner needs provides a valuable foundation for identifying gaps in students' preparedness for professional HRM roles, including deficits in applied labour law knowledge, ethical decision-making, digital HR capabilities, and relational competence. By anchoring curriculum design in these diagnosed needs, the HRM curriculum development framework ensures that competence development is contextually grounded and responsive to national employment challenges.

The subsequent phases of Taba's model which are content selection, organisation, and the design of learning experiences align closely with the process dimension of the proposed HRM framework. Within this framework, curriculum content is deliberately selected to integrate HRM theory with workplace practice, while learning experiences are structured to promote applied problem-solving, stakeholder engagement, and exposure to authentic organisational scenarios. Taba's focus on the organisation of learning activities supports the use of scaffolding and progression across curriculum levels, ensuring that HRM competencies are developed incrementally rather than in isolation.

Evaluation, as the final stage of Taba's model, reinforces the importance of reflective curriculum practice. In a systems-based HRM framework, evaluation extends beyond assessing student performance to include examining curriculum relevance, teaching effectiveness, and alignment with professional standards. Feedback from employers, professional bodies, and graduates serves as a critical input for curriculum revision, thereby strengthening the responsiveness and sustainability of HRM programmes.

In summary, Taba's curriculum development model offers a valuable inductive complement to more objectives-driven and outcomes-focused approaches. When integrated with the General Systems Theory, Taba's emphasis on learner needs, teacher agency, and iterative refinement provides a robust foundation for context-sensitive curriculum design. This integration directly informs the proposed HRM curriculum development framework by ensuring that curriculum inputs are grounded in diagnosed needs, that processes are pedagogically coherent and practice-oriented, and that outputs are continuously evaluated against employability and professional-readiness outcomes. Through this systems-based application, the Taba approach makes a meaningful contribution to the development of HRM curricula that are adaptive, inclusive, and aligned with South Africa's evolving employment landscape. Taba's model is shown in Figure 2.1.

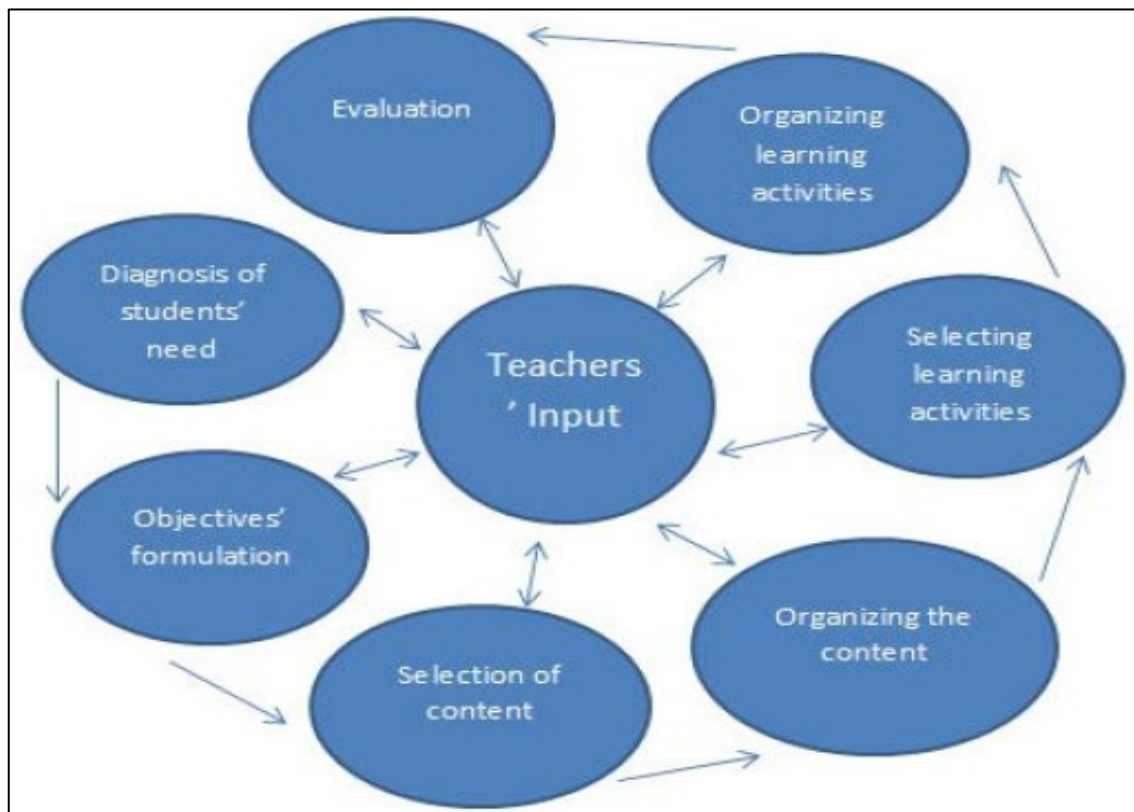


Figure 2.1: The Taba model of curriculum development

Source: Adapted from O'Neill (2010)

2.9.7 The Cyclical Model

Wheeler's cyclical model conceptualises curriculum development as a dynamic, continuous, and iterative process rather than a linear sequence of steps (Palupi, 2018; Prihantoro, 2021). In contrast to early objectives-based models that present curriculum design as a largely sequential activity, Wheeler's approach emphasises ongoing interaction among curriculum components and recognises the need for regular review and adaptation in response to contextual change. This cyclical orientation is particularly relevant in contemporary higher education environments characterised by rapid technological advancements, shifting labour-market demands, and evolving professional standards.

The Wheeler model begins with the definition of goals and objectives, which articulate what learners are expected to know, value, and be able to do by the end of a programme (Dulo, 2021). Unlike purely content-driven models, Wheeler's emphasis on clearly defined outcomes ensures that curriculum design remains purpose-driven and aligned with broader educational and professional expectations. In this respect, the model aligns with Tyler's and Nicholls'

approaches, both of which foreground the importance of explicit objectives. However, Wheeler differs in that objectives are not treated as fixed endpoints; rather, they are refined over time as the curriculum cycles through implementation and evaluation.

The second stage of Wheeler's model involves selecting learning experiences. At this stage, educators identify pedagogical strategies, learning activities, and instructional methods that enable learners to achieve the stated objectives (Dulo, 2021). These learning experiences are expected to be responsive to students' needs, prior knowledge, and socio-cultural contexts, and to promote deep engagement, skill development, and active participation. Compared with Taba's learner-centred inductive approach, Wheeler's model offers a more structured framework while still accommodating responsiveness to learner diversity and contextual variation.

The third stage focuses on selecting curriculum content. This involves identifying the knowledge domains, concepts, and skills that learners should acquire to support the achievement of the objectives and to complement the selected learning experiences (Odigbo, 2023). Content selection in Wheeler's model emphasises relevance, coherence, and developmental appropriateness, ensuring that learners are exposed to material that is both academically rigorous and professionally meaningful. In contrast to content-heavy traditional curricula, Wheeler's approach underscores the alignment between content, learning experiences, and desired outcomes.

The fourth stage entails organising learning experiences and content into a coherent structure. This organisational phase ensures logical progression from foundational to more complex levels of learning, prevents unnecessary duplication, and aligns curriculum delivery with contextual factors such as available resources, institutional constraints, student diversity, and time allocations (Prihantoro, 2021). This emphasis on coherence and progression distinguishes Wheeler's model from more fragmented curriculum approaches and strengthens its relevance for professional programmes that require cumulative competence development. The final stage of Wheeler's model is evaluation, which involves a systematic assessment of whether the defined objectives and goals have been achieved. Evaluation encompasses both student learning outcomes and the overall effectiveness of the curriculum design and delivery processes (Odigbo, 2023). Crucially, the evaluation results are not treated as an endpoint but are fed back into the system, prompting revisions to objectives, content, learning experiences, and organisational structures. This feedback mechanism reinforces the model's cyclical nature, supporting continuous curriculum improvement.

When examined through the lens of the General Systems Theory (GST), Wheeler's cyclical model closely aligns with a systems-based understanding of curriculum development. Goals and objectives serve as system inputs, while teaching and learning activities and content represent the core processes. Graduate competence and employability outcomes constitute system outputs, and evaluation operates as a feedback loop that enables the system to self-regulate and adapt. This alignment makes Wheeler's model particularly compatible with curriculum frameworks that seek to remain responsive to changing external environments.

This systems-oriented perspective directly informs the proposed HRM curriculum development framework advanced in this study. HRM education operates within a complex ecosystem shaped by labour-market demands, professional standards, technological change, and socio-economic conditions. Wheeler's cyclical approach provides a conceptual foundation for designing HRM curricula that are continuously reviewed and refined in response to stakeholder feedback, graduate performance, and industry needs. Within the HRM framework, clearly defined competence-based objectives serve as inputs, integrated pedagogical strategies and curriculum content function as developmental processes, and work-ready HRM graduates represent the intended outputs.

Furthermore, Wheeler's emphasis on alignment between objectives, learning experiences, content, and evaluation supports the framework's focus on authentic assessment and stakeholder-informed curriculum renewal. By embedding evaluation and feedback as central components of curriculum design, the model enables HRM programmes to identify misalignments between intended competencies and actual graduate capabilities and to make evidence-based adjustments. This iterative process is essential for ensuring that HRM curricula remain relevant, coherent, and capable of enhancing graduate employability in a rapidly evolving professional landscape.

In summary, Wheeler's cyclical model offers a robust and adaptable approach to curriculum development that complements and extends objectives-based and inductive models such as those proposed by Tyler, Nicholls, and Taba. When integrated with the General Systems Theory, Wheeler's emphasis on continuous feedback and refinement offers a powerful conceptual lens for designing responsive, competence-based HRM curricula. This integration strengthens the proposed HRM curriculum development framework by embedding continuous improvement, stakeholder responsiveness, and systems thinking at its core, thereby supporting the sustained employability and professional readiness of HRM graduates. Wheeler's cyclical model is shown in Figure 2.2.

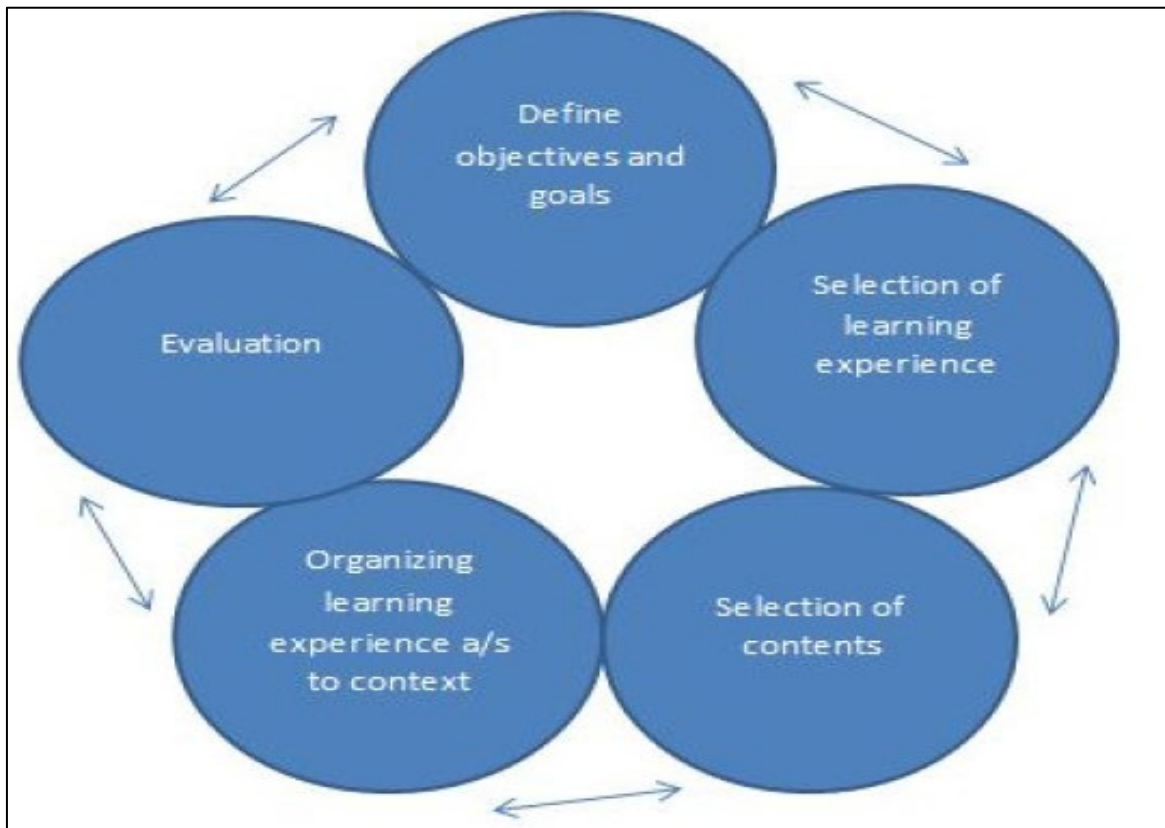


Figure 2.2: Wheeler's cyclical model of curriculum development

Source: Adapted from O'Neill (2010)

In conclusion:

This discussion critically examined prominent curriculum design models and theories of Tyler, Taba, Nicholls, and Wheeler. While these models originate from different epistemological positions and historical contexts, a comparative analysis reveals a set of shared foundational principles that collectively inform contemporary competence-based, systems-oriented curriculum design. Importantly, this synthesis demonstrates that these models do not operate as competing alternatives, but rather as complementary precursors that, when integrated, provide a robust conceptual foundation for developing a responsive HRM curriculum framework.

Across all four models, the centrality of clearly articulated aims and objectives emerges as a unifying theme. Tyler's principles foreground the alignment of curriculum objectives with societal and professional needs, establishing a rational starting point for curriculum design. Nicholls' five-phase model reinforces this logic by embedding objectives within an outcome-oriented design process that explicitly integrates assessment and evaluation. Wheeler's cyclical model further extends this alignment by positioning objectives as dynamic inputs that

are continuously refined through iterative feedback. Taba's inductive approach, while shifting the starting point toward learner needs and teacher agency, nonetheless converges on the formulation of contextually grounded curriculum objectives as a critical design phase. Collectively, these perspectives underscore the importance of defining graduate competence profiles that are explicit, context-sensitive, and aligned with external stakeholder expectations.

A second cross-cutting insight concerns the conceptualisation of curriculum development as a process rather than a static product. Wheeler's cyclical model most explicitly articulates curriculum design as a continuous system of planning, implementation, evaluation, and renewal. However, when viewed through a contemporary lens, Tyler's, Nicholls', and Taba's models also reveal implicit feedback mechanisms that support ongoing curriculum refinement. This process-oriented understanding aligns closely with General Systems Theory, which conceptualises educational programmes as dynamic systems comprising inputs, processes, outputs, and feedback loops. Within this systems perspective, curriculum aims and objectives function as inputs; teaching and learning strategies and content represent core processes; graduate competence and employability constitute outputs; and evaluation provides feedback that informs system adaptation.

The discussion further highlighted the growing recognition that curriculum effectiveness is contingent not only on content selection but also on the coherence and alignment between objectives, pedagogy, assessment, and evaluation. Nicholls' explicit emphasis on assessment design and Wheeler's focus on alignment and coherence across curriculum stages are particularly instructive in this regard. These models collectively support a shift away from fragmented, content-heavy curricula toward integrated designs that prioritise the development and demonstration of applied competence. This shift is especially pertinent for professional disciplines such as Human Resource Management, where graduate success is measured not merely by theoretical knowledge, but by the ability to apply knowledge ethically, strategically, and effectively in complex organisational contexts.

Importantly, the comparative analysis also revealed limitations within traditional curriculum models when applied in isolation. Linear interpretations of Tyler's model risk rigidity in rapidly changing environments, while purely inductive approaches, such as Taba's, may lack systematic mechanisms for external accountability and standardisation. Similarly, cyclical models like Wheeler's require operational tools to translate continuous review into actionable curriculum decisions. These limitations underscore the need for an integrative framework that synthesises the strengths of multiple models while addressing their respective gaps.

The Integrated Curriculum Development Framework proposed in this study is positioned within this context. Drawing conceptually from Tyler's objective alignment, Taba's contextual responsiveness, Nicholls' outcome-oriented coherence, and Wheeler's cyclical renewal, the framework adopts a systems-based logic that explicitly integrates stakeholder expectations, curriculum design processes, pedagogical practices, assessment strategies, and institutional enablers. The framework operationalises the General Systems Theory by making visible the relationships among curriculum inputs, developmental processes, outputs, and feedback mechanisms, thereby providing a coherent structure for strengthening HRM graduate competence.

Furthermore, this discussion provides the theoretical justification for the development of two applied governance instruments introduced later in the study: the HRM curriculum scorecard and the accreditation rubric. While the curriculum models reviewed articulate *what* should be considered in curriculum design, they offer limited guidance on *systematically evaluating and sustaining* alignment, coherence, and responsiveness over time. The scorecard and rubric address this gap by translating the integrated principles derived from these models into measurable criteria and performance standards. In doing so, they extend classical curriculum theory into practical tools that support evidence-based curriculum review, quality assurance, and continuous improvement in HRM education.

For HRM curricula, cyclical review mechanisms should ideally include employer panels, alumni feedback, professional body input, student success data, and labour-market trend analysis.

2.10 FRAMEWORKS FOR CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

Post-apartheid South Africa has fundamentally reshaped approaches to curriculum development, placing strong emphasis on democratic participation, inclusivity, and social responsiveness. In the higher education sector, this shift is reflected in policy frameworks that mandate stakeholder involvement in curriculum design and review processes, most notably the Higher Education Act No. 101 of 1997, which promotes participatory governance and accountability within universities (Mncube & Ngema, 2023). Curriculum development is therefore no longer regarded as an exclusively academic exercise, but as a collaborative process that must reflect the needs, values, and expectations of a diverse range of stakeholders, including students, employers, professional bodies, and broader society.

Student activism and decolonisation movements have further intensified calls for inclusive and contextually relevant curricula. These movements challenge historically inherited curricula that

privilege Eurocentric knowledge systems and marginalise local, indigenous, and experiential knowledge (Davids, 2021). Within this context, curriculum design is increasingly expected to address issues of social justice, epistemic access, and relevance, while simultaneously preparing graduates for meaningful participation in the labour market. This dual imperative has added complexity to curriculum development in professional disciplines, such as Human Resource Management (HRM).

Contemporary curriculum scholarship reflects these shifts. Hoadley (2024) identifies three significant transitions in modern curriculum thinking. First, there has been a move away from rigid, subject-based curricula towards competence-based models that emphasise what graduates can do with what they know. Second, curriculum design has increasingly foregrounded learner-centred pedagogies that recognise students as active participants in knowledge construction. Third, there has been a shift from a narrow focus on prescribed outcomes towards a broader concern with capability development and application in real-world contexts. Together, these shifts signal a move towards curricula that prioritise adaptability, relevance, and application.

Competency-based curricula emphasise the integrated acquisition of knowledge, skills, and abilities that enable graduates to perform effectively in complex, changing workplace environments (Boahin, 2018). In the South African context, this orientation is reinforced through policy instruments and quality assurance frameworks. The “design-down, deliver-up” approach endorsed by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) requires curriculum designers to begin with clearly articulated exit-level outcomes informed by workplace and professional expectations, and to ensure alignment across learning outcomes, teaching strategies, and assessment practices (Coetzee, et al., 2019).

Despite the availability of curriculum models and policy guidelines at both global and national levels, a critical gap remains. Existing models often lack integration, contextual sensitivity, or operational clarity when applied to professional disciplines such as HRM within the South African higher education landscape. There is no integrative, empirically grounded framework that systematically links competence definition, curriculum processes, stakeholder engagement, and employability outcomes. This gap underscores the need for a context-specific framework explicitly designed to enhance the employability of HRM graduates, which the present study seeks to address. This gap is more pronounced in HRM because curriculum quality depends simultaneously on academic integrity, professional legitimacy, regulatory alignment, and employability outcomes.

2.11 INTEGRATION OF CURRICULUM DESIGN THEORIES

The preceding sections examined a range of curriculum design models and theoretical perspectives that inform how academic programmes are conceptualised, structured, implemented, and reviewed. A common point of convergence across these models is the recognition that effective curriculum development begins with the clear articulation of curriculum aims and objectives. These aims and objectives provide direction, coherence, and purpose, ensuring that curriculum design is aligned with intended learning outcomes and broader educational and societal goals.

While there is agreement on the primacy of curriculum aims, theorists diverge in how they conceptualise curriculum development beyond this point. Linear models typically portray curriculum design as a sequential process in which objectives inform content selection, teaching and learning strategies, and assessment in a stepwise manner. In contrast, circular and cyclical models, such as Wheeler's, conceptualise curriculum design as a continuous, iterative process in which curriculum components are regularly reviewed, refined, and adjusted in response to feedback and contextual change (Dutt & Gandhi, 2024). These circular models emphasise responsiveness and ongoing improvement, recognising that curricula must evolve as professional, technological, and societal conditions change.

Given the suitability of these models for contemporary professional education, particularly in Human Resource Management (HRM), it is evident that no single model fully captures the complexity of curriculum design in dynamic labour-market contexts. HRM education operates within an environment characterised by shifting professional standards, digital transformation, regulatory requirements, and diverse stakeholder expectations. As such, curriculum design requires a lens that accommodates interdependence, feedback, and contextual influence.

In this regard, the General Systems Theory offers a particularly useful analytical framework. The General Systems Theory conceptualises phenomena as systems composed of interrelated inputs, processes, and outputs. In curriculum design, curriculum aims and objectives serve as inputs; curriculum content, pedagogical approaches, assessment strategies, and stakeholder engagement constitute the core processes; and the development of competent, employable graduates represents the intended output. This systems-oriented perspective foregrounds the relationships between curriculum components rather than treating them as isolated elements, thereby supporting coherence, alignment, and accountability across the curriculum lifecycle. Systems thinking is particularly appropriate where multiple

actors influence curriculum quality, including academics, students, regulators, employers, professional bodies, and institutional leadership.

Furthermore, adopting a systems perspective enables curriculum designers to explicitly consider the influence of environmental and contextual factors on the effectiveness of their curriculum. These include institutional governance structures, resource availability, professional body standards, labour market demands, and socio-economic conditions. By recognising these influences, curriculum design moves beyond static models toward a more adaptive and context-sensitive approach.

Importantly, the literature suggests that combining elements from multiple curriculum design models can enhance curriculum adaptability, contextual relevance, and graduate outcomes (Dutt & Gandhi, 2024). Rather than adhering rigidly to a single theoretical model, an integrative approach allows curriculum designers to draw on the strengths of linear, cyclical, and systems-based models. Such integration supports the development of curricula that are both structured and flexible, enabling responsiveness to stakeholder feedback while maintaining alignment with clearly defined educational objectives.

In summary, this synthesis highlights that contemporary HRM curriculum design requires an iterative, integrative, and systemically governed approach. The insights derived from curriculum design models and the General Systems Theory provide a conceptual foundation for viewing HRM curricula as dynamic systems in which aims, processes, and outcomes are continuously aligned and evaluated. This perspective directly informs the framework contribution later in this study, which seeks to operationalise these principles through structured processes, evaluative mechanisms, and feedback loops to enhance HRM graduate competence and employability.

The framework, therefore, moves beyond abstract theory by operationalising integration through scorecards, governance processes, competence mapping, and feedback mechanisms.

2.12 SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter critically examined curriculum theory, models, philosophies, and development approaches relevant to HRM education. It demonstrated that no single curriculum model adequately addresses the complexity of employability-oriented professional education in South Africa. Instead, an integrated systems perspective is required to align curriculum aims, learning

processes, stakeholder expectations, assessment practices, and graduate outcomes. The next chapter extends this discussion by examining employability theory and the competencies required for HRM graduates to succeed in contemporary workplaces.

CHAPTER THREE

EMPLOYABILITY OF HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT GRADUATES

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter seeks to conceptualise employability and identify the key proficiencies required for HRM graduates to be future-fit in an increasingly complex labour market. The discussion begins by defining employability, then explores the challenges graduates face and strategies to enhance their employability. This discussion will subsequently inform the development of constructs that underpin the design of employability proficiencies. Finally, initial guidelines will be proposed for constructing a framework to inform curriculum design, which will be elaborated in subsequent chapters. Employability is a critical construct for this study, as the successful integration of HRM graduates into the workforce depends on the skills, capabilities, and competencies they acquire during their education and training. Contemporary employability discourse increasingly recognises that graduate success depends not only on obtaining first employment, but also on sustaining employability through continuous learning, career agility, identity development, and responsiveness to technological disruption.

Given the profession-specific nature of HRM work, this chapter places particular emphasis on employability as it relates to people management, ethical practice, organisational contribution, and digital HR capability.

3.2 DEFINITION OF EMPLOYABILITY

Although employability remains a contested concept without a universally agreed-upon definition, scholarly literature provides valuable insight into its progressive evolution. Early interpretations framed employability narrowly as an individual's ability to obtain work within prevailing labour market conditions. Kiley (2020) traces the origin of the term to Beveridge's 1909 work, where employability was associated with underemployment during Britain's industrial expansion. Similarly, Mouly and Costa (2022) explain that employability in the early twentieth century was largely equated with the capacity to secure paid work, reflecting economic and industrial priorities of the time. This perspective positioned employability as an external labour market outcome rather than an internally developed set of competencies. A useful distinction in the literature is between absolute employability (capacity to obtain work), relative employability (advantage compared with other candidates), and sustainable employability (capacity to remain employable over time despite labour-market change).

By the late twentieth century, particularly during the 1980s and 1990s, economic restructuring, technological change, and globalisation began reshaping labour market expectations (Favero, 2022). Employability gradually shifted from a static, job-acquisition concept to a dynamic construct emphasising adaptability, lifelong learning, and transferable competencies. Römgens, Scoupe and Beausaert (2020) note that employability came to be understood as a combination of personal attributes, skills, and behaviours enabling individuals to obtain, maintain, and progress in employment. This extends this view by emphasising practical professional behaviours and adaptive capabilities required for effective workplace performance. These definitions reflect a broader move from “employment status” toward “employment capability.” Employability should therefore not be conflated with employment status. A highly employable graduate may remain unemployed because of macroeconomic constraints, while a less employable individual may secure work through labour-market conditions or networks.

Contemporary scholarship conceptualises employability as a multidimensional and developmental construct shaped by both individual and contextual factors. Akkermans, Tomlinson, and Anderson (2023) argue that employability now encompasses sustained labour market participation, supported by competencies, dispositions, and identity resources that enable career resilience. Glerum and Judge (2021) similarly highlight the importance of aligning education with labour market demands by cultivating both technical and psychosocial capabilities. Modern definitions further integrate social capital, psychological readiness, and professional identity as central components of employability (Tomlinson et al., 2017; Clarke, 2018). As labour markets become increasingly volatile and shaped by the Fourth Industrial Revolution, employability is no longer seen merely as the ability to gain employment, but rather as the continuous capacity to remain relevant, adaptable, and valuable across evolving professional contexts.

In this study, employability is conceptualised as the integrated capability of HRM graduates to obtain, perform, adapt, and progress in employment through the mobilisation of knowledge, skills, identity resources, psycho-social strengths, and contextual awareness.

3.2.1 The need to inculcate and nurture employability capabilities

Employability is an integral aspect of career development, encompassing the ability to acquire and sustain employment (Glerum & Judge, 2021). Its relevance is particularly pronounced in South Africa, where unemployment rates are high, and the labour market faces the dual challenges of job losses during the post-COVID-19 recovery and technological disruption that

automates certain roles, reducing workforce demand in specific areas (Verick, Schmidt-Klau & Lee, 2022). The evolving HRM function requires graduates with advanced skills, attitudes, and dispositions to navigate this changing landscape (Armstrong & Taylor, 2023). This distinction is particularly important in South Africa, where structural unemployment means graduate employability must be understood as necessary but not sufficient for employment outcomes.

While the United States experiences a labour shortage, South Africa faces the inverse problem: more graduates than available employment opportunities. The rising number of university graduates has not been matched by job creation, resulting in high graduate unemployment and skill mismatches across many sectors of the economy (Köhler et al., 2023).

Historically, apartheid significantly influenced employment patterns, creating skewed opportunities along racial lines. While legal segregation no longer exists, current labour market challenges stem largely from systemic educational inadequacies (Molope, 2022). Efforts, such as the Skills Development Act and associated strategies, have aimed to bridge these gaps; however, structural deficiencies in schooling have limited their impact over the past 28 years (Mbandlwa, 2023).

Following 1994, the democratic government sought to address socio-economic inequities through initiatives such as the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) and the Growth, Employment and Redistribution Programme (GEAR). These policies aimed to reduce unemployment, enhance educational access, and promote socio-economic transformation (Vally & Motala, 2022). Despite these interventions, South Africa continues to face high unemployment, inequality, and skill shortages. Ansari (2021) highlights the International Monetary Fund's description of South Africa as having one of the world's highest unemployment rates, lowest labour participation, and most unequal income distribution. Statistics South Africa (SSA) (2025) indicates that unemployment currently stands at 31.9%, while GDP growth has averaged only 3% since 2009. Youth unemployment rates remain substantially higher than aggregate unemployment, intensifying pressure on universities to support smoother school-to-work transitions, entrepreneurial capability, and career self-management.

In response, the National Development Plan (NDP) aims to create 11 million jobs by 2030, emphasising the critical role of employable graduates in addressing national economic challenges (Zulu & Singh, 2023). Graduate employability in South Africa must therefore be understood within this complex socio-economic and historical context, which encompasses

systemic inequalities, corruption, and governance challenges that affect labour market access and fair employment practices (Buccus, 2022; Masenya, 2017).

For HRM graduates specifically, employability is further shaped by the availability of entry-level HR roles, organisational willingness to hire inexperienced graduates, and perceptions of professional readiness.

3.3 THEORIES OF EMPLOYABILITY

Employability is a multifaceted concept that requires a combination of theoretical perspectives to understand and operationalise. Glerum and Judge (2021) note that employability has become central due to labour market unpredictability, global talent shortages, and the inadequacy of higher education in developing graduate capabilities. No single theory fully explains employability because labour-market outcomes emerge from the interaction of individual capability, social structures, employer behaviour, economic conditions, and institutional quality. Table 3.1 summarises three primary approaches to employability.

Table 3.1: Approaches to the concept of employability

Approach	Description	Reference
Person-centred trait approaches	Focus on proactive individual adaptation, career identity, and social/human capital	Panari and Tonelli (2022)
Competency development approaches	Focus on knowledge, skills, occupational abilities, corporate intelligence, job flexibility, and optimisation	Rakowska and de Juana-Espinosa (2021)
Job perception approaches	Focus on engagement and acquisition of favourable job resources	Lulewicz-Sas, Kinowska and Fryczyńska (2022)

The approaches outlined in Table 3.1 demonstrate the complex nature of employability and the need for an integrative framework. In addition, employability is conceptualised through the Resource-Based View (RBV), which posits that graduates must possess unique, valuable, and difficult-to-imitate capabilities to secure employment (Glerum & Judge, 2021). Historically, employability theories emphasised suitability for the labour market based on skills, knowledge, and flexibility (Kiley, 2020). However, the South African labour market introduces complexities due to structural unemployment, lagging labour market intelligence, and mismatches between skills supply and demand (Mokofe, 2024; Laurisz et al., 2024). Collectively, these approaches suggest that employability should be conceptualised as a multi-level construct comprising

personal agency, competence development, opportunity structures, and job-resource alignment.

Predicting future employability requires consideration of both current and emerging skills needs, especially given technological disruptions, artificial intelligence, and automation (Adegbite & Adeosun, 2021; Ehiane, Khan, Khan & Sesa, 2024; Nikunen, 2021). Theories offer foundational insights, but they often oversimplify the complex nature of employability, which involves multiple variables and stakeholders (Ndlovu & Ndebele, 2019).

3.3.1 Human capital theory

Human capital theory conceptualises employability as the outcome of investments in education, training, and skills development that enhance an individual's productive capacity and labour market value. From this perspective, graduates are regarded as carriers of human capital when they possess attributes such as formal education, cognitive ability, work experience, work-related behaviours, motivation, and initiative, all of which increase their economic and organisational value (Deming, 2022; Tight, 2023). These attributes are not limited to technical or disciplinary knowledge but also include transferable skills such as problem-solving, communication, adaptability, and continuous learning. However, critics argue that human capital theory may understate discrimination, unequal opportunity structures, signalling effects, and the role of social networks in labour-market outcomes.

Within this framework, higher education institutions are positioned as central agents in the accumulation and development of human capital. By designing curricula that foster both theoretical knowledge and applied competence, universities contribute to the development of graduates who can support organisational performance and broader economic growth (Mutalemwa, 2021). Human capital theory thus provides a foundational rationale for curriculum responsiveness, emphasising higher education's responsibility to equip graduates with competencies aligned with labour market demands. However, critics note that a narrow human capital focus may overemphasise economic returns at the expense of psycho-social and identity-related dimensions of employability, necessitating integration with complementary theoretical perspectives.

For HRM curriculum design, the value of human capital theory lies in emphasising deliberate investment in competencies linked to workplace contribution.

3.3.2 A resource-based view of employability

The Resource-Based View (RBV), originally developed in strategic management theory, offers an expanded understanding of employability by framing graduate capabilities as strategic resources that confer competitive advantage in the labour market. According to RBV, resources become sources of advantage when they are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (Barney, Ketchen Jr., & Wright, 2021). Applied to graduate employability, this implies that graduates must develop both tangible and intangible resources that distinguish them from others in increasingly competitive employment contexts. In HRM graduate terms, “rare” and valuable resources may include analytics capability, conflict-resolution competence, strategic communication, change leadership potential, and cross-cultural agility.

From an employability perspective, RBV emphasises the acquisition of dynamic capabilities, including adaptability, learning agility, emotional intelligence, and the ability to apply knowledge in novel contexts (Li, Pu, & Phakdeephrot, 2024; Monson, 2024). These capabilities are not static outcomes of education but are continuously developed through curriculum design, pedagogical practices, and experiential learning opportunities. This perspective aligns closely with Kiley’s (2020) concept of identity capital resources and Coetzee’s (2008) notion of psychological career resources, both of which highlight the role of curriculum in cultivating rare and valuable graduate attributes. RBV therefore reinforces the argument that employability depends not only on possessing qualifications, but on developing differentiated capabilities through intentional curriculum design. The RBV also supports differentiation strategies in crowded graduate labour markets, where generic qualifications alone may provide limited competitive advantage.

3.3.3 Credentialism theory

Credentialism theory focuses on the role of educational qualifications as signals of competence and employability in the labour market. From this perspective, qualifications are viewed as formal indicators that graduates have acquired a recognised body of knowledge, technical skills, and, increasingly, soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and ethical awareness (Alasmari, 2024; Mutalemwa, 2021). Credentials thus function as gatekeeping mechanisms that regulate access to employment opportunities and professional status. This is particularly relevant in contexts where degree inflation occurs, meaning that qualifications once sufficient for entry-level work no longer differentiate applicants.

However, contemporary scholarship highlights significant limitations of credentialism when qualifications are not accompanied by demonstrable competence. While credentials remain necessary, they are increasingly insufficient to guarantee employability in complex and dynamic labour markets (Asefer & Abidin, 2021). Employers frequently report gaps between formal qualifications and graduates' ability to perform effectively in workplace settings, particularly in problem-solving, professional judgement, and the practical application of knowledge (Mourad, Meshreki & Sarofim, 2020; Ramnund-Mansingh & Reddy, 2021). Credentialism theory therefore underscores the need for higher education curricula to move beyond certification toward integrated models that combine theoretical knowledge, applied skills, and standardised competence development across institutions. Accordingly, HRM programmes should ensure that credentials represent genuine competence rather than symbolic certification.

3.3.4 The identity capital model of graduate employability

The identity capital model, as articulated by Kiley (2020), provides a holistic account of employability by emphasising the role of both tangible and intangible resources in shaping graduate outcomes. Tangible resources include human capital (knowledge and skills), social capital (networks and relationships), financial capital, and socio-cultural capital. Intangible resources, by contrast, are rooted in agentic qualities such as confidence, self-efficacy, adaptability, and the ability to articulate a coherent professional identity.

This model extends traditional employability frameworks by foregrounding the role of self-concept and identity formation in career development. Graduates who can construct and communicate a credible professional identity are better positioned to navigate transitions, adapt to labour market uncertainty, and sustain long-term employability. The identity capital model complements the RBV by emphasising that employability advantage arises not only from what graduates know or can do, but also from who they are and how they position themselves within professional and organisational contexts. Curriculum design, therefore, plays a critical role in supporting identity development through reflective learning, experiential exposure, and career-oriented pedagogical practices. For HRM students, identity capital may be strengthened through internships, reflective portfolios, networking events, mentoring, student leadership roles, and professional association participation.

3.3.5 The Psychological Career Resources (PCR) model

The Psychological Career Resources (PCR) model, developed by Coetzee (2008, 2014) and further refined by Coetzee, Van Lill, and Bester (2022), conceptualises employability as being underpinned by a set of meta-capabilities that enable individuals to manage their careers proactively and adaptively. PCRs include psychological attributes such as adaptability, self-insight, career orientation, emotional literacy, resilience, and values clarity. These resources shape how individuals perceive career opportunities, adapt to change, and maintain motivation and engagement at work. These resources are increasingly important in volatile labour markets characterised by uncertainty, short job tenures, portfolio careers, and frequent organisational change.

The PCR model organises these attributes into functional categories, including career enablers, harmonisers, drivers, preferences, and values, offering a comprehensive framework for understanding career behaviour and employability. Unlike models that focus primarily on skills acquisition, PCR emphasises the internal psychological conditions that enable graduates to deploy their skills effectively in diverse and changing contexts. Within HRM education, the PCR model emphasises the importance of incorporating reflective practices, the development of emotional intelligence, and career self-management capabilities into curricula to promote sustainable employability and work engagement.

Within HRM education, PCR development can be supported through coaching, reflective learning journals, career planning modules, and experiential learning.

3.4 THE GENERAL SYSTEMS THEORY AND THE THEORIES OF EMPLOYABILITY

The General Systems Theory (GST) provides a powerful integrative lens for understanding employability as the product of interacting subsystems rather than isolated variables. From this perspective, student attributes, curriculum quality, institutional support, labour-market conditions, professional standards, and socio-economic context function as interconnected elements of one employability system. Inputs include prior learning, motivation, competencies, and identity resources. Throughputs include curriculum experiences, teaching quality, mentoring, work-integrated learning, and career support. Outputs include graduate capability, employment transitions, professional performance, and sustained career adaptability. Feedback loops arise through employer evaluations, graduate outcomes data, alumni experience, and labour-market intelligence. GST is therefore particularly suitable for this study

because it explains why fragmented interventions often fail and why coordinated curriculum design is necessary to enhance HRM graduate employability.

3.5 GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

Contemporary employability research in South Africa consistently highlights a persistent misalignment between the skills developed through higher education and the competencies employers expect (Coetzee, Ferreira & Potgieter, 2019). While graduates often leave universities with formal qualifications, employers frequently report deficiencies in applied skills, problem-solving ability, workplace readiness, and professional judgement. This misalignment is particularly evident in professional and management disciplines, where graduates are expected to contribute value shortly after entering the workplace. South Africa's employability challenge reflects both supply-side issues (skills gaps, curriculum relevance, uneven graduate readiness) and demand-side issues (slow growth, limited vacancies, hiring risk aversion, and sectoral stagnation).

The emergence of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) has intensified these challenges by fundamentally reshaping skills requirements across sectors. Rapid technological change has increased demand for adaptability, digital and technological literacy, analytical capability, and innovative thinking, while reducing reliance on routine and narrowly defined technical skills (Gaula, Telukdarie & Munsamy, 2022). As a result, employability is no longer defined solely by disciplinary knowledge, but by graduates' ability to learn continuously, integrate technology into practice, and respond creatively to complex organisational problems. These developments place significant pressure on higher education institutions to redesign curricula that are responsive to technological and labour market transformations. The rise of generative AI, platform work, and automation further shifts graduate advantage toward judgement-intensive, relational, creative, and ethically complex roles that are harder to automate.

In response to these systemic challenges to employability, the South African government has introduced a range of legislative and policy frameworks aimed at strengthening skills development and aligning the labour market. Instruments such as the Skills Development Act, the National Skills Development Strategy III (NSDS III), Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs), and the Quality Councils seek to coordinate education, training, and workforce development in ways that enhance employability and economic participation (Letshaba, 2024; Saul, Binza, & Moeti, 2024; Shibiti, 2022). While these frameworks provide an enabling policy environment, their effectiveness depends heavily on meaningful collaboration between government, industry, professional bodies, and higher education

institutions, as well as on curriculum designs that translate policy intent into graduate competence. Despite extensive policy architecture, implementation fragmentation and weak coordination often limit the translation of national intentions into local employability outcomes.

Within this broader context, HRM graduates face distinctive and evolving professional demands. They are expected to address contemporary workforce challenges, including technological integration into HR practices, persistent skills shortages, labour market inequality, and the ongoing professionalisation of the HRM function (Gabobegwe, 2022). HRM practitioners must navigate complex employment relations, contribute to organisational performance, and support inclusive and ethical people management in an environment characterised by economic uncertainty and social transformation. These expectations reinforce the need for HRM curricula that intentionally integrate strategic, technological, ethical, and psycho-social competencies aligned with South Africa's labour market realities.

3.6 GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY CHALLENGES

Despite sustained policy attention and extensive institutional reform initiatives, higher education in South Africa continues to face significant challenges in meeting the interconnected needs of students, employers, and the national economy. Empirical research consistently indicates persistent shortcomings in skills provision, limited opportunities for practical and work-integrated learning, insufficient development of soft and transferable skills, and underdeveloped career guidance and employability support systems (Konstantinou, & Miller, 2020; Doherty & Stephens, 2023). These challenges are not evenly distributed across the sector, but are exacerbated by large student enrolments, constrained institutional resources, and deep-seated inequalities that disproportionately affect students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds. Additional barriers include weak professional networks, limited internship access, geographic disadvantage, language barriers, and digital inequality.

One of the most widely documented employability challenges is the enduring disconnect between university-based learning and workplace expectations. Graduates frequently struggle to translate disciplinary knowledge into applied problem-solving, professional judgement, communication, and ethical decision-making within real organisational contexts. This theory–practice gap reflects not only limitations in curriculum content but also misalignment among pedagogical approaches, assessment strategies, and the realities of contemporary work. Employers consequently report dissatisfaction with graduate preparedness, resulting in increased onboarding costs, extended induction and training periods, and delayed graduate productivity. These outcomes negatively affect organisational performance while

simultaneously undermining graduate confidence, career identity formation, and early career progression. For HRM graduates, a further challenge is the expectation of prior workplace exposure for supposedly entry-level roles.

Beyond individual skill deficits, employability challenges in South Africa are embedded within broader structural and systemic conditions. High graduate unemployment, labour market saturation in certain fields, rapid technological change, and persistent socio-economic inequality create conditions in which even academically successful graduates may struggle to secure meaningful employment. In this context, employability cannot be understood solely as an individual attribute, but rather as an outcome shaped by the interaction between curriculum design, institutional support structures, labour market conditions, and socio-economic context (Tomlinson et al., 2017).

The literature further suggests that fragmented institutional responses contribute to the persistence of employability challenges. Isolated curriculum updates, ad hoc work-integrated learning initiatives, or stand-alone career services interventions are often insufficient to produce sustained improvement. Without coherence across curriculum objectives, teaching and learning practices, assessment design, and career development support, employability initiatives risk remaining superficial and unevenly implemented. This fragmentation is particularly problematic in professional disciplines such as HRM, where graduates are expected to integrate technical knowledge with strategic thinking, ethical judgement, interpersonal competence, and digital capability.

Addressing graduate employability challenges, therefore, requires a holistic, systems-oriented approach that recognises the interdependence of educational, organisational, and societal factors. An effective employability framework must balance student aspirations, employer expectations, and national development priorities, while explicitly accounting for structural inequalities and the changing nature of work. Such a framework should ensure alignment between curriculum design, pedagogy, assessment, and institutional support mechanisms, enabling higher education institutions to move beyond deficit-oriented views of graduate employability toward coordinated, evidence-based interventions. Without this level of integration, efforts to enhance employability are likely to remain fragmented, perpetuating skills mismatches and limiting higher education's contribution to inclusive economic development in South Africa.

These realities reinforce the need for employability interventions to be systemic, evidence-based, and inclusive rather than relying solely on generic skills workshops.

3.7 THE DEVELOPMENT OF EMPLOYABILITY PROFICIENCIES OF HRM GRADUATES

The development of employability proficiencies among HRM graduates requires a deliberate and integrated approach that extends beyond the acquisition of disciplinary knowledge. Contemporary employability research emphasises that effective preparation for the labour market depends on the development of both technical competencies and psychosocial capabilities, including adaptability, communication, leadership, and professional identity formation (Chweu, Schultz & Jordaan, 2023; Glerum & Judge, 2021). For HRM graduates, employability is particularly complex, as the profession demands the integration of people management expertise, ethical judgement, strategic thinking, and interpersonal effectiveness.

Technical competencies in HRM encompass knowledge of labour legislation, human capital management, talent development, performance management, and emerging digital HR technologies. However, the literature consistently indicates that technical proficiency alone is insufficient to ensure graduate employability. Technical HR competence includes labour law literacy, recruitment processes, performance systems, reward principles, learning and development, and HR information systems.

Psychosocial competencies—such as career self-management, resilience, networking ability, problem-solving, emotional intelligence, and professional communication—play a critical role in enabling graduates to navigate complex organisational environments and dynamic career trajectories. Adaptive digital-career competence includes data literacy, virtual collaboration, AI awareness, self-directed learning, and career agility.

For analytical clarity, employability proficiencies may be grouped into four domains:

- (1) Technical HR competence
- (2) Strategic-business competence
- (3) Relational and ethical competence
- (4) Adaptive digital-career competence

Career navigation and networking capabilities are especially salient for HRM graduates, whose professional effectiveness depends on building trust-based relationships, influencing stakeholders, and managing conflict within diverse organisational contexts. Leadership and problem-solving skills enable graduates to contribute strategically rather than functioning solely in administrative roles, while advanced communication skills underpin effective employee

relations, negotiation, and change management. These competencies must therefore be intentionally embedded within HRM curricula rather than treated as peripheral or co-curricular attributes.

Alignment between curriculum design and industry requirements is a central mechanism for developing employability proficiencies. Gaula, Telukdarie and Munsamy (2022) argue that curricula that are responsive to labour market needs enhance graduate relevance and adaptability in rapidly changing employment contexts. In HRM education, this requires ongoing engagement with industry stakeholders and professional bodies to ensure that learning outcomes, teaching strategies, and assessment practices reflect contemporary professional expectations.

Figure 3.1 illustrates the interconnected capabilities, capacities, skills, and knowledge required for graduate employability. Importantly, these elements should not be viewed as discrete attributes but as interdependent components of an integrated competence profile. Employability emerges when graduates can mobilise knowledge, skills, and personal attributes holistically in response to workplace challenges.

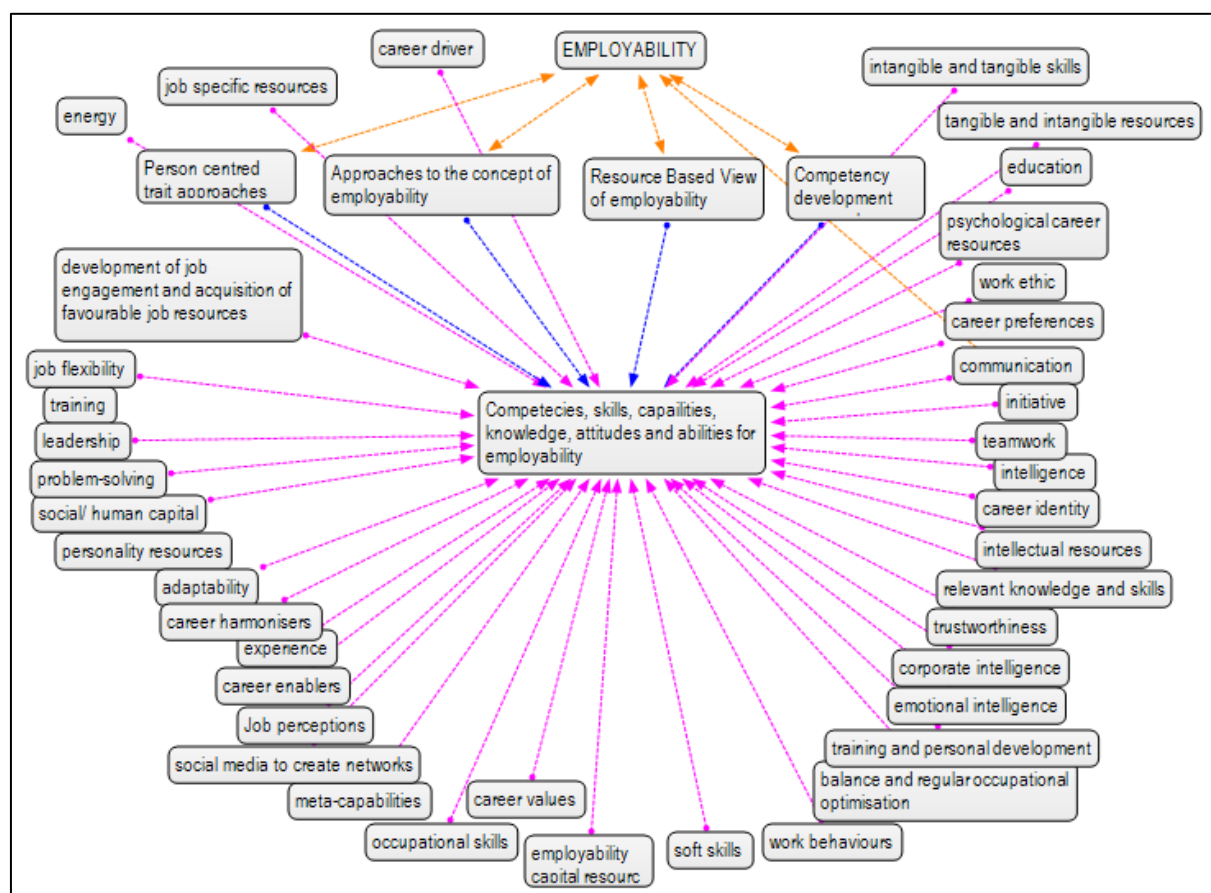


Figure 3.1: Factors of graduate employability

This four-domain clustering provides a practical basis for curriculum mapping, assessment design, and stakeholder validation in later chapters.

Despite growing recognition of the importance of employability, much of the existing literature continues to focus on generic models of curriculum design, with insufficient attention to discipline-specific proficiency development. In the case of HRM, this represents a significant gap, given the profession's unique combination of technical, ethical, relational, and strategic demands. Consequently, further research is required to develop curriculum frameworks that explicitly target the employability proficiencies of HRM graduates and translate them into coherent curricula, pedagogical approaches, and assessment strategies.

This study responds to this gap by advancing a competence-based, systems-oriented framework that integrates employability proficiency development into the core design and governance of HRM curricula. By doing so, it moves beyond fragmented skills development toward a holistic model of graduate employability grounded in professional practice and contextual relevance.

3.8 CURRICULUM DESIGN FOR EMPLOYABILITY OF HRM GRADUATES

Graduate employability is increasingly recognised as a shared responsibility that extends beyond the individual graduate to encompass multiple systemic actors, including government, higher education institutions, professional bodies, and industry (Cheng et al., 2022; Higdon, 2016). Governments shape employability outcomes through higher education policy, funding frameworks, and labour market regulation; higher education institutions are responsible for designing and delivering curricula that develop relevant and transferable competencies; and industry plays a critical role by articulating evolving skills demands, providing workplace exposure, and partnering in curriculum co-design and work-integrated learning initiatives. Employability, therefore, emerges from the interaction of these stakeholders rather than from isolated institutional or individual efforts. In this sense, curriculum design becomes the governance mechanism through which competing stakeholder expectations are prioritised, balanced, and translated into learning outcomes.

Within this shared-responsibility framework, curriculum design serves as a central coordination mechanism through which stakeholder expectations are translated into graduate capabilities. An inclusive and responsive curriculum must integrate socio-cultural, psycho-social, and technical competencies in a coherent manner to ensure that graduates are prepared not only

for immediate labour market entry but also for sustained career adaptability. Socio-cultural competencies enable graduates to navigate diverse and complex work environments. Psycho-social competencies support resilience, adaptability, and ethical judgment, and technical competencies ensure functional and professional proficiency. The alignment of these competence domains with labour market and professional expectations is essential for addressing skills mismatches and enhancing graduate employability.

In the South African HRM context, the South African Board for People Practices (SABPP) HR Competency Model provides an authoritative articulation of industry-aligned expectations. The model identifies leadership capability, technological integration, data analytics, learning agility, and diversity and inclusion as core professional competencies required of contemporary HR practitioners (SABPP, 2025). These competencies extend beyond technical HR knowledge and explicitly incorporate behavioural, strategic, and ethical dimensions, reinforcing the importance of soft skills such as communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and ethical decision-making. When embedded in HRM curricula through stakeholder collaboration, these competency requirements serve as a practical bridge between higher education provision and professional practice, reinforcing stakeholders' shared accountability for graduate employability outcomes. Comparable global HR frameworks similarly prioritise analytics, inclusion, business acumen, ethical leadership, and employee experience management, suggesting strong international convergence regarding future HR capability needs. Therefore, employability-oriented HRM curricula should be co-designed, periodically reviewed, and evidenced through authentic assessment.

3.9 REFLECTION OF THE EMPLOYABILITY PROFICIENCIES OF HRM GRADUATES

HRM graduate employability requires the integration of competencies drawn from multiple and complementary theoretical perspectives, including the Resource-Based View (RBV), Psychological Capital Resources (PCR), identity capital theory, and human capital theory (Barney, 2021; Luthans, Youssef & Avolio, 2007; Tomlinson et al., 2017; Becker, 1994). These perspectives collectively emphasise that employability extends beyond disciplinary knowledge to include psychological resilience, professional identity formation, and the strategic application of human capabilities within organisations. While each theory explains a different dimension of employability, their combined value lies in demonstrating that graduates need both external market value and internal adaptive capacity.

From a curriculum perspective, the challenge lies not in recognising these competence domains in isolation, but in synthesising them into a coherent developmental logic. The

General Systems Theory provides an integrative analytical lens through which these diverse employability competencies can be conceptualised as interdependent inputs, developed through aligned curriculum processes, and manifested as graduate outputs in the form of workplace readiness and professional effectiveness (Von Bertalanffy, 1968; Jackson & Chapman, 2012). This synthesis also justifies the study's integrated framework, which avoids reducing employability to a checklist of isolated skills.

Applying a systems-based approach to HRM education enables the deliberate integration of leadership capability, psycho-social competence, technological literacy, and interpersonal effectiveness within a unified curriculum framework. Leadership and strategic thinking align with RBV principles by positioning HRM graduates as contributors to organisational value creation (Barney, 1991). Psychosocial capabilities, such as resilience, adaptability, and self-efficacy, reflect the core constructs of psychological capital that underpin sustained employability in volatile labour markets (Luthans, Youssef & Avolio, 2007). Technological and analytical competencies support engagement with digitally enabled HR practices, while interpersonal and identity-related competencies strengthen professional credibility, career adaptability, and stakeholder engagement (Tomlinson et al., 2017).

When integrated through a systems-oriented curriculum framework, these employability proficiencies ensure that HRM graduates are not only academically qualified but also workplace-ready, adaptable, and capable of making meaningful contributions to organisational and societal outcomes.

3.10 SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter critically examined employability as a multidimensional construct relevant to HRM graduates in South Africa. It demonstrated that employability extends beyond qualifications to include human capital, strategic differentiation, psycho-social resources, identity formation, and contextual opportunity structures. The chapter further showed that fragmented approaches are insufficient and that a systems-based curriculum response is required. These insights provide the conceptual foundation for Chapter 4, which focuses on empirical findings and framework development.

CHAPTER FOUR

CURRICULUM DESIGN FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF STUDENT EMPLOYABILITY

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The preceding chapters conceptualised curriculum design and examined the notion of employability from multiple theoretical and contextual perspectives. This chapter integrates these bodies of knowledge to respond to the central research question guiding this study: Which curriculum design practices facilitate the development of employability proficiencies among HRM graduates in South Africa? Addressing this question is essential in laying the conceptual foundation for the subsequent chapter, where a literature-based framework for curriculum design will be proposed. Such a framework aims to guide curriculum enhancement within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to better equip HRM graduates for the labour market. While earlier chapters treated curriculum design and employability separately, the present chapter synthesises these strands into practical curriculum design principles capable of guiding institutional decision-making, stakeholder collaboration, and programme renewal.

The present chapter is structured to examine the key curriculum design practices that influence graduate employability, with a particular focus on stakeholder involvement, psychological career resources (PCRs), existing curriculum design frameworks, and the relevance of systems thinking. It further highlights the processes and outputs of curriculum design aimed at enhancing the employability of HRM graduates in South Africa's dynamic socio-economic, technological, and policy environment.

Particular emphasis is placed on how curriculum design can intentionally produce HRM graduates who are competent, adaptable, ethical, digitally capable, and professionally credible.

4.2 CURRICULUM DESIGN PRACTICES FOR THE EMPLOYABILITY OF HRM GRADUATES

Developing an appropriate and responsive curriculum development framework for HRM graduate employability requires an extensive review of existing theories and empirical studies in curriculum design. Table 4.1 summarises key scholarly contributions that highlight the multi-dimensional and stakeholder-driven nature of curriculum design. A dominant and recurring theme emerging from this analysis is the centrality of stakeholder involvement in shaping curricula that align with labour market expectations, national development goals, and societal

needs. The literature consistently suggests that employability-enhancing curriculum design is characterised by four recurring features: stakeholder responsiveness, competence integration, authentic learning, and continuous review.

Table 4.1: Previous research on curriculum design practices for employability

Study	Purpose of the study	Summary of findings	Implications for curriculum design
Scott (2018).	The study aimed to investigate the need for a revised South African curriculum design system to ensure student success. The study was founded on the criticism that the education system was failing to address the country's national economic and developmental needs.	The study highlighted the need to develop a vision and strategy aligned with student success. The study also found a need to include relevant stakeholders. The responsibilities of the relevant stakeholders should be clearly defined.	- Stakeholder involvement. - Strategic vision for educational reform.
Venugopal and Kumar (2022).	The paper examined the relationships among psychosocial variables, employability skills, and career adaptability in relation to employment among graduates from management disciplines. The study specifically explored how career adaptability skills affect the relationship between employability skills and placements.	The study found evidence that management graduates require more adaptable skills, in addition to employability skills, to secure employment through placements. The study used the employability-adaptability model. In the study, career adaptability dimensions included control, curiosity, concern, and confidence. The study argued that employability skills can be acquired through academic workshops and training interventions for management graduates.	- Fostering curriculum content that strengthens career adaptability. - Incorporating management training and workshops for graduates.
Coetzee, Ferreira and Potgieter (2019b).	The study examined the impact of employers' perceptions of graduate workers' employability on their graduate status, and how graduate workers' mindsets, particularly in relation to marketability, entrepreneurial	The study found evidence that graduate mindsets, including entrepreneurial orientation, networking potential, and marketability, affected their confidence in the employment search.	The curriculum should foster an entrepreneurial orientation, enhance marketability, and build self-confidence.

Study	Purpose of the study	Summary of findings	Implications for curriculum design
	orientation, job search orientation, and networking, predict their self-confidence in securing employment.		
Asefer and Abidin (2021).	The study explored soft skills and employability from employers' perspectives.	The study found that soft skills are a strong predictor of employability among today's graduates. The study established that the world of work has become dynamic and global, thereby requiring such skills.	The design of curricula should enhance the development of soft skills, which, at present, appear not to be clearly captured within Bloom's Taxonomy assessment verbs
Tomlinson et al., (2017).	The study explored employability through certain employability capital resources.	The study found that employability is enhanced by: (1) Human capital resources (technical knowledge, hard skills, and career-building), (2) social capital (networks, bonding, and social relationships), cultural capital (cultural knowledge and confidence), identity capital (self-concept and personal narratives), and psychological capital (resilience and adaptability).	The curricula should: - Link students with industry early - Inculcate graduate cultural confidence. - Help students develop learner self-concept and confidence.
Botha, Coetzee and Coetzee (2015)	The study explored the self-directedness characteristic of learners and their employability	The study found a significant relationship between employability characteristics and self-directedness in learning among students in an ODeL university	The curriculum should be designed to strengthen learner self-directedness
Cook (2022).	The study reviewed conceptual models of employability for graduates.	The study established that employability can be part of the intra-curriculum (embedded within the formal curriculum), co-curriculum (activities outside the curriculum provided by universities through career service centers), and extracurricular (opportunities offered outside the university that facilitate career development).	The employability concept should be part of the intra-curriculum, co-curriculum, and extracurricular activities.
Peeters et al., (2019).	The study aimed to discuss the concept of	The study found the necessity for two notions in	The employability curriculum

Study	Purpose of the study	Summary of findings	Implications for curriculum design
	'employability capital' and how it can be attained.	employability: (1) employability distinction, which involved job-related or career-related as well as development-based employability capital, and (2) a capital distinction, which separated human capital from social capital.	encompasses job-, career-, and development-related capital, clearly distinguishing between human and social capital.
Coetzee and Esterhuizen (2010).	This study considered the relationship between psychological career resources and coping resources.	Psychological career resources were found to predict coping resources scores.	The curriculum should ensure the development of psychological career resources to enhance career coping resources.
Coetzee and Bergh (2009).	The study sought to explore the relationship between psychological career resources and subjective work experiences.	Psychological career resources were found to predict work experiences in terms of life satisfaction, job/career satisfaction, work-based happiness, and perceptions of work's value.	The curriculum should inculcate the development of psychological career resources.

Although the studies in Table 4.1 differ in context and methodology, they converge on the principle that employability is not generated through content transmission alone, but through intentionally designed developmental experiences across the student lifecycle. A key theme that emerged from the analysis in Table 4.1 is the need to involve appropriate stakeholders. However, stakeholder involvement should be structured and evidence-based, as excessive or unbalanced influence from any one stakeholder group may distort curriculum priorities.

4.2.1 Stakeholder involvement in curriculum design

The curriculum is not solely an academic artefact; it is a shared social product influenced by multiple stakeholders who either derive value from it or contribute value to it. According to stakeholder theory, educational effectiveness improves when the needs, expectations, and contributions of all relevant stakeholder groups are recognised and integrated (Lu et al., 2023). However, stakeholder engagement is not without tension: interactions may generate both conflict and value, requiring careful mediation (Tomlinson & Anderson, 2021). Stakeholder theory is particularly relevant to HRM education because the profession itself is relational, requiring graduates to balance organisational, employee, regulatory, and societal interests.

Human's (2017) research on responsive curricula emphasises that disciplinary knowledge alone is insufficient. Curriculum development should meet the evolving needs of students, industry, and society through integrated, inclusive approaches. Wright, Ritter, and Wisse Gonzales (2022) argue that curriculum design training should be extended to all stakeholders, including students, academics, industry representatives, and government actors, to enhance meaningful participation. From a stakeholder perspective, curricula are shaped by a diverse group, including students, faculty, employers, industry bodies, government agencies, communities, and professional boards. Erjavec (2021) categorises stakeholders into internal (students and academic staff) and external (government, employers, community, NGOs, and donors). In practical terms, stakeholder inclusion may occur through advisory boards, tracer studies, curriculum review panels, alumni consultation, student representation, and professional body participation. The conceptual framework (Figure 4.1) illustrates how stakeholder inputs inform all stages of the curriculum process, highlighting the importance of inclusive engagement. The sections that follow elaborate on the role of key stakeholders in designing HRM curricula that foster employability.

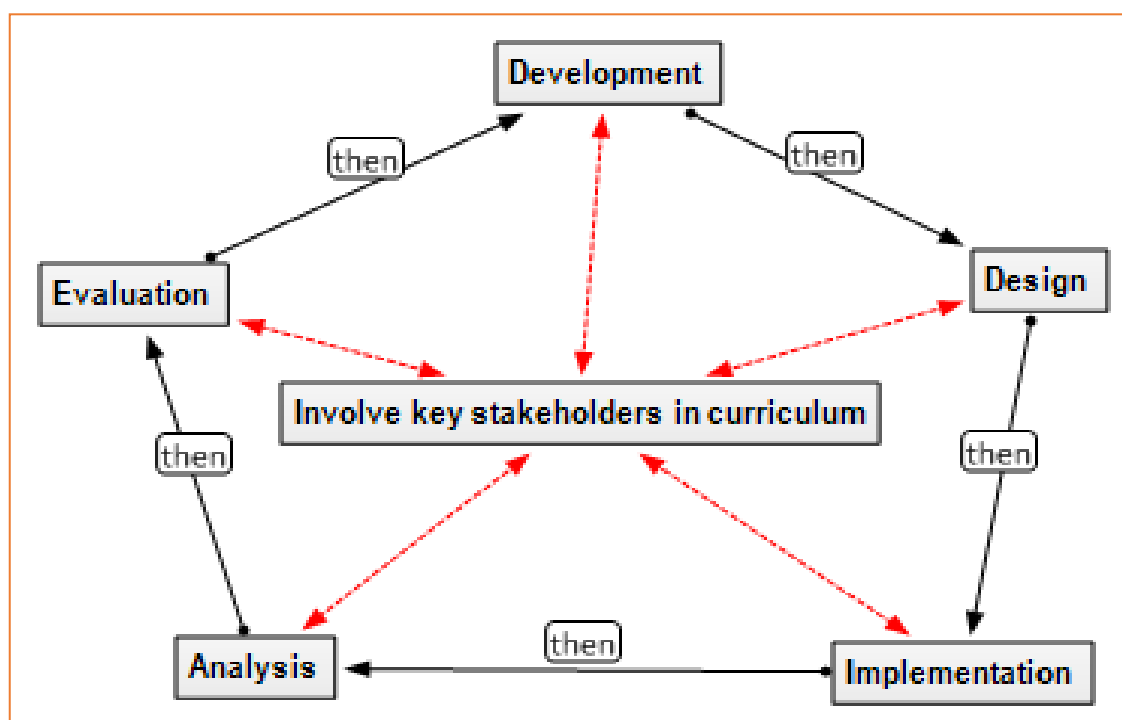


Figure 4.1: A stakeholder-based curriculum design process

For quality assurance purposes, stakeholder engagement should be periodic, documented, representative, and linked to formal curriculum decision-making processes. In line with the stakeholder theory, there is a need for broad stakeholder involvement in the curriculum design process to foster employability. The key stakeholders are discussed in the sections that follow.

4.2.2 The South African government as a stakeholder in curriculum design

Higher education in South Africa is inextricably linked to the state's political, social, and developmental agenda. Since the democratic transition in 1994, national policy frameworks have consistently positioned higher education as a central mechanism for redressing historical inequalities, advancing skills development, and promoting inclusive economic growth. Foundational policy instruments such as *White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education* (1997), the *National Skills Development Strategy III*, and the *National Skills Development Plan (2030)* explicitly identify graduate employability as a strategic national priority, thereby situating curriculum design within a broader developmental mandate. In addition, funding frameworks, enrolment planning, scarce-skills priorities, and quality assurance reviews indirectly shape which programmes expand, contract, or redesign their curricula.

Within this policy environment, the South African government serves as a powerful macro-level stakeholder that indirectly shapes curriculum design through legislation, funding mechanisms, quality assurance requirements, and national skills planning processes. Cheng et al. (2022) observe that in contexts such as the United Kingdom, governments increasingly devolve responsibility for graduate employability to higher education institutions. Although a similar trend is evident in South Africa, the local context presents distinctive challenges. Osman and Maringe (2022) caution that transferring responsibility for employability entirely to universities overlooks the state's historically central role in labour market regulation, employment creation, and redress-oriented policies in the post-apartheid era.

Government influence on curriculum design is most clearly operationalised through skills development legislation and institutional structures. The *Skills Development Act 97 of 1998* established the Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) as intermediaries between government, education providers, and industry. SETAs are mandated to identify sector-specific skills needs, facilitate workplace-based learning, support curriculum alignment, and promote partnerships between employers and HEIs (Saul & Maleka, 2024). Through these mechanisms, the government plays an active role in shaping curricula to foster employability, particularly in professionally aligned disciplines such as Human Resource Management (HRM). For HRM programmes, relevant SETA intelligence and occupational trends can inform modules relating to talent development, labour relations, learning and development, and workforce analytics.

From a curriculum governance perspective, SETAs and related policy instruments embed employability considerations into programme design by influencing qualification standards, work-integrated learning requirements, and funding incentives. However, the effectiveness of this influence is uneven. Critics argue that policy-driven curriculum alignment can become compliance-oriented, prioritising short-term labour-market responsiveness over deeper educational coherence and the development of critical capabilities (Wheelahan, 2015). This tension highlights the complexity of government involvement in curriculum design, where developmental imperatives must be balanced against academic autonomy and long-term professional formation.

Within a systems-oriented understanding of curriculum design, the state operates as a contextual enabler that shapes inputs (policy priorities, funding, skills frameworks), processes (institutional governance, stakeholder coordination), and outputs (graduate employability outcomes). For HRM education, this underscores the importance of aligning curricula not only with immediate skills shortages but also with broader national objectives related to equity, ethical governance, and sustainable employment. Consequently, government involvement in curriculum design should be understood as a relational and dynamic process that requires ongoing coordination between policymakers, HEIs, professional bodies, and industry stakeholders.

This study recognises the South African government as a critical stakeholder whose policies and structures significantly influence the conditions under which employability-oriented HRM curricula are developed, implemented, and evaluated. This suggests that policy alignment should inform curriculum design without reducing universities to narrow training providers. The framework proposed later in this study explicitly accounts for this governance role by integrating policy alignment and stakeholder collaboration into the systemic design of HRM curricula.

4.2.3 Industry as a stakeholder in the curriculum design process

Industry, encompassing both the private and public sectors, constitutes a central stakeholder in curriculum design due to its role as the primary consumer of graduate capabilities. Employers increasingly articulate that graduate employability extends beyond disciplinary and technical knowledge to include interpersonal competence, ethical conduct, adaptability, problem-solving ability, and professional identity formation (Cheng et al., 2022). These expectations place sustained pressure on higher education institutions (HEIs) to ensure that curricula particularly in professionally oriented fields such as Human Resource Management

(HRM) are responsive to evolving workplace realities. In HRM specifically, employers increasingly seek graduates able to contribute to recruitment technology, employee experience, HR analytics, inclusion strategy, change management, and ethical people governance.

From an employability perspective, industry engagement contributes to curriculum relevance by providing insights into current and emerging skills demands, organisational practices, and professional standards. However, the relationship between HEIs and industry is not merely transactional. Contemporary scholarship emphasises that effective industry involvement requires structured collaboration rather than ad hoc consultation, enabling curricula to balance immediate labour market responsiveness with long-term capability development (Jackson, 2016; Yorke & Knight, 2006). In HRM education, this balance is especially critical, as graduates must be prepared not only for entry-level roles but also for strategic, ethical, and leadership responsibilities throughout their careers.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) represent an additional dimension of industry engagement, particularly in contexts characterised by socio-economic inequality and high graduate unemployment. Coetzee and Esterhuizen (2010) highlight the value of NGO university partnerships in implementing work readiness programmes that expose students to authentic workplace contexts, thereby strengthening psychosocial competencies, career confidence, and professional identity. Such partnerships are particularly relevant in South Africa, where NGOs often operate at the interface between communities, labour markets, and development initiatives.

Professional bodies further institutionalise industry influence on curriculum design. The South African Board for People Practices (SABPP), for example, plays a regulatory and developmental role by articulating professional HR standards, competency frameworks, and ethical guidelines. By incorporating employer representation within its governance structures, the SABPP ensures that HRM curricula remain aligned with professional expectations and workplace realities (Coetzee, 2023). This alignment contributes to the professionalisation of HRM and supports graduates' transition into practice.

HEIs operationalise industry engagement through multiple mechanisms, including advisory boards, curriculum review committees, guest lectures, employer consultations, and work-integrated learning (WIL) arrangements. While these mechanisms enhance curriculum relevance, scholars caution that industry input should inform not dominate curriculum design. Overemphasis on short-term employer needs risks narrowing educational purpose and

undermining the development of critical, reflective, and adaptive graduates (Wheelahlan, 2015). Consequently, industry engagement must be embedded within a broader curriculum governance framework that safeguards academic integrity while promoting employability. High-impact industry engagement models include internships, live consulting projects, simulated HR cases, mentoring, guest practitioners, and capstone problem-solving projects.

Within a systems-based approach to curriculum design, industry functions as a critical external subsystem that shapes curriculum inputs (skills demands, professional standards), processes (learning activities, WIL, assessment practices), and outputs (graduate employability outcomes). For HRM curricula, this underscores the importance of sustained, reciprocal partnerships with industry stakeholders that support coherent, future-oriented curriculum development rather than fragmented or reactive adjustments. This study, therefore, conceptualises industry not merely as an end-user of graduates, but as a strategic co-contributor to the design of employability-oriented HRM curricula. Accordingly, industry input should be continuous rather than episodic, ensuring curricula remain future-oriented rather than merely reactive.

4.2.4 Students as key stakeholders in the curriculum design process

Students are increasingly recognised as central stakeholders in curriculum design, particularly within higher education systems undergoing transformation and responding to demands for inclusivity, relevance, and social justice. In the South African context, student activism has foregrounded the need for curricula that are responsive to diverse lived experiences, socio-economic realities, and historical inequalities (Davids, 2021). These dynamics position students not merely as recipients of curriculum but as active contributors to its design, evaluation, and continuous improvement. Student participation is especially important where first-generation, working, rural, multilingual, or digitally disadvantaged students may experience curriculum barriers differently from traditional student cohorts.

Cheng et al. (2022) argue that higher education institutions (HEIs) frequently underestimate the extent to which student demographics, prior educational experiences, and structural labour market barriers such as race, gender, and socio-economic background shape employability outcomes. When these factors are insufficiently considered, curricula risk privileging dominant groups and reproducing inequality, thereby limiting the employability prospects of historically marginalised students. Meaningful student participation, therefore, serves both an equity and a quality assurance function in curriculum design.

From a curriculum governance perspective, involving students enhances relevance, accessibility, and pedagogical effectiveness. Students are uniquely positioned to provide insight into how curriculum content, teaching approaches, assessment practices, and workload demands are experienced in practice. Van Zyl et al., (2020) demonstrate that structured student engagement fosters a sense of ownership, intrinsic motivation, and deeper learning engagement, which are themselves linked to graduate success and employability.

However, the literature cautions against equating consultation with genuine participation. Feedback mechanisms such as surveys, focus groups, and student representative councils are valuable, but their impact depends on whether student input meaningfully informs decision-making processes (Bovill, Cook-Sather & Felten, 2016). Tokenistic involvement, where student voices are acknowledged but not acted upon, risks reinforcing power asymmetries between students and institutional authorities. At the doctoral level, it is therefore essential to conceptualise student participation as a form of curriculum co-creation rather than passive feedback. Meaningful co-creation may include student curriculum committees, co-design workshops, pilot testing of modules, and structured interpretation of student success data.

In employability-oriented curricula, student engagement also helps align learning with career aspirations and labour market realities. Students' reflections on work-integrated learning experiences, career-readiness initiatives, and assessment practices can inform curricula that better support professional identity formation and transition into work. Within a systems-based approach to curriculum design, students influence curriculum inputs (learning needs and expectations), processes (learning experiences and assessment), and outputs (employability outcomes).

Accordingly, this study conceptualises students as active stakeholders whose participation is essential to the development of responsive, inclusive, and employability-focused HRM curricula. Their involvement must be structured, iterative, and embedded within formal curriculum governance processes to ensure that student perspectives meaningfully shape curriculum design and contribute to sustainable graduate employability.

4.3 PSYCHOLOGICAL CAREER RESOURCES (PCRs) FOR ENHANCING GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

While disciplinary knowledge and technical competence remain essential, contemporary scholarship increasingly recognises that employability is equally shaped by graduates' psychological, behavioural, and self-regulatory capacities. In dynamic labour markets

characterised by technological disruption, organisational restructuring, and non-linear career trajectories, graduates are required not only to perform tasks competently but also to manage their careers proactively. Within this context, Psychological Career Resources (PCRs) provide a robust conceptual lens for understanding how individuals navigate work transitions and sustain employability over time. PCRs are particularly relevant in uncertain labour markets where technical competence may secure entry, but psychological agility often determines persistence, growth, and career sustainability.

Coetzee and Govender (2020) conceptualise PCRs as an integrated set of cognitive, affective, motivational, and behavioural resources that enable individuals to direct, adapt, and regulate their careers. These resources are not fixed traits but developable capacities that interact with contextual opportunities and constraints. PCRs are commonly categorised into four interrelated domains:

- **Career drivers**, which encompass motivation, sense of purpose, values, and career aspirations that energise and direct career behaviour;
- **Career enablers**, including self-esteem, communication competence, and problem-solving ability, which facilitate effective engagement with work tasks and organisational demands;
- **Career harmonisers**, such as emotional literacy, resilience, and behavioural adaptability, which support balance, coping, and sustained performance under pressure; and
- **Career values**, reflecting individual preferences, ethical orientations, and long-term aspirations that shape career choices and work identity.

Collectively, these domains help explain why graduates with similar qualifications often experience very different career outcomes. These domains are particularly salient in contemporary labour markets where graduates must manage uncertainty, frequent role changes, and complex interpersonal environments. Empirical studies demonstrate that PCRs are associated with career adaptability, employability satisfaction, work engagement, and proactive career behaviours (Coetzee & Govender, 2020).

From a curriculum perspective, the relevance of PCRs lies in their capacity to address limitations inherent in traditional outcome-based learning models. Bloom's Taxonomy has long informed curriculum design by structuring learning outcomes across cognitive, psychomotor, and affective domains. However, Gilyazova, Zamoshchansky and Vaganova (2021) caution that Bloom's framework, particularly in its traditional application, insufficiently captures the

complex affective, motivational, and self-regulatory capabilities required for sustained employability. As a result, curricula that rely predominantly on cognitive outcomes risk producing graduates who are technically competent but psychologically underprepared for career volatility. For this reason, employability-focused curricula should combine cognitive outcomes with affective, behavioural, and reflective developmental outcomes.

Integrating PCRs into curriculum design extends learning beyond knowledge acquisition toward holistic capability development. This requires pedagogical approaches that promote reflection, identity development, emotional intelligence, and adaptive learning, as well as assessment strategies that capture behavioural and affective growth alongside technical competence. Within a systems-based curriculum framework, PCRs function as critical mediating mechanisms between curriculum inputs (learning outcomes and content), developmental processes (pedagogy and assessment), and employability outputs (career readiness and adaptability).

Accordingly, PCRs provide a theoretically grounded foundation for enhancing graduate employability by foregrounding the psychological capacities that enable graduates to translate academic learning into sustainable career success. Their inclusion in HRM curricula strengthens alignment between educational design, labour market realities, and the long-term career development of graduates.

In HRM education, PCR development is especially relevant because graduates are expected to manage conflict, influence stakeholders, support employee wellbeing, and lead change.

4.3.1 Identity capital and employability

Kiley's (2020) identity capital theory extends and complements the Psychological Career Resources (PCR) literature by emphasising the role of self-related and agentic attributes in shaping graduate employability. From this perspective, employability is influenced not only by the possession of skills and qualifications but also by graduates' self-esteem, confidence, adaptability, and capacity to construct and sustain a coherent professional identity. These identity-related resources enable graduates to navigate labour market transitions, present themselves credibly to employers, and respond effectively to uncertainty and change in contemporary workplaces (Kiley, 2020; Tomlinson et al., 2017). Identity capital thus provides a crucial link between internal psychological resources and external labour market outcomes.

The integration of identity capital theory with PCR further highlights the importance of self-development and reflective capability within higher education curricula. While PCR focuses on meta-capabilities such as career adaptability, emotional literacy, and self-insight (Coetzee, 2008, 2014), identity capital foregrounds how these psychological resources are mobilised to support employability and career progression. Embedding opportunities for self-reflection, identity formation, and career narrative development within HRM curricula, therefore, becomes essential for enabling graduates to translate psychological resources into meaningful professional action (Coetzee, Van Lill & Bester, 2022). Identity capital becomes visible when graduates can narrate their strengths, demonstrate professional confidence, build credible networks, and position themselves strategically in recruitment processes.

Taken together, PCR theory, identity capital theory, stakeholder-based curriculum models, and broader human capability perspectives offer a multidimensional understanding of graduate employability. These approaches collectively recognise that employability is shaped by the interaction of individual psychological resources, curriculum design, institutional practices, and labour market structures (Sen, 1999; Cheng et al., 2022). However, when applied in isolation, each perspective risks providing a partial view of employability development.

To address this complexity, the present study adopts the General Systems Theory as an overarching integrative framework. The General Systems Theory provides a holistic lens through which employability can be understood as an outcome of interconnected inputs (such as psychological and identity resources), developmental processes (including curriculum design, pedagogy, and stakeholder engagement), and outputs (graduate competence and employability outcomes), supported by continuous feedback and adaptation (Von Bertalanffy, 1968). This systems-based orientation enables the integration of PCR, identity capital, and stakeholder-driven curriculum models into a coherent framework for HRM education, thereby supporting the intentional development of work-ready, adaptable, and professionally grounded graduates. This reinforces the study's argument that employability emerges from interacting personal, curricular, institutional, and labour-market systems rather than from isolated variables.

4.4 EXISTING FRAMEWORKS OF CURRICULUM DESIGN

Curriculum design is a structured, formal process grounded in established frameworks (Tractenberg et al., 2020). Existing curriculum design models emphasise different elements such as competencies, learning outcomes, pedagogical strategies, stakeholder engagement, and contextual alignment.

Kiley (2020) argues that traditional employability models emphasise competencies and personal traits but pay insufficient attention to the broader psychosocial and systemic factors that shape employability. This limitation supports the adoption of holistic frameworks, such as the General Systems Theory, that recognise the interplay between individual attributes and external influences. Classical curriculum models remain valuable because they provide design logic; however, on their own they often insufficiently address volatility, digital disruption, stakeholder complexity, and employability capability development.

Table 4.2 summarises key curriculum design frameworks. While they offer valuable insights, the South African HRM context requires an integrated, context-specific model that considers national skills priorities, industry needs, technological disruptions, stakeholder expectations, and the psychosocial development of graduates.

Curriculum reform must therefore build on existing curricula, preserve effective components, and adapt to new labour market demands, particularly those emerging in the post-COVID-19, digital and automation-driven environment.

Table 4.2: Existing curriculum design frameworks

Study	Summary of the study	Implications for curriculum design for the employability of HRM graduates in South Africa
Tyler's (1949) technical/scientific approach to curriculum design (Hung, 2022).	These are technical models: deductive and inductive. Deductive models follow the linear plan: design, implement, and evaluate. The model is linear and progresses from general to specific. This model is sometimes described as society-centred. The inductive models begin by observing and evaluating specific approaches before testing them on a broad scale, and then plan to create a model for overall implementation.	Tyler's approach is important for informing basic decision-making in curriculum design but may fail to address the real challenges of curriculum implementation in the current environment.
Taba's (1967) model (Hung, 2022).	This model emphasises the essence of teachers in guiding curriculum design activities, including planning, implementation, and evaluation. The approach is termed a grassroots model owing to its emphasis on	Drawing on Taba's model, educators have a significant influence on the design of employability curricula. Teachers and educators play a central role in the curriculum design process. Despite this argument, the DHET advocates

Study	Summary of the study	Implications for curriculum design for the employability of HRM graduates in South Africa
	exploring the views of curriculum implementers who are believed to represent students.	for student-centredness in curriculum design. Therefore, the teachers should draw their inputs with close regard to the students' views.
Wheeler (1976) (Hung, 2022).	Wheeler's work conceptualised the ideas of Tyler and Taba but added the concept of continuity to the process. They proposed a cyclical framework where evaluation is not the last component	The curriculum may be viewed as cyclical and continuous, with evaluation informing continuous planning and improvement of the curriculum framework.
Bhuttah et al., (2019)	The study reviewed curriculum design frameworks from popular curriculum theorists (Tyler, Taba, and Wheeler). These frameworks are deductive, inductive, or cyclical. The authors classified Tyler's model as deductive, Taba's as Inductive, and Wheeler's as cyclical. In the literature review process, the process and product, as well as technical and non-technical models, are also explained. Product models emphasise the outcome, which is an industry-fit graduate, while process models are explained to emphasise the activities and methodologies followed. At the same time, technical models are logical and efficient, while non-technical frameworks are subjective and person-centred. Process models suggest that curriculum design should be conducted rigorously. Curriculum design frameworks would require specifically considering both affective and cognitive needs to ensure comprehensive employability.	Given that the present study was formulated to address a specific problem of the employability of HRM graduates, a product model may be considered relevant. The study has a pre-determined outcome that the curriculum is expected to meet. While acknowledging that deductive designs imply that educational outcomes are determined by curriculum planners and instructional strategies, this study suggests that non-technical approaches are better suited to meeting the need for learner-centredness, which is considered vital for employability.
Tractenberg et al., (2020)	The study presented an iterative model of curriculum design, that commences with the formulation of educational	This model advocates a curriculum driven by the outcomes to be achieved. The curriculum objectives are prepared first, followed by the

Study	Summary of the study	Implications for curriculum design for the employability of HRM graduates in South Africa
	goals and outcomes, followed by the selection of learning experiences as well as the content of the curriculum, after which assessments are developed and evaluated.	learning experiences and assessments in an iterative process. This model may be simplistic, as it fails to capture complex situational factors that may affect the iteration. The above resonates with an outcomes-based education system.
Coetzee (2023)	This study investigated the function of learning and development (L&D) within South African entities. It emphasised aligning learning and development with organisational needs and qualification standards in South Africa. It explains SAQA's design and delivers the up-model's principles, ensuring learning is aligned with organisational needs and delivered effectively.	The HRM curricula must integrate the SAQA structure to safeguard the employability skills employers require, enhancing applied learning, strategic practices in learning and development, and workplace preparedness.
Temoso and Myeki (2023).	Provided the 'Design down' and 'deliver up' curriculum model, which emphasises starting with determining the purpose of the curriculum, followed by what students should learn, then determining the evidence for learning, before establishing the teaching and learning activities.	This framework emphasises learner-centeredness and stakeholder engagement.

The reviewed models collectively contribute important principles: clarity of outcomes (Tyler), practitioner insight (Taba), continuous review (Wheeler), iterative alignment (Tractenberg), and stakeholder responsiveness (Temoso & Myeki). The present study synthesises these strengths rather than adopting one model uncritically.

4.5 THE SYSTEMS THEORY PERSPECTIVE OF CURRICULUM DESIGN

Systems thinking, which gained prominence in the twentieth century across disciplines such as biology, engineering, organisational studies, and cybernetics, offers a powerful conceptual framework for understanding complex, adaptive phenomena (Davelaar, 2023). In contrast to linear or reductionist approaches, systems thinking emphasises interdependence, dynamic

interaction, and contextual embeddedness. These characteristics render it particularly appropriate for analysing curriculum design in higher education, where multiple stakeholders, competing priorities, and rapidly changing labour market demands intersect. Curriculum problems such as weak employability outcomes often persist because institutions treat symptoms separately—for example assessment redesign without industry engagement, or policy compliance without pedagogical renewal.

Von Bertalanffy's (1968) General Systems Theory (GST) provides the foundational principles for systems thinking by conceptualising systems as open, dynamic entities composed of interrelated inputs, processes, outputs, and feedback mechanisms (Zarghami, 2023). Within this perspective, no component of a system can be fully understood in isolation; rather, meaning and effectiveness emerge from the relationships between components and their interaction with the environment. This holistic logic aligns closely with contemporary understandings of curriculum design as a socially embedded and context-responsive process rather than a static technical exercise. In the era of AI and rapid technological change, open-system responsiveness is no longer optional but essential.

Mallillin and Laurel (2022) identify four core characteristics of systems thinking that are particularly relevant to curriculum design:

1. A holistic interpretation of reality that accounts for contextual, institutional, and societal influences;
2. Recognition of relationships and interactions rather than isolated curriculum components;
3. Appreciation of multiple operational levels, including policy, institutional, programme, and classroom levels;
4. Acceptance of diverse rationalities and stakeholder perspectives that shape system behaviour.

Applied to curriculum design, GST enables the integration of diverse elements such as national policy frameworks, professional standards, industry expectations, institutional capacity, pedagogical practices, and student characteristics into a coherent analytical structure. Curriculum inputs (e.g., stakeholder needs, employability competencies, regulatory requirements) are transformed through curriculum processes (e.g., pedagogical strategies, assessment design, stakeholder engagement) into curriculum outputs (e.g., graduate competence, employability outcomes, professional readiness). Feedback loops ensure that outputs inform continuous curriculum review and adaptation.

Importantly, GST conceptualises educational systems as open systems, meaning that curricula must continuously adapt to external changes such as technological innovation, economic shifts, and evolving professional practices. This is particularly salient in the South African context, where higher education institutions operate within complex socio-economic conditions marked by inequality, skills shortages, and transformation imperatives. A systems perspective, therefore, supports curriculum responsiveness, sustainability, and relevance by explicitly acknowledging environmental constraints and enablers.

In this study, GST serves as the overarching theoretical lens, integrating curriculum design inputs, processes, and outputs into a unified framework to enhance HRM graduate employability. By foregrounding interdependence, adaptability, and feedback, the systems theory perspective provides a robust conceptual foundation for the Integrated Curriculum Development Framework and the associated curriculum scorecard and accreditation rubric developed later in the study. GST therefore provides the conceptual justification for the Integrated Curriculum Development Framework, scorecard, and rubric proposed later in the thesis.

4.5.1 Relevance of the systems view in curriculum design

Curriculum design in contemporary higher education is inherently complex and dynamic, shaped by multiple stakeholders, competing priorities, and rapidly evolving educational, technological, and labour market demands. In professional disciplines such as Human Resource Management (HRM), curricula are expected to develop graduates who possess not only disciplinary and technical knowledge, but also non-technical capabilities, including ethical judgement, digital competence, communication skills, adaptability, and psychological readiness for sustained employability. Addressing this multidimensional mandate requires a conceptual framework that integrates diverse elements into a coherent, responsive whole. This complexity is particularly visible in HRM curricula where legal, behavioural, technological, strategic, and ethical domains must coexist coherently.

The systems view, as articulated through the General Systems Theory (GST), provides a robust theoretical lens for understanding and managing this complexity. GST conceptualises social and organisational phenomena as open systems composed of interdependent components that interact dynamically with their environments. Applied to curriculum design, this perspective shifts attention away from isolated curriculum elements toward the relationships, feedback loops, and interactions that collectively shape educational outcomes.

Within a systems-based curriculum framework, the inputs–processes–outputs structure serves as an organising logic that enhances coherence and alignment. Inputs encompass stakeholder expectations (students, industry, professional bodies, and government), national policy and regulatory requirements, labour market trends, and underpinning educational philosophies. These inputs define the intended graduate profile and competence architecture of the curriculum. Processes refer to the pedagogical and organisational mechanisms through which these inputs are translated into learning experiences, including curriculum design practices, teaching and learning strategies, assessment approaches, and structured stakeholder engagement. Outputs include not only graduate employability outcomes and assessment results, but also evaluative data and stakeholder feedback that inform ongoing curriculum review and renewal.

A key strength of GST lies in its emphasis on feedback and adaptation. Rather than treating curriculum design as a linear or static exercise, a systems view recognises curriculum as a cyclical and evolving construct. Feedback from graduates, employers, professional bodies, and accreditation processes feeds back into the system, enabling evidence-based refinement of curriculum inputs and processes. This feature is particularly important in HRM education, where professional standards, technological tools, and workplace practices change rapidly. Examples of feedback data include graduate employment rates, employer satisfaction, student progression, module performance, accreditation findings, and alumni reflections.

Moreover, GST supports a governance-oriented understanding of curriculum design by clarifying roles, responsibilities, and interdependencies among stakeholders. It provides a conceptual foundation for integrating curriculum content, pedagogy, assessment, and institutional enablers into a single, coherent system, thereby reducing fragmentation and misalignment. In employability-focused curricula, this integration is essential for ensuring that learning outcomes, teaching practices, and assessment methods collectively support the development of work-ready graduates.

Given its capacity to accommodate complexity, support responsiveness, and embed continuous improvement, the General Systems Theory is adopted in this study as the overarching theoretical framework to inform the development of a holistic, stakeholder-responsive HRM curriculum.

4.5.2 Guiding concepts in the development of a systems-based curriculum

Drawing from McEneaney and Morsink (2022), a framework for curriculum design should have the following four interdependent curriculum design elements at its centre:

1. Learning objectives
2. Curriculum content
3. Pedagogical approaches
4. Assessment strategies

These four central design elements should be aligned rather than treated independently. Misalignment (for example innovative outcomes but outdated assessment) weakens curriculum effectiveness. These elements operate within a broader environment shaped by economic, political, technological, and social forces.

- **Economic forces - labour-market signals, skills demand, and employability**

Economies and labour markets shape the programmes that are prioritised. Practically, this means curricula are revised to include industry-relevant skills (e.g., data literacy, project management, sector-specific technical skills), embed work-integrated learning (internships, industry projects), and introduce micro-credentials to respond quickly to employer needs. Universities typically use employer advisory forums, labour market analyses, and tracer studies to update learning outcomes and develop targeted modules that enhance graduate employability and align with national development goals. Such alignment enhances graduate placement and institutional relevance but requires ongoing employer engagement and curriculum agility (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2022). For HRM, emerging priority areas include people analytics, employee wellness, ESG reporting, talent intelligence, and hybrid workforce management.

- **Political and regulatory forces - quality assurance, standards, and funding levers**

Government policy, funding formulas, accreditation standards, and national qualification frameworks directly determine programme structures, credit load, and minimum learning outcomes. In practice, curriculum teams must map programme outcomes to national qualification descriptors, include compulsory quality-assurance evidence (e.g., assessment rubrics, moderation processes), and sometimes adapt intake/throughput targets in response to funding incentives. Regulatory reviews (e.g., doctoral programme reviews) also prompt institutions to strengthen supervision support structures and professionalise supervisory competencies as part of their compliance efforts. Policy changes, therefore, often triggers formal curriculum revision cycles and institutional investment in support services (Council on

Higher Education, 2023). In South Africa, alignment with CHE, SAQA, DHET and professional expectations remains essential for legitimacy and programme sustainability.

- **Technological forces - digital platforms, skills for Industry 4.0, and assessment innovation**

Rapid technological change forces two practical curriculum responses. First, content changes include the inclusion of digital skills, AI literacy, and domain-specific tech competencies. Second, pedagogical and assessment innovation: adoption of blended/hybrid learning, virtual labs, e-portfolios, automated formative feedback, and secure online assessment. Curriculum teams must specify digital literacies as explicit learning outcomes, train staff in e-pedagogy, and redesign assessments (e.g., project-based or authentic assessments) to reduce the risk of plagiarism from generative AI while assessing higher-order skills. These changes require investment in platforms, staff development, and instructional design capacity (Haleem et al., 2022). HRM-specific technologies include applicant tracking systems, HR information systems, workforce dashboards, e-learning systems, and AI-enabled people tools.

- **Social and cultural forces - inclusion, decolonisation, diversity, and student needs**

Social imperatives reshape curriculum content and representation, influencing pedagogical choices and the equity of assessment. Practically, this means reviewing reading lists and case studies for cultural representation, embedding inclusive assessment alternatives (e.g., multiple formats, accommodations), and integrating community-engaged learning to reflect social relevance. Student diversity also requires scaffolding and formative feedback systems to support retention. Institutional commitments to transformation and social justice, therefore, drive curriculum audits, the development of new module content, and CPD for staff on inclusive pedagogy (Stentiford, 2022). Inclusive HRM curricula should also prepare graduates to manage diversity, conflict sensitivity, employee dignity, and fair labour practices.

- **Cross-cutting practical mechanisms**

Several mechanisms translate environmental signals into curriculum change: (1) structured stakeholder engagement (employer boards, policymakers, community partners), (2) iterative curriculum review cycles tied to QA and funding calendars, (3) modularisation and micro-credentials to increase responsiveness, (4) investment in staff development (digital pedagogy, inclusive assessment), and (5) monitoring systems (graduate outcome tracking, employer feedback) to evaluate impact and close the loop between outputs and context. These mechanisms operationalise the bidirectional influence shown in the integrated framework:

context shapes curriculum, and graduate outcomes feed back into economic, social, and policy systems.

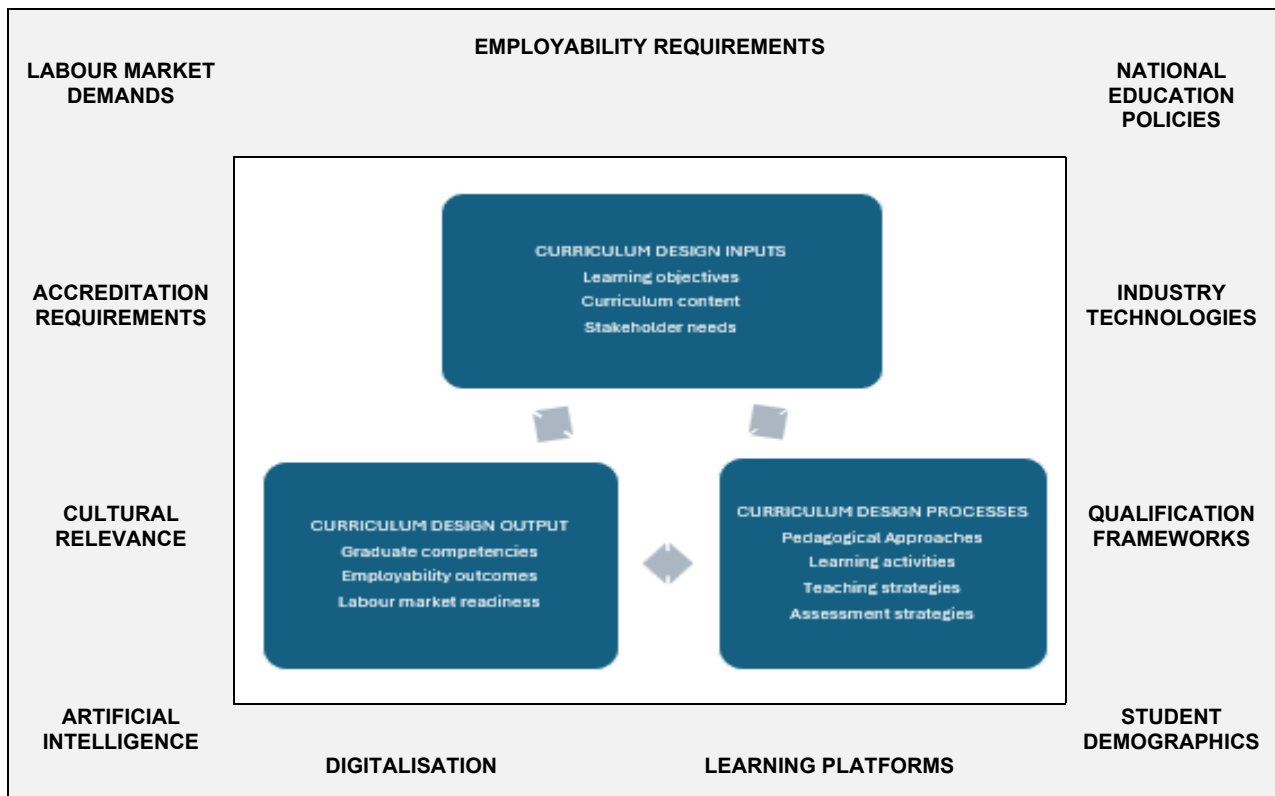


Figure 4.2: Conceptual framework for developing a curriculum

Figure 4.2 illustrates the conceptual model of these interactions, demonstrating the complexity, rather than the linearity, of the factors involved in curriculum design. Figure 4.2 may also serve as the architecture for the later curriculum scorecard by converting each domain into measurable indicators. Curriculum design is illustrated as an integrated and dynamic system. Learning objectives and curriculum content constitute key design inputs, implemented through curriculum design processes encompassing pedagogical approaches, teaching and learning strategies, and assessment practices. These processes generate curriculum design outputs in the form of graduate competencies and employability outcomes. All components operate within, and are continuously shaped by, broader environmental influences, including economic, political, technological, and social forces. The bidirectional relationships depicted emphasise curriculum design as an adaptive and responsive process rather than a linear sequence.

4.6 CURRICULUM DESIGN INPUTS

Within a systems-based approach to curriculum design, inputs represent the foundational elements that shape curriculum intent, structure, and expected outcomes. In employability-

oriented professional programmes such as Human Resource Management (HRM), curriculum inputs must be carefully aligned to ensure that graduate attributes reflect labour market realities, policy expectations, and stakeholder needs. As previously established, graduate employability requires an integrated blend of technical expertise, soft skills, and behavioural competencies that enable graduates to perform effectively and adapt sustainably in complex work environments. For practical application, inputs may be grouped into five categories: policy inputs, stakeholder inputs, market inputs, learner inputs, and capability-framework inputs.

The acceleration of Industry 4.0 has intensified demands for digital literacy, analytical capability, data-informed decision-making, and adaptive learning capacity (Maisiri & Van Dyk, 2020). These developments require curricula that are not static but are designed to support continuous upskilling and reskilling throughout graduates' careers. Consequently, competence requirements derived from technological change constitute a critical curriculum input, informing learning outcomes, content selection, pedagogy, and assessment strategies.

National policy and skills governance structures further exert a decisive influence on curriculum inputs in South Africa. Shibiti and Mulaudzi (2023) highlight the coordinated roles of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs), the National Skills Authority, and the Skills Development Act in shaping skills development priorities. Through mechanisms such as national skills plans, occupational standards, and funding incentives, these structures define priority skills areas and encourage alignment between education, training, and labour market demand. In HRM curricula, this policy environment serves as a regulatory and strategic input that shapes curriculum relevance and accountability.

In addition to policy and labour market considerations, stakeholder expectations constitute a further critical category of curriculum inputs. Employers, professional bodies, students, and higher education institutions each contribute distinct perspectives on the competencies required for effective HRM practice. Effective curriculum design, therefore, requires the systematic integration of these inputs through formal consultation, co-design mechanisms, and evidence-based review processes. In HRM programmes, capability-framework inputs may include SABPP competency expectations and comparable international professional standards.

Finally, curriculum inputs must be responsive to contextual and environmental dynamics. Porlares and Tan (2021) emphasise curriculum responsiveness as a prerequisite for enhancing employability, arguing that curricula should adapt to economic shifts, technological

disruption, and evolving professional standards. Within a systems framework, responsiveness is achieved by continuously monitoring input conditions and recalibrating curriculum design accordingly.

Taken together, curriculum design inputs in HRM education comprise a structured constellation of employability requirements, policy and regulatory frameworks, stakeholder expectations, and environmental conditions. Conceptualising these elements as interrelated inputs within a systems-based curriculum framework provides a coherent foundation for translating external demands into integrated curriculum processes and employability-focused graduate outcomes.

4.7 CURRICULUM DESIGN PROCESSES

Within a systems-based approach to curriculum development, curriculum design processes serve as mechanisms for translating curriculum inputs into coherent learning experiences and employability-focused outcomes. These processes are neither linear nor static; rather, they are iterative, collaborative, and responsive to ongoing changes in policy, labour market conditions, professional standards, and stakeholder expectations. In employability-oriented programmes such as Human Resource Management (HRM), curriculum processes play a critical mediating role between external demands and the development of graduate capabilities. Effective processes require governance clarity regarding who approves, designs, reviews, resources, and quality assures curriculum changes.

Curriculum processes typically begin with environmental scanning and needs analysis, through which institutions identify emerging skills requirements, technological developments, regulatory expectations, and socio-economic challenges affecting graduate employability. This phase provides the empirical and contextual evidence required to justify curriculum decisions and ensure relevance. Stakeholder consultation follows as a core process, involving structured engagement with employers, professional bodies, students, alumni, and policymakers to validate identified needs and co-construct curriculum priorities.

Once needs are established, curriculum mapping and alignment processes ensure coherence between learning outcomes, module content, teaching strategies, and assessment practices. Alignment with national qualification frameworks and professional standards is crucial for maintaining academic integrity, regulatory compliance, and professional credibility. In the South African context, this includes alignment with frameworks overseen by bodies such as the Department of Higher Education and Training and relevant professional councils.

Curriculum maps should explicitly indicate where technical, digital, ethical, and employability competencies are introduced, reinforced, and mastered across programme levels.

Pedagogical planning and assessment design represent central curriculum processes through which employability capabilities are operationalised. Teaching and learning strategies must deliberately integrate theory and practice, digital tools, and experiential learning opportunities. Assessment design should prioritise authentic, formative approaches that evaluate the application of knowledge, skills, and professional behaviours rather than knowledge recall alone. Authentic assessment examples include HR case hearings, recruitment simulations, analytics dashboards, consulting reports, reflective portfolios, and workplace projects.

Feedback collection and evaluation are integral to sustaining curriculum quality and responsiveness. Data from students, graduates, employers, and external reviewers provide evidence of the curriculum's effectiveness and highlight areas that require refinement. These evaluative processes feed into continuous curriculum review, completing the feedback loop inherent in a systems-based design model.

Collaboration among academic, administrative, and external stakeholders is essential throughout these processes. Figure 3.1 (Chapter 3) illustrates the stakeholder engagement process that informs the present study's conceptualisation of curriculum design processes. In this study, curriculum processes are understood as dynamic, interconnected practices that enable continuous adaptation, alignment, and improvement, ensuring that HRM curricula remain responsive to evolving demands for employability.

4.8 CURRICULUM DESIGN OUTPUTS

Within a systems-based approach to curriculum design, curriculum outputs represent the demonstrable results of curriculum inputs and processes, serving as primary indicators of curriculum effectiveness, relevance, and quality. In employability-oriented programmes such as Human Resource Management (HRM), outputs extend beyond individual assessment scores to include evidence of graduate competence, professional readiness, ethical judgement, and adaptability in dynamic labour markets. Outputs should be measured at multiple levels: module-level learning, programme-level graduate attributes, and post-graduation employability outcomes.

Assessment practices remain a central mechanism for evaluating curriculum outputs. Chandio, Pandhiani, and Iqbal (2016) emphasise Bloom's Taxonomy as a foundational framework for

assessing cognitive development across levels of remembering, understanding, applying, analysing, evaluating, and creating. These domains continue to provide a robust structure for evaluating disciplinary knowledge and higher-order thinking skills.

However, contemporary curriculum outputs must also reflect the realities of digitally mediated and technologically intensive workplaces. Bloom's Revised Digital Taxonomy incorporates competencies such as digital content creation, online collaboration, data interpretation, and technological problem-solving (Boud & Dawson, 2023). These competencies are increasingly essential for HRM graduates, who are expected to operate within digital HR systems, analytics platforms, and hybrid work environments (Goulart, Liboni & Cezarino, 2022).

In this context, curriculum outputs should capture a multidimensional profile of graduate capability. Effective assessment systems should therefore evaluate not only content mastery, but also:

- psychological career resources, including adaptability, resilience, and self-regulation;
- identity capital, encompassing confidence, professional identity, and agency;
- soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving;
- professional and ethical behaviour aligned with HR standards;
- digital literacy and technological fluency; and
- ethical reasoning and responsible decision-making.

These outputs support the development of a balanced scorecard in which academic achievement is only one dimension of curriculum success. Glerum and Judge (2021) argue that employability outcomes are best achieved through integrated, programme-wide assessment approaches rather than isolated or fragmented evaluation practices. Daubney (2022) similarly contends that employability competencies must be embedded holistically across curricula, ensuring that graduate attributes are systematically developed and assessed rather than treated as optional or peripheral add-ons.

Beyond individual assessments, curriculum outputs also include longitudinal evidence of learning and of the impact on employability. Sotiriadou et al., (2020) emphasise the importance of programme-level evaluation, triangulating assessment results with graduate outcomes, employer feedback, and alumni data. Maki (2023) further highlights that sustainable curriculum quality requires the use of assessment evidence to inform continuous improvement and institutional accountability. Possible indicators include graduate employment rates, time-to-employment, professional registration, employer ratings, alumni progression, and student self-efficacy gains.

Research on learning science reinforces the importance of structured output mechanisms. Spaced learning, formative assessment, and iterative feedback promote deep and transferable learning. Stanton, Sebesta, and Dunlosky (2021) argue that metacognitive and affective skills must be intentionally developed and assessed across entire programmes rather than confined to discrete modules.

Within this study, curriculum outputs are therefore conceptualised as both evaluative evidence and feedback mechanisms. They validate whether curriculum inputs and processes have successfully produced work-ready HRM graduates, providing the empirical basis for curriculum renewal, stakeholder engagement, and quality assurance. In this way, curriculum outputs complete the systems cycle by informing ongoing curriculum redesign and ensuring sustained alignment with the demands of employability and professional practice. In this study, outputs are not the system's endpoint but the evidence base for iterative redesign.

4.9 SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter synthesised literature on employability-oriented curriculum design and demonstrated that effective HRM curricula require coordinated stakeholder involvement, psychological capability development, robust design models, and systems-based governance. The chapter further showed that curriculum quality depends on the alignment of inputs, processes, and outputs supported by continuous feedback. These insights provide the conceptual basis for the methodological chapter that follows and for the integrated framework contribution later in the thesis.

CHAPTER FIVE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to present and justify the research methodology adopted to address the objectives of the study. Because research methodology underpins scientific inquiry, the chapter provides a clear account of the processes used to ensure the study's findings are reliable, credible, and grounded in appropriate methodological choices. The methodological design was selected not only for procedural fit, but also for philosophical coherence with the study's aim of understanding how multiple stakeholders interpret curriculum relevance and graduate employability within a specific South African context.

The chapter begins by outlining the philosophical orientation that guided the study, recognising that any investigation into educational phenomena, particularly curriculum design and graduate employability, must be rooted in a coherent worldview that links assumptions about reality to methodological decisions. This study acknowledges that perceptions of employability and curriculum relevance are socially constructed, diverse, and contextually embedded; therefore, a discussion of the research philosophy, paradigm, and underlying assumptions is essential.

The chapter then expands on the methodological approach and research design, explaining how the selected methods draw from previous literature while remaining responsive to gaps and limitations in earlier studies. The chapter also describes the population, sampling, data collection instruments, and analytical procedures used to achieve the study's purpose. Consideration is given to quality assurance strategies applicable in qualitative research, namely credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and authenticity, as well as validity, reliability, and trustworthiness.

Finally, the chapter outlines ethical considerations and the steps taken to ensure that participants' rights and privacy were upheld in accordance with institutional and national guidelines. This chapter thereby establishes the methodological basis for interpreting the findings presented in the next chapter. Accordingly, this chapter demonstrates the alignment between research questions, paradigm, methods, analysis, and quality assurance strategies.

5.2 RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY AND PARADIGM

Research philosophy and paradigms form the foundation for methodological choices. Melnikovas (2018) explained that philosophy and paradigm are the initial and defining elements of research methodology, establishing the assumptions that guide how knowledge is generated and interpreted. In classic terms, a research paradigm was originally conceptualised by Kuhn (1962) as a worldview, an overarching framework that directs how phenomena are understood. In subsequent scholarship, paradigms have been described as consisting of three essential components: ontology, epistemology, and axiology (Bonache & Festing, 2020; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

- Ontology concerns assumptions about the nature of reality.
- Epistemology relates to how knowledge about reality is acquired.
- Axiology reflects the values that underpin inquiry.

Axiology is particularly important in qualitative inquiry because researcher values influence topic selection, participant interaction, interpretation, and representation of findings. As Creswell (2021) explained, such paradigms represent broader “world views” that influence every methodological decision, from the framing of the problem to the form of data collection and analysis. Similarly, Saunders (2023), in the research onion, positions philosophical assumptions as the outermost layer of research methodology, emphasising their centrality.

For this study, selecting an appropriate paradigm was crucial, as curriculum design and graduate employability are multidimensional constructs involving diverse stakeholders. Designing a curriculum framework for HRM graduates, especially in the context of Industry 4.0, requires carefully incorporating perceptions from academics, industry bodies (such as the SABPP), graduates, and broader societal expectations (Ramnund-Mansingh & Reddy, 2021). This aligns with constructivist paradigms, which maintain that reality is co-created through interaction and shared meaning-making processes. Constructivism was considered more appropriate than positivist or purely post-positivist paradigms because the study did not seek universal causal laws, but contextually situated meanings regarding employability and curriculum design.

Constructivism posits that knowledge arises from the interplay between individuals' experiences and interpretations. Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) argue that constructivism is especially relevant for studies exploring perceptions, experiences, and subjective realities. Creswell (2021) links constructivism with qualitative methodologies because qualitative

designs allow researchers to capture rich, nuanced accounts from participants. For this reason, the study adopted constructivism as its guiding philosophy, enabling the interpretation of subjective viewpoints on employability and curriculum relevance.

The paradigm therefore informed not only data collection methods, but also the interpretive logic applied during coding, theme development, and framework construction.

5.3 OVERVIEW OF THE METHODOLOGY

The preceding section described the study's philosophical and paradigmatic grounding. This section explains how those philosophical commitments informed the methodological approach and research procedures.

Research approaches are typically classified as either qualitative or quantitative. Quantitative approaches are often associated with positivism, which seeks to test hypotheses and measure relationships using numerical data. By contrast, qualitative approaches are associated with anti-positivist traditions that explore experiences, meanings, and interpretations (Cahyono & Daniel, 2023). Anti-positivism challenges the notion that social phenomena can be studied using the same methods as those of the natural sciences and emphasises the importance of human subjectivity (Masullo, 2024). Although quantitative methods may have measured perceptions at scale, they would have been less effective in capturing the complexity, nuance, contradictions, and context-specific meanings central to this study.

Given the study's focus on perceptions of employability, curriculum relevance, and stakeholder expectations, qualitative methods were the most appropriate. The study was grounded in constructivism, concluding that meaningful insights into curriculum design could emerge only from subjective, context-rich information shared by stakeholders.

Furthermore, the study's conceptual framework draws from the General Systems Theory, which emphasizes that educational systems must be analyzed holistically, considering inputs, processes, and outputs (Turner & Baker, 2019). Graduate unemployment, emerging technologies, shifting labour market expectations, and curriculum misalignment are interconnected elements of the educational system. Consequently, the study employed a phased qualitative design in which each stage informed the next through progressive refinement:

1. A thematic literature review to identify global and local themes on employability and curriculum design.
2. Qualitative interviews with HRM lecturers, focusing on curriculum practices, Industry 4.0 expectations, and perceived gaps.
3. Qualitative interviews with SABPP officials, validating and extending emergent themes through industry expert perspectives.

This sequential logic enhanced methodological triangulation by integrating literature evidence, academic stakeholder perspectives, and professional body perspectives. This methodological sequence enabled a deep, holistic understanding of the phenomenon while aligning with the philosophical underpinnings of constructivism and systems thinking.

5.4 THE PHILOSOPHY OF CONSTRUCTIVISM

Constructivism was selected as the philosophical foundation of this study because it is particularly well-suited to research that seeks to understand complex, socially embedded phenomena from multiple stakeholder perspectives. Graduate employability, and specifically the development of employability-oriented curricula in Human Resource Management (HRM), is shaped by the meanings, experiences, and interpretations of diverse actors, including educators, students, employers, professional bodies, and policymakers. As such, a constructivist paradigm provides an appropriate lens for interpreting how these stakeholders construct and negotiate understandings of employability and curriculum relevance.

Shah, Shah, and Khaskhelly (2018) argue that constructivism is especially suitable for exploring subjective meanings and integrating multiple viewpoints rather than testing predetermined hypotheses. In this study, employability is not treated as an objective or fixed outcome, but rather as a socially constructed concept that varies across institutional, professional, and labour market contexts. Constructivism, therefore, enables the exploration of how different stakeholders perceive employability requirements, curriculum adequacy, and graduate readiness. Constructivism does not imply that all interpretations are equally persuasive; rather, interpretations are judged according to credibility, coherence, evidential grounding, and contextual plausibility.

The philosophical roots of constructivism can be traced to Kant's (1881) proposition that knowledge is not a direct reflection of an objective reality but is actively constructed through human cognition and experience (Borges & Revez, 2019). Building on this foundation, constructivism emerged as a response to the limitations of objectivist and positivist paradigms,

which assume a single, observable reality independent of human interpretation. In contrast, constructivism is underpinned by a relativist ontology, which recognises multiple realities, and a subjectivist epistemology, which holds that knowledge is co-created through interaction between the researcher and participants.

Within a constructivist framework, the researcher is not a detached observer but an active participant in the process of meaning-making. Knowledge is generated through dialogue, reflection, and interpretation, emphasising the importance of context, language, and social interaction. This philosophical stance aligns closely with the qualitative methodology adopted in this study, which seeks to elicit rich, contextualised insights into curriculum design practices and employability expectations. For this reason, reflexive memoing was maintained throughout the study to document assumptions, interpretive decisions, and emerging insights.

Furthermore, constructivism complements the study's systems perspective by acknowledging that meaning emerges from interactions within complex systems. Stakeholder perspectives, institutional practices, and policy environments are understood as interrelated components that collectively shape curriculum design and graduate outcomes. By embracing constructivism, this study can integrate diverse viewpoints into a coherent analytical narrative, thereby supporting the development of an evidence-based, contextually responsive curriculum framework.

In summary, constructivism provides the philosophical foundation that legitimises the exploration of multiple realities, supports interpretive inquiry, and aligns with both the qualitative research design and the systems-oriented approach underpinning this study. This philosophical coherence enhances the credibility and rigor of the research, ensuring that the findings accurately reflect the lived experiences and perspectives of those directly engaged in HRM education and practice.

5.4.1 Ontology and epistemology of constructivism

Constructivist ontology is grounded in the assumption that reality is not singular, fixed, or objectively given, but rather multiple, subjective, and socially constructed through human interaction and experience (Maarouf, 2019). From this ontological perspective, social phenomena such as graduate employability do not exist independently of the meanings that stakeholders ascribe to them. Instead, realities are shaped by context, institutional location, professional roles, and historical conditions.

Within the context of this study, a constructivist ontological stance acknowledges that understandings of employability vary across stakeholder groups. For example, critiques that higher education institutions fail to produce work-ready graduates represent one socially constructed interpretation of reality, often articulated by employers or policymakers (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021). Academics, by contrast, may construct alternative realities that foreground systemic constraints such as resource limitations, massification, regulatory compliance, or competing institutional mandates. Neither interpretation is treated as inherently superior; rather, each is understood as a legitimate construction shaped by contextual positioning.

Maarouf's (2019) notion of the "reality cycle" provides a useful conceptualisation of how realities are continuously formed and reformed within constructivist ontology. This cycle assumes that:

- different stakeholders perceive the same phenomenon in divergent ways;
- these perceptions inform decisions, behaviours, and institutional responses;
- emergent contexts, such as technological disruption associated with Industry 4.0, generate new interpretations of existing phenomena; and
- stakeholders reconstruct their understandings as they interact with new conditions and constraints.

These assumptions justify the use of interviews because interviews enable participants to articulate meanings that may not be observable through numerical instruments alone. This ontological position is particularly salient for curriculum design, which must remain responsive to shifting economic, technological, and social contexts. In South Africa, persistent concern regarding the mismatch between graduate capabilities and labour market demands illustrates how employability is continually reconstructed in response to economic pressures and skills shortages (Mtawa, Fongwa, & Wilson-Strydom, 2021). From a constructivist standpoint, curriculum reform is therefore an ongoing process of negotiation rather than a one-time technical intervention.

Constructivist epistemology complements this ontological stance by asserting that knowledge is co-constructed through interaction between researchers and participants, rather than discovered as objective truth. Knowledge production is thus interpretive, dialogical, and context-bound. In this study, epistemological alignment with constructivism justifies the use of qualitative methods that privilege stakeholder voice, meaning-making, and situated understanding.

Accordingly, interviews and thematic engagement with the literature were employed to generate rich, contextualised insights into how employability and curriculum alignment are understood across stakeholder groups. These methods facilitate the examination of underlying assumptions, values, and rationalities that inform curriculum design decisions. The analytical process reflects a constructivist epistemology by treating data interpretation as an iterative and reflexive activity in which meaning is constructed rather than merely extracted.

In sum, the ontological and epistemological assumptions of constructivism provide a coherent philosophical foundation for this study. They legitimise the exploration of multiple stakeholder realities, support interpretive and qualitative inquiry, and align with the study's systems-oriented approach to curriculum design and employability enhancement.

In methodological terms, multiple realities were treated as valuable data rather than as error variance to be controlled.

5.5 RESEARCH DESIGN

Research design refers to the strategic plan that guides the implementation of research, ensuring that procedures systematically address the research objectives (Li, Shamsuddin & Braga, 2021). In this study, the research design followed a qualitative, phased approach aligned with constructivist principles and systems thinking.

Figure 5.1 maps the sequential logic of data collection. The research design included:

1. A thematic literature review to identify core themes related to employability, curriculum design, HR 4.0, and competencies.
2. Semi-structured interviews with HRM lecturers, using an interview guide informed by the literature review.
3. Semi-structured interviews with SABPP officials, using an interview guide informed by both literature and lecturer interviews.

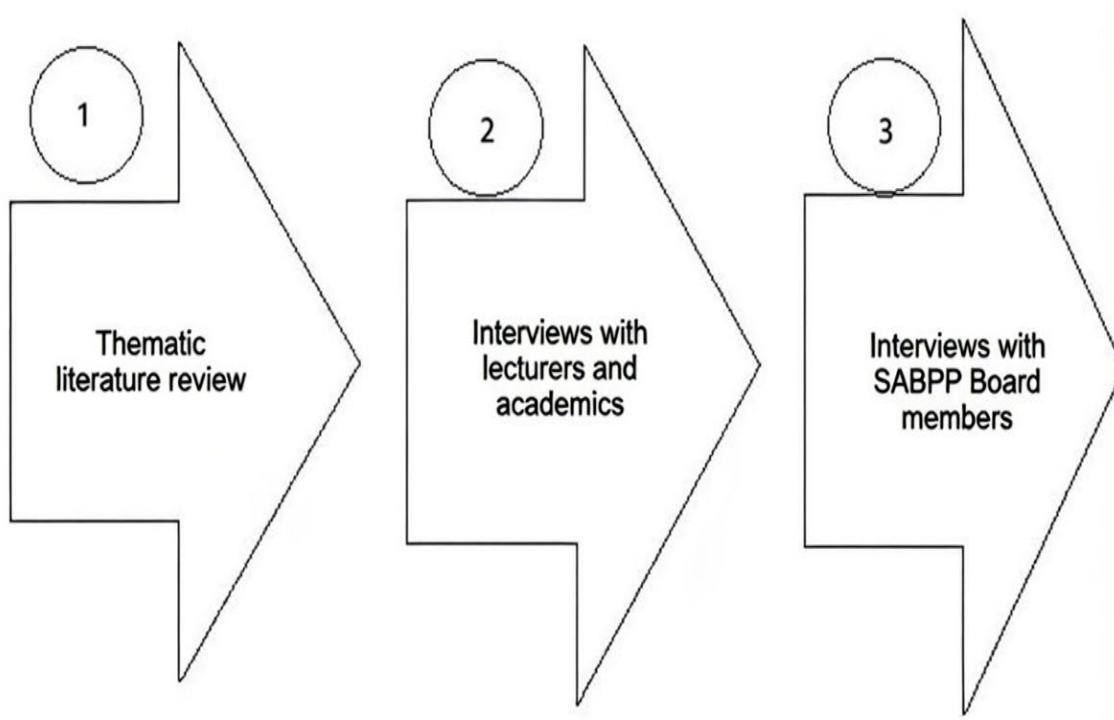


Figure 5.1: Overview of the phased qualitative research design for the study

Each phase built on the preceding phase, allowing for progressive refinement of concepts and ensuring that findings remained grounded in stakeholder perspectives and scholarly evidence. While the design used multiple qualitative data sources, it did not constitute mixed methods because no quantitative data collection or statistical integration occurred.

5.5.1 Thematic literature review

A thematic literature review served as the first stage of data collection. This review made a significant contribution to understanding the global and national discourse on graduate employability, curriculum design, and Industry 4.0 skills. A thematic analysis of the literature identified patterns and themes related to the inputs, processes, and outputs of curriculum design frameworks. The literature review served both exploratory and sensitising purposes: exploratory in identifying dominant themes, and sensitising in informing interview protocols without predetermining participant responses.

The thematic literature review approach aligns with Salman, Ganie and Saleem's (2020) characterisation of thematic reviews as detailed analyses of specific topics aimed at identifying recurring themes. Munna and Kalam (2021) affirm that thematic reviews are useful for identifying curriculum design principles, particularly when synthesising a wide range of frameworks and models.

The PRISMA protocol was adopted to ensure rigour in article selection, screening, and inclusion (Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, Altman & Prisma Group, 2010). Inclusion criteria consisted of the following:

- Peer-reviewed publications
- English language
- Published between 2013 and 2024
- Relevance to employability, curriculum design, HR 4.0, Industry 4.0, competency-based education. Through applying the PRISMA process, the study ensured transparency, replicability, and academic rigour.

Exclusion criteria included duplicate records, non-peer-reviewed opinion pieces, sources unrelated to higher education or employability, and studies lacking sufficient methodological clarity.

Searches were conducted using combinations of keywords such as “graduate employability”, “HRM curriculum”, “Industry 4.0 skills”, “competency-based curriculum”, and “South African higher education”.

5.6 POPULATION AND SAMPLING

5.6.1 Target population

The study comprised multiple data sources. The literature review drew from academic databases such as Web of Science and AOSIS, as well as policy documents published by the South African government and the SABPP. The qualitative phase involved:

- 17 HRM lecturers from a South African university, and
- 5 SABPP officials, representing the professional body responsible for HRM standards.

These groups were selected because they possess direct insight into HRM curriculum design and employability competencies. The use of multiple participant groups strengthened the study by incorporating both academic curriculum expertise and professional practice perspectives.

5.6.2 Sampling method

Non-probability sampling was used across all phases. Purposive sampling was used to identify relevant literature and participants with expertise in HRM curriculum and industry expectations. Akkaş and Meydan (2024) describe purposive sampling as appropriate when participants possess specialised knowledge relevant to the research topic. Convenience sampling facilitated access to HRM lecturers and SABPP officials through gatekeepers. Convenience

access affected only recruitment logistics; final inclusion remained purposive and expertise-based.

All procedures adhered to POPI Act requirements (De Waal, 2022), ensuring confidentiality, secure data storage, and the ethical management of personal information. Purposive criteria for lecturers included current or recent teaching involvement in HRM modules and familiarity with curriculum matters. Criteria for SABPP officials included professional expertise relevant to competency standards, accreditation, or HR professional practice.

5.6.3 Sample size and response rate

The final qualitative sample comprised 17 participants: 14 HRM lecturers and 3 SABPP officials. Of the 22 individuals initially approached (17 lecturers and 5 SABPP officials), 17 agreed to participate, yielding an overall participation rate of 77.3%. Lecturer participation was 82.4%, while SABPP participation was 60.0%.

Sample adequacy was determined through information power and thematic saturation principles rather than statistical representativeness. Saturation was considered reached when successive interviews yielded repetition of themes without substantively new conceptual insights.

5.6.4 Research instruments and data collection

This study made use of two main research instruments:

1. A semi-structured interview guide for HRM lecturers
2. A semi-structured interview guide for SABPP officials

Both guides were based on themes derived from the thematic literature review and were refined considering emerging insights from earlier interviews. Keywords such as "employability", "curriculum design", "HR 4.0", and "Industry 4.0 competencies" informed the literature search. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they balance consistency across participants with flexibility to probe emerging issues, clarify meanings, and explore unexpected insights.

Qualitative data collection

The qualitative data collection occurred in two phases:

- Interviews with HRM lecturers
- Interviews with SABPP officials

All interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were checked against recordings for accuracy prior to coding. POPI Act compliance was ensured throughout. Table 5.1 summarises the methods used in both the literature review and interview phases. Interviews ranged from 45 to 75 minutes, depending on participant availability and the depth of discussion.

Table 5.1: Data collection process and sampling methods

Data Collection Method	Sampling Method	Target Population	Sample Size	Response Rate (%)
Thematic literature review	Purposive	N/A (academic sources)	14 articles	N/A
Qualitative interviews (Lecturers & SABPP Officials)	Purposive & convenience	22 (17 lecturers + 5 SABPP officials)	17 (14 lecturers + 3 SABPP officials)	N/A – data saturation reached

The study used the following instruments to collect information to ensure consistency, theoretical grounding, and coverage of key themes:

- a document analysis template,
- an interview guide for HRM lecturers, and
- an interview guide for SABPP officials.

The Interview guides are included as appendices.

5.7 DATA ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis, as defined by Braun and Clarke (2022), was used to analyse the qualitative data. This method enables researchers to systematically extract meaningful patterns and themes from extensive data, addressing their research objectives. Thematic analysis was chosen because it is theoretically flexible and well suited to identifying patterned meaning across stakeholder groups while remaining compatible with constructivist inquiry. Atlas.ti was used for coding and organising data. The software assisted with data management and auditability but did not replace interpretive judgement by the researcher. The analysis followed an iterative process involving:

1. Familiarisation with data
2. Generation of initial codes

3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Developing the thematic narrative

Initial coding combined inductive coding (arising from the data) with deductive sensitising concepts derived from the literature on employability, curriculum design, and systems theory. This approach aligns with constructivist epistemology by prioritising interpretation, meaning-making, and contextual understanding.

Cross-case comparison was undertaken between lecturer and SABPP responses to identify convergence, divergence, and unique stakeholder emphases.

5.7.1 Reliability and validity

Although the concepts of reliability and validity originate in positivist and quantitative research traditions, qualitative inquiry requires alternative criteria for establishing methodological rigour. Consistent with the constructivist paradigm underpinning this study, rigour was ensured through criteria that emphasise credibility, coherence, transparency, and interpretive depth rather than replicability or statistical generalisation. For conceptual consistency, the term “trustworthiness” may be prioritised in qualitative chapters, while reliability and validity are discussed comparatively.

Maxwell’s (2021) validity framework was applied to guide the qualitative research process in terms of quality and integrity. Descriptive validity was ensured by accurately capturing participants’ accounts through careful transcription and systematic documentation of interview data. Interpretive validity was strengthened by analysing data in a manner that remained faithful to participants’ intended meanings, avoiding the imposition of preconceived theoretical assumptions. This was achieved through iterative coding and constant comparison across data sources.

Theoretical validity was ensured by grounding emerging themes firmly in the empirical data and by continuously testing interpretations against alternative explanations. Rather than forcing alignment with existing theory, theoretical constructs were introduced only where they enhanced explanatory coherence. Generalisation, understood in qualitative terms, was approached cautiously through analytic rather than statistical logic, allowing findings to inform theory and practice in comparable contexts rather than claiming universal applicability.

Evaluative validity was addressed through critical reflection on the values and assumptions that shape interpretation, ensuring that analytical judgments were explicitly justified.

In addition to Maxwell's framework, trustworthiness was further strengthened using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) widely accepted qualitative criteria. Credibility was enhanced through triangulation across stakeholder groups and documentary sources, allowing for the systematic examination of both convergence and divergence in perspectives. Credibility was additionally enhanced through member reflection opportunities, where participants could clarify or elaborate key points during interviews. Transferability was supported by providing detailed, contextualized descriptions of the research setting and participants, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other contexts. Dependability was ensured through the maintenance of a detailed audit trail documenting research decisions, data collection procedures, and analytical steps. Dependability was further supported through consistent use of interview guides across participant groups. Confirmability was addressed by grounding interpretations in verbatim participant data and maintaining reflexive awareness of the researcher's role in meaning construction. Reflexive notes were maintained to monitor researcher assumptions and analytic influence. Authenticity was pursued by representing a balanced range of stakeholder perspectives, including both convergent and divergent views on employability and curriculum design.

Data saturation served as an additional indicator of methodological adequacy. Saturation was deemed achieved when no substantively new themes emerged from successive data collection and analysis cycles, thereby reinforcing the credibility and dependability of the findings. Saturation was assessed at the level of thematic meaning rather than mere code repetition. Collectively, these strategies ensured that the study's findings are trustworthy, theoretically coherent, and methodologically robust within a qualitative, constructivist research framework.

5.8 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study adhered to rigorous ethical standards as prescribed by the university's ethics committee and applicable South African legislation. Ethical clearance was obtained prior to data collection, and all research activities were conducted in accordance with principles of respect for persons, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice (Israel & Hay, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained electronically from all participants prior to their involvement. Participants were provided with clear information regarding the purpose of the study, the nature of their participation, their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty, and the intended use of the data. Participants were further informed that they could decline any question and request withdrawal of their data within a reasonable period after the interview. This approach aligns with ethical requirements for autonomy and transparency in qualitative research (Orb, Eisenhauer & Wynaden, 2001).

To protect participants' privacy and minimise potential harm, no identifying personal information was collected. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured throughout the research process, particularly given the study's organisational context, where participants could potentially be identifiable through their roles or experiences. Pseudonyms or coded identifiers (e.g., Lecturer 1; SABPP 2) were used during transcription and reporting. Data were securely stored and managed in compliance with the Protection of Personal Information (POPI) Act (De Waal, 2022), including password-protected digital storage and restricted access to raw data.

Given the study's constructivist orientation and reliance on participants' subjective experiences, ethical sensitivity extended beyond procedural safeguards to include relational and contextual ethics. Care was taken to minimise power imbalances between the researcher and participants, especially where participants occupied junior or vulnerable positions within their organisations. No incentives were offered for participation, thereby reducing the risk of undue influence or coercion.

The researcher exercised neutrality, integrity, and reflexivity throughout the research process. Reflexive awareness was exercised to recognise how the researcher's assumptions, professional background, and interpretive role could influence data generation and analysis (Berger, 2015). Ethical responsibility was therefore understood not as a single procedural step, but as an ongoing commitment throughout the research lifecycle, from study design to reporting of findings. Given the relatively small professional community, special care was taken to remove indirectly identifying details from quotations.

Collectively, these measures ensured that the study upheld high ethical standards, safeguarded participant welfare, and maintained the credibility and integrity of the research outcomes.

5.9 SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter articulated and justified the methodological foundation underlying the study. Grounded in a constructivist philosophical orientation, the chapter demonstrated how the research paradigm, ontology, and epistemology informed the choice of a qualitative research approach, which is appropriate for exploring the complex, socially constructed nature of graduate employability and curriculum design. The methodological choices were explicitly aligned with the study's aim to integrate multiple stakeholder perspectives within a systems-oriented framework.

The chapter detailed the research design, including the selection of the study population, purposive sampling strategy, and the rationale for engaging participants who occupy key roles in curriculum development, employability, and professional practice. Data collection methods were justified in relation to the study's interpretive intent, and the thematic analysis process was presented as a rigorous, systematic means of generating analytically grounded insights. Particular attention was given to ensuring methodological rigour through established qualitative criteria for trustworthiness, including credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability, as well as through the application of Maxwell's validity framework.

Ethical considerations were addressed not merely as procedural requirements but as an ongoing reflexive responsibility embedded throughout the research process. The chapter, therefore, established the integrity, coherence, and robustness of the methodological design, ensuring that the findings are both credible and contextually meaningful.

This chapter justified the philosophical, methodological, and procedural choices underpinning the study. A constructivist paradigm informed the use of a phased qualitative design combining a thematic literature review with semi-structured stakeholder interviews. The chapter further demonstrated how sampling, data collection, thematic analysis, trustworthiness strategies, and ethical safeguards were aligned to yield credible, contextually meaningful findings. Chapter 6 now presents the empirical findings and their interpretation in relation to the study objectives and conceptual framework.

CHAPTER SIX RESULTS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the empirical findings of the study, serving as the analytical bridge between the problem framing established in Chapter 1 and the framework development undertaken in Chapter 7. Consistent with the revised research orientation, the purpose of this chapter is not merely to describe competence gaps among HRM graduates but to interrogate the systemic curriculum processes, pedagogical practices, stakeholder engagement mechanisms, and institutional conditions that shape the development of graduate competence. Chapter 1 established that the persistent misalignment between HRM graduate outcomes and professional expectations is fundamentally a process-oriented problem, rather than a simple deficiency in curriculum content. Accordingly, this chapter addresses Research Objectives 1 to 4 by generating empirical evidence on (i) the competencies required for contemporary HRM practice, (ii) stakeholder perceptions of graduate preparedness, (iii) the degree of alignment between HRM curricula and professional expectations, and (iv) the structural and contextual constraints that hinder effective competence development. In qualitative research, findings are not treated as neutral facts but as interpreted patterns of meaning derived through systematic engagement with multiple data sources.

The findings presented in this chapter are derived from two complementary qualitative strands: a thematic literature review and semi-structured interviews with HRM academics and representatives of the South African Board for People Practices (SABPP). The thematic literature review provides an analytically synthesised account of global and national competence requirements and curriculum design principles relevant to HRM education. The interview data contextualise and deepen these insights by revealing how these competencies are currently (and inadequately) developed within South African HRM programmes and by identifying the institutional and procedural barriers that sustain this misalignment.

Importantly, this chapter maintains a clear analytical boundary between empirical findings and the framework's construction. While patterns, themes, and relationships are interpreted through the study's theoretical lenses (Constructivist Learning Theory, Competency-Based Education, Human Capital Theory, and the General Systems Theory), no prescriptive model or framework is introduced at this stage. Instead, the chapter systematically develops the empirical foundation upon which the Integrated Curriculum Development Framework is logically and methodologically constructed in Chapter 7.

The chapter is structured as follows. Section 6.2 outlines the qualitative data analysis procedures used to ensure analytical rigour and transparency. Section 6.3 presents the findings of the thematic literature review and addresses Research Objective 1. Section 6.4 reports the thematic findings from stakeholder interviews, addressing Research Objectives 2, 3, and 4. The chapter concludes with a synthesis of key findings that explicitly identifies the design imperatives and process gaps that necessitate the development of a coherent, evidence-based framework for HRM curriculum design and graduate competence development. To enhance analytical coherence, findings are organised according to the study objectives rather than merely by data source. Interpretive commentary is provided where necessary to explain significance, convergence, contradiction, or implications of the findings.

The analysis followed the sequential procedures outlined in Chapter 5, employing thematic analysis to examine competence requirements, curriculum alignment, and systemic challenges. Figure 6.1 provides a general outline of the steps followed to achieve the research objectives.

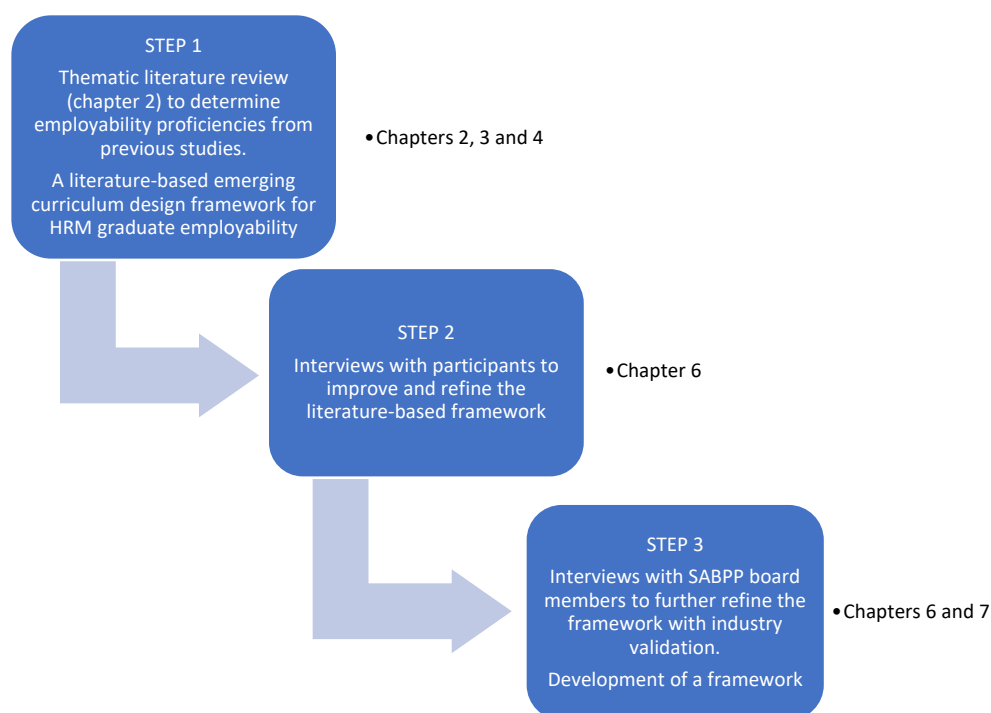


Figure 6.1: Steps performed to achieve the research objectives

6.2 QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

Qualitative data analysis is fundamentally a process of data reduction, where key information is extracted to reveal insights relevant to the research questions. This study adopted a five-stage analysis framework informed by Bingham (2023) and Clarke and Braun (2017). Bingham (2023) distinguishes between deductive and inductive approaches. The deductive approach relies on existing theories and prior studies to guide coding, whereas the inductive approach involves immersion in the data to allow themes to emerge naturally. Deductive codes included stakeholder engagement, curriculum alignment, competence domains, assessment practices, and systemic barriers. Inductive codes included issues such as bureaucratic delay, over-assessment of memory, and digital capability anxiety. This study combined both approaches, drawing deductive codes from the systems theory framework and seminal studies such as Coetzee, Ferreira, and Potgieter (2019) and Kiley (2020), while inductive codes emerged from data analysis. The analysis was iterative rather than strictly linear, with movement back and forth between transcripts, codes, themes, literature, and theoretical concepts.

The data analysis process consisted of open coding, constant comparison, and the identification of key categories and themes. The five phases, as guided by Bingham (2023), included:

1. Organising data: Data was categorised according to research questions, with attributes such as time, location, source, and type.
2. Sorting data: Data was aligned with the research purpose and topic codes were used to identify key categories for further analysis.
3. Understanding the data: Inductive codes were generated from the categories, and relationships between categories were explored.
4. Interpreting data: Themes were identified, and links with theoretical constructs were established.
5. Explaining data: Findings were interpreted within the context of the systems theory framework.

To strengthen trustworthiness, preliminary themes were compared across the literature review, academic interviews, and SABPP interviews to identify convergence and divergence. Themes were retained when they demonstrated recurrence, conceptual relevance, and explanatory power, rather than solely on frequency.

6.3 FINDINGS FROM THE THEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

The thematic review of fourteen (14) articles, selected via the PRISMA procedure, provided a foundation for understanding HRM competence requirements and curriculum design principles internationally and within the South African context (addressing Objective 1). The quality of the included studies was assessed based on their methodological rigour and relevance to graduate preparedness. The organising phase involved establishing attribute codes, including year of publication, study type, and focus. Table 6.1 summarises the articles reviewed. Although fourteen studies were included, the value of the review lies less in numerical volume than in conceptual coverage across employability, curriculum design, psychological resources, stakeholder participation, and digital capability.

Table 6.1: Attributes of articles for thematic literature review

Article	Article summary	Attribute codes	
		Nature of the study	Study focus
Ngope and Coetzee (2023)	A cross-sectional survey of the inner career orientations of students at a university. The curriculum should promote inner career orientations that value security and stability, entrepreneurship, creativity, problem-solving, and autonomy. Implement career guidance.	Quantitative survey	Curriculum content
Nghonyama, Maluleke and Seitshiro (2023)	The study examined the role of gender and race as determinants of career choice among learners in public vocational and training colleges. Curriculum content in relation to careers should be uniform across demographic variables. Curriculum implementation and evaluation should enhance career skills across all genders and racial groups.	Quantitative	Curriculum content
Sims, Titus, Lundie, and Govender (2023)	The study explored shifts in assessment paradigms in South African higher education. It was found that there are shifts from assessment of learning towards assessment for learning and assessment as part of learning. Increased reliance on technological and online systems. Continuous and lifelong learning. Employment as part of learning	Qualitative	Curriculum planning
Veldsman and Coetzee (2022)	The study aimed to identify the intersection of professional personality qualities and capabilities that affect the Human Resource Practitioner (HRP) and Industrial-Organisational Psychologist. Offered a technology-enabled hybrid and virtualised strategy suitable for modern work environments.	Thematic analysis	Capabilities for employability

Article	Article summary	Attribute codes	
		Nature of the study	Study focus
Venugopal and Kumar (2022).	The paper examined the relationships among psychosocial variables, employability skills, and career adaptability in relation to employment among graduates from management disciplines. Graduates need more adaptable skills, particularly in employability, to secure employment through placements. In the study, career adaptability dimensions included control, curiosity, concern, and confidence. The study argued that employability skills can be acquired through academic workshops and training interventions for management graduates.	Quantitative	Graduate skills for employability
Coetzee (2022)	A cross-sectional quantitative survey on career orientation learning. The curriculum should foster career orientation, work awareness, and career agility. Career counselling and purpose identification should be key components of career implementation. The purposive career exploration counselling and exploration should focus on the implications of the digital era. Digital era purposive career competencies	Quantitative	Curriculum content
Cook (2022)	The study reviewed conceptual models of employability for graduates. Intra-curricular (employability can be embedded within the formal curriculum), co-curricular (activities outside curricula that are provided by universities through career service centres), and extra-curricular (opportunities offered outside the university that allow for career development). The employability concept should be part of the intra-curriculum, co-curriculum, and extracurricular activities	Literature review	Curriculum for employability
Asefer and Abidin (2021).	The study explored soft skills and employability from employers' perspectives. The study found that soft skills are a strong predictor of employability among today's graduates. The study established that the world of work has become dynamic and global, thereby requiring such skills. Curricula should be designed to enhance the development of soft skills.	Literature review	Skills for graduate employability
Marsay, Atitsogbe, Ouedraog, Nsubuga, Pari, Kossi and Solberg (2021)	A ground theory-based thematic analysis of social-emotional learning skills required for learners to effectively transition to the workplace. Curriculum content should include social-emotional skills such as self-awareness, self-control, self-regulation, compassion, empathy, appreciation for cultural diversity, interpersonal skills,	Qualitative thematic analysis	Skills for employability

Article	Article summary	Attribute codes	
		Nature of the study	Study focus
	decision-making, and respect. Social-emotional skills should be central to teaching and learning, and academics and educators who possess these skills should educate learners.		
Rawatlal (2021)	A mixed study involving intervention and control schools based on the introduction of career education among Grade 10 learners. Planning for early (secondary level) implementation of whole-school implementation of career guidance education. Developing an ethical orientation, relationships, as well as organisational and school management structures that groom learners for employability through an appropriate school life. A curriculum that involves various stakeholders. Making employability and career development at the centre of the education system. Early development of psychological and non-psychological competencies for employability	Mixed study	Curriculum design for employability
Kiley (2020)	The study was developed to propose an Identity Capital Resources Theory of employability for graduates. Curriculum design should strengthen students' identity capital (tangible resources that include financial, human, social, and cultural capital), and elements such as race and socioeconomic background have been found to be associated with better outcomes.	Quantitative	Resources for graduate employability
Peeters et al (2019).	The study aimed to discuss the concept of 'employability capital' and how it can be attained. The study found the necessity for two notions in employability: (1) employability distinction, which involved job-related or career-related as well as development-based employability capital, and (2) a capital distinction, which separated human capital from social capital. Employability curriculum should involve job-related, career-related, and development-related capital, and clearly distinguish between human and social capital.	Conceptual study.	Employability capital
Scott (2018)	The study aimed to investigate the need to redesign the South African university education system to promote student success. The study was founded on the criticism that the education system was failing to address the country's national economic and developmental needs. The study highlighted the need to develop a	Conceptual analysis	Curriculum design

Article	Article summary	Attribute codes	
		Nature of the study	Study focus
	vision and strategy aligned with student success. The study also found a need to include relevant stakeholders. The responsibilities of the relevant stakeholders should be clearly defined.		
Tomlinson et al., (2017)	The study explored employability through certain employability capital resources. The study found that employability is enhanced by: (1) Human capital resources (technical knowledge, hard skills, and career-building), (2) social capital (networks, bonding, and social relationships), cultural capital (cultural knowledge and confidence), identity capital (self-concept and personal narratives), and psychological capital (resilience and adaptability).	Literature review	Employability resources

Note: The nature of the study categories was standardised by the researcher for comparative purposes.

Collectively, Table 6.1 shows that recent scholarship conceptualises employability as multidimensional, extending beyond technical skill to include psycho-social, identity, strategic, and contextual resources.

6.3.1 HRM competence requirements for the digital age

Analysis revealed three interdependent competency domains essential for contemporary HRM practice, moving beyond traditional administrative knowledge.

Theme 1: Technical-functional and digital competencies

The literature confirms an evolution from basic HR administration to digitally enabled practice. Competence now requires proficiency in data analytics for talent decisions, use of AI in recruitment and performance management, and fluency with HR information systems (Coetzee, 2022; Veldsman & Coetzee, 2022). This represents a fundamental shift toward technology as a core competency rather than a support tool. This suggests that digital competence should be mainstreamed across modules rather than confined to a single HR technology subject.

Theme 2: Strategic and cognitive competencies

Effective HR practice demands higher-order strategic thinking. Reviewed studies highlight the critical importance of business acumen, strategic alignment capability, critical analysis, and innovative problem-solving (Ngope & Coetzee, 2023; Tomlinson et al., 2017). HR graduates must demonstrate cognitive agility to translate business challenges into people solutions.

Strategic competence therefore requires curriculum exposure to business cases, organisational metrics, and cross-functional decision-making.

Theme 3: Relational and ethical practice competencies

Literature consistently identifies employability capital, relational and ethical capabilities as the most significant differentiators of workplace success. This includes:

- **Intrapersonal capacities:** Resilience, adaptability, self-regulation, and commitment to continuous learning (Marsay et al., 2021; Venugopal & Kumar, 2022).
- **Interpersonal and ethical capacities:** Advanced communication, ethical leadership, cultural intelligence, conflict navigation, and promoting inclusive workplaces (Asefer & Abidin, 2021; Rawatlal, 2021).

The findings indicate that relational and ethical capabilities may be harder to teach through lectures alone and require experiential pedagogies, reflection, and authentic assessment. Taken together, the three domains indicate a T-shaped graduate profile: disciplinary HR depth combined with broad transversal capability.

Table 6.2 maps the contributions of the reviewed literature against the study's research questions, illustrating the source of the identified themes. The table should be interpreted as a thematic contribution matrix rather than as a ranking of studies.

Table 6.2: Excerpts from the literature review with themes from the research questions

Authors	Capabilities for employability	Competency-based industry 4.0 curriculum design practices	Elements of a competency-based Industry 4.0 curriculum design framework to enhance the employability of HRM graduates in South Africa?
Ngope and Coetzee (2023).	Inner career orientations of security and stability, entrepreneurship, creativity, problem solving, as well as autonomy.	Implement career guidance, career training workshops, and counselling.	Skills to strengthen internal career orientations of university learners.
Nghonyama, Maluleke and Seitshiro (2023).	Person demographic characteristics and career match.	Demographic and career sensitivity. Curriculum implementation and evaluation should enhance career skills across all genders and racial groups.	All demographic cohorts should possess career skills.

Authors	Capabilities for employability	Competency-based industry 4.0 curriculum design practices	Elements of a competency-based Industry 4.0 curriculum design framework to enhance the employability of HRM graduates in South Africa?
Sims et al., (2023).	Perceive employment and career progression as a learning opportunity.	Shift from assessment of learning towards assessment for learning as well as assessment as part of learning.	Continuous and lifelong learning. Employment as part of learning.
Veldsman and Coetzee (2022).	Technology competencies matched with the work environment.	Offered a technology-enabled hybrid and virtualised strategy suitable for modern work environments.	Hybrid competencies.
Venugopal and Kumar (2022).	Adaptability skills (self-control, curiosity, concern, confidence), and employability skills.	Provision of academic workshops as well as training interventions on employability and careers to graduates.	Hybrid skills.
Coetzee (2022).	Career readiness.	The curriculum should foster career orientation, work awareness, and career agility. Career counselling and purpose identification should be key components of career implementation.	Digital era purposive career competencies.
Cook (2022).	Labour market entry skills. Technical and psychological work readiness.	Intra-curricular (employability can be embedded within the formal curriculum), co-curricular (activities outside curricula that are provided by universities through career service centres), and extra-curricular (opportunities offered outside the university that allow for career development).	Broad work skills.
Asefer and Abidin (2021).	Soft skills	Educational content should be dynamic and global	Soft skills.
Marsay, et al. (2021).	Social-emotional competencies.	Curriculum content should include social-emotional skills such as self-awareness, self-control, self-regulation, compassion, empathy, appreciation for cultural diversity, interpersonal skills, decision-making, and respect.	Social-emotional skills should be central to teaching and learning, so academics and educators who possess these skills should educate learners as well.
Rawatlal (2021).	Ethical orientation, career development knowledge, and skills.	Planning for early (secondary level) implementation of whole-school implementation of career guidance education. Developing an ethical	Making employability and career development at the

Authors	Capabilities for employability	Competency-based industry 4.0 curriculum design practices	Elements of a competency-based Industry 4.0 curriculum design framework to enhance the employability of HRM graduates in South Africa?
		orientation, relationships as well as organisational and school management structures that groom learners for employability through an appropriate school life. A curriculum that engages various stakeholders.	centre of the education system. Early development of psychological and non-psychological competencies for employability.
Kiley (2020).	The possession of identity capital resources by students.	Curriculum design should strengthen students' identity capital (tangible identity resources, including financial, human, social, and cultural capital). Elements such as race and financial background were found to be associated with better academic performance, career prospects, and overall life prospects.	Identity capital resources (human, social, financial, and cultural capital).
Peeters, et al. (2019).	Human capital, social capital.	Have a curriculum with job-related or career-related as well as development-based employability capital, and (b) a capital distinction which separates human capital from social capital.	Perform essential human and social imperatives at work.
Scott (2018)	Stakeholder interaction abilities. Engagement skills, networking.	Crafting a relevant vision and strategy for student success. The study also found a need to include relevant stakeholders. The responsibilities of the relevant stakeholders should be clearly defined.	Include relevant stakeholders.
Tomlinson et al. (2017)	Human capital resources (technical knowledge, hard skills, and career-building), social capital (networks, bonding, and social relationships), cultural capital (cultural knowledge and confidence, identity capital (self-concept and personal narratives), and psychological	Including psychosocial development.	Psychosocial skills, identity, capital, social capital, cultural capital, and functional competencies.

Authors	Capabilities for employability	Competency-based industry 4.0 curriculum design practices	Elements of a competency-based Industry 4.0 curriculum design framework to enhance the employability of HRM graduates in South Africa?
	capital (resilience and adaptability).		

The thematic literature review yielded rich themes for curriculum design that enhance the employability of HRM graduates. Figure 6.2 provides a diagram of the codes sorted according to the study's research questions.

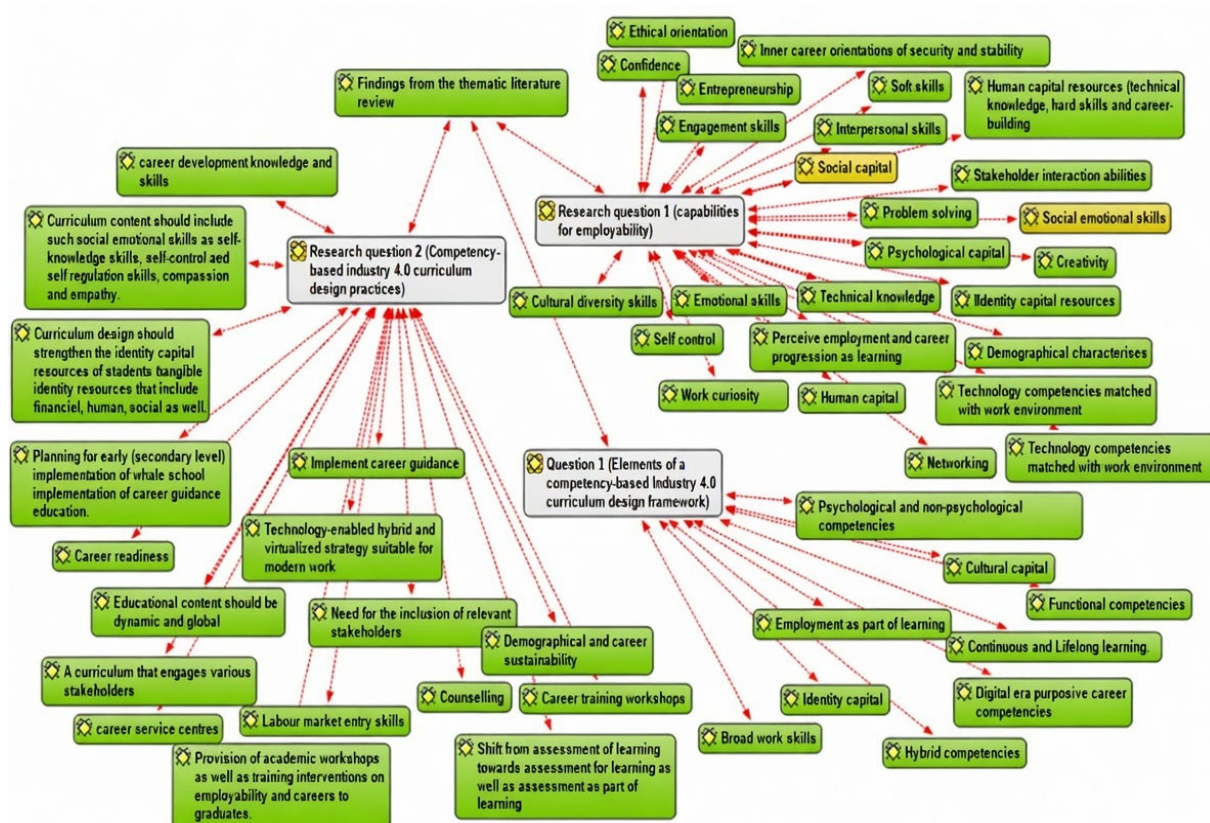


Figure 6.2: Thematic diagram for the literature review

6.3.2 Curriculum design and teaching approaches

The review identified pedagogical principles and structural factors that influence graduate preparedness.

Theme 4: The theory-practice-integration imperative

A dominant critique was of curricula that remain abstract and theoretical. Effective programmes systematically integrate practical application through simulations, case-based learning, and

technology labs with conceptual frameworks, thereby bridging the classroom-workplace divide (Cook, 2022; Sims et al., 2023). The theory-practice gap emerged consistently across both literature and interviews, increasing confidence that this is a systemic rather than isolated concern.

Theme 5: Stakeholder-collaborative curriculum development

The literature strongly advocates moving beyond academic insularity in curriculum design. Engaging industry experts, professional bodies, and alumni in curriculum co-creation and review are presented as essential to ensuring labour market relevance and responsiveness (Scott, 2018). However, stakeholder collaboration requires governance structures; without formal mechanisms, engagement tends to become sporadic and symbolic.

6.4 FINDINGS FROM STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

Data from interviews with 14 academics and 3 SABPP board members provided rich evidence addressing Objectives 2, 3, and 4. The findings validated, contextualised, and deepened the literature-derived themes, while identifying specific alignment gaps and systemic challenges within the South African context. For reporting purposes, respondents coded R1–R14 refer primarily to HRM academic participants, while SABPP respondents are separately identified, with quotations specifically reflecting professional body perspectives. While academics emphasised pedagogical feasibility and institutional constraints, professional body participants more strongly emphasised standards, readiness, and accountability.

6.4.1 Stakeholder perspectives on required competencies (Objective 2)

Interviews strongly validated the tripartite competence model while adding critical nuance.

- **Technical-functional and digital:** Participants emphasised an urgent need for applied digital competence, specifically HR data analytics ("data literacy, digital agility"- Academic R8), practical regulatory and compliance navigation, and hands-on proficiency with contemporary HR technologies. Theoretical knowledge alone was deemed insufficient.
- **Strategic and cognitive:** A recurring theme was the expectation for HR graduates to function as strategic business partners from day one. As one SABPP board member stated, "HR is no longer a support function... companies expect a return on investment." This necessitates deliberate curriculum focus on business acumen, strategic influence, and systems thinking.
- **Relational and ethical:** This domain was cited as the primary determinant of workplace integration and trust-building. Communication mastery was the most

frequently emphasised capability. Ethical integrity, resilience, and context-specific cultural intelligence were highlighted as non-negotiable for effective practice in South Africa's complex socio-economic environment.

These findings substantially validate the competence domains identified in the literature review while adding stronger emphasis on immediate workplace readiness. Table 6.3 lists the specific capabilities mentioned by interview respondents, providing a detailed view of the expected graduate competencies.

Table 6.3: Capabilities that HRM graduates should possess when they start working

CAPABILITY OUTLINED	RESPONDENTS WHO MENTIONED THE CAPABILITY	CAPABILITY CLUSTER
Communication	R1; R2; R3; R7; R9; R10; R12; R13; R14	Relational
Technological	R2; R3; R4; R5; R14	Digital-Analytical
Ethical	R10; R12; R13; R14	Ethical Professionalism
Problem-solving skills	R1; R2; R9; R12	Critical Inquiry
Critical thinking skills	R1; R9; R14	Critical Inquiry
Integrity	R7; R10; R11	Ethical Professionalism
Labour laws	R9; R10; R13	Ethical Professionalism
Analytical skills	R2; R9	Digital-Analytical
Writing skills	R4; R9	Relational
Project management	R3	Strategic Leadership
Team player	R3	Relational
Interview skills	R4	Relational
Presentation skills	R4	Relational
Numeracy skills	R4	Digital-Analytical
Time management	R6	Adaptive Career Capability
Diversity management	R6	Relational
Leadership	R7	Strategic Leadership
Business acumen	R8	Strategic Leadership
Talent management	R8	Strategic Leadership
Data literacy	R8	Digital-Analytical
Data analysis	R9	Digital-Analytical
Data collection	R9	Digital-Analytical
Flexibility	R10	Adaptive Career Capability

CAPABILITY OUTLINED	RESPONDENTS WHO MENTIONED THE CAPABILITY	CAPABILITY CLUSTER
Adaptability	R10	Adaptive Career Capability
Confidence	R11	Adaptive Career Capability
Relational	R12	Relational
Interpersonal	R13	Relational
Organising	R13	Strategic Leadership
Responsible	R14	Ethical Professionalism
Resilient	R14	Adaptive Career Capability
Lifelong learning	R14	Adaptive Career Capability
Working under pressure	R14	Adaptive Career Capability
Teamwork	R1	Relational
Emotional intelligence	R1	Relational

Note: Capability clusters were developed by the researcher to synthesise individual competencies into broader graduate capability domains relevant to employability and curriculum design. These domains reflect integrated rather than isolated competencies.

The clustering of capabilities presented in Table 6.3 reveals that respondents viewed employability for HRM graduates as a multidimensional construct rather than a narrow set of technical skills. The strongest concentration of responses falls within the Relational Capability cluster, including communication, teamwork, interpersonal effectiveness, emotional intelligence, presentation ability, and diversity management, indicating that HRM graduates are expected to function effectively in people-centred environments where collaboration, influence, and stakeholder engagement are essential. The prominence of the Digital-Analytical Capability cluster, comprising technological proficiency, data literacy, data analysis, numeracy, and analytical skills, further suggests that contemporary HR practice increasingly requires evidence-based decision-making and confidence in digital systems. In addition, responses associated with Adaptive Career Capability, such as flexibility, resilience, lifelong learning, confidence, and the ability to work under pressure, reflect the expectation that graduates must remain agile in volatile and rapidly changing workplaces. Although fewer in frequency, the Ethical Professionalism, Critical Inquiry, and Strategic Leadership Capability clusters remain highly significant, as they represent the judgement, integrity, business understanding, and leadership potential required for long-term professional success. Collectively, these findings indicate that HRM curricula should move beyond content transmission toward the deliberate development of integrated graduate capabilities aligned with contemporary workplace realities.

This indicates that graduates are not expected to arrive as narrow HR technicians, but as adaptive, socially skilled, ethically grounded, and digitally capable professionals. Rather than addressing each skill individually, the table suggests the need for integrated capability clusters.

Relational competence

This integrates the capacity to exchange information with others while building sustainable professional relationships through social awareness and emotional intelligence. The concept is commonly used in graduate attribute frameworks and aligns well with NQF Level 7 expectations, which emphasise applied competence, professional judgement, and effective interaction in complex workplace contexts.

Digital analytical competence

This integrates the effective use of digital tools and systems, data collection, interpretation and management, critical analysis, problem-solving, and evidence-based decision-making in professional HRM contexts. The concept aligns with future-ready capabilities and graduate attributes.

Ethical professionalism

Ethical professionalism within this cluster involves ethics, integrity, and responsibility, integrating knowing what is right, doing what is right, and being accountable for ethical decisions. Curriculum adaptation is therefore required to ensure ethics is taught as applied professional judgement rather than theory only, in alignment with graduate attribute frameworks, NQF Level 7 expectations, and the requirements of HRM professional bodies in South Africa. Thus, curriculum content should integrate ethical decision-making into reward decisions, recruitment practices, labour relations, and diversity management. This approach ensures that ethics is embedded as a cross-cutting curriculum principle, rather than a standalone topic.

Critical inquiry

This capability cluster reflects critical inquiry, integrating the ability to question assumptions, evaluate evidence, reason logically, and apply analyses to develop sound, defensible solutions. It also encompasses problem-solving, working under pressure, and organising. In terms of the curriculum, content should prioritise problem-based learning, reducing overemphasis on memorisation, and incorporating case analysis, open-ended problem-solving tasks, and simulated organisational challenges. These approaches ensure that assessments measure graduates' ability to apply HR knowledge and exercise critical inquiry in complex, uncertain, and high-pressure organisational contexts, in alignment with NQF Level 7 descriptors and higher education assessment frameworks.

Adaptability, resilience, and lifelong learning (*Future-oriented capabilities*)

This capability cluster integrates graduates' abilities to adapt to changing contexts, face complexity, uncertainty, and setbacks, and continuously update their knowledge and skills. It encompasses flexibility, adaptability, resilience, lifelong learning, and confidence, focusing on the developmental capacities expected of graduates in dynamic work environments.

Curriculum design should prepare graduates for continuous change rather than stable roles, incorporating reflective practice, self-directed learning tasks, and exposure to emerging HR trends. Topics such as career self-management, learning agility, and change management simulations further equip graduates to navigate labour market volatility, evolving HR roles, and complex organisational contexts.

Strategic leadership capability

This cluster integrates business acumen, leadership judgement, HR strategy, project management, and talent management, which are central to senior HRM graduate attributes. The curriculum should explicitly link HR decisions to business outcomes, organisational performance, and strategic objectives, ensuring graduates understand HRM as a value-creating business function rather than merely a support role.

Curriculum approaches to develop this cluster may include integrated capstone projects, cross-functional case studies, and strategic HR simulations, enabling graduates to apply HR knowledge and leadership judgement in complex organisational contexts.

The identification of key capabilities highlights two critical shortcomings in current HRM curricula:

1. **Overloaded content and underdeveloped capabilities:** Breadth of content often comes at the expense of systematic development and assessment of key capabilities.
2. **Need for a capability-based curriculum model:** Results support a shift toward T-shaped HRM graduate profiles, combining:
 - **Depth in HRM knowledge** (e.g., labour law, talent management, HR strategy)
 - **Breadth in transversal capabilities** (communication, ethics, analytics, adaptability, critical inquiry)

Implications for curriculum governance and assessment

Based on the results, curricula should:

- Use integrated assessment (one task assesses multiple capabilities)
- Track capability development longitudinally across the programme

- Align learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessments explicitly to:
 - Communication
 - Ethics
 - Data literacy
 - Problem-solving
 - Adaptability

Conscious efforts should thus be made to assess whether these capabilities are intentionally embedded and achieved.

In essence, Table 6.3 shows that HRM graduates are expected to be ethically grounded, communicatively competent, digitally and analytically literate, adaptable problem-solvers, and able to operate relationally and strategically in complex organisational environments. Therefore, the curricula must:

- Move beyond knowledge transmission
- Intentionally develop integrated, transferable capabilities
- Use authentic, applied, and reflective learning approaches
- Be governed through capability frameworks, scorecards, or accreditation rubrics

These implications indicate that curriculum quality should be judged partly by evidence of capability progression across programme years.

6.4.2 Curriculum alignment gaps and challenges (Objectives 3 and 4)

Interviews revealed significant misalignments and systemic constraints that hinder the development of work-ready graduates.

Theme 6: The persistent theory-practice disconnect

Both academic and professional stakeholders identified the chasm between classroom learning and workplace application as the most critical alignment gap. Curricula were criticised for being overly theoretical, with assessment methods (final examinations) failing to evaluate practical competency. As one SABPP official noted, “graduates need to be ready to work... what they receive should not just be 100% theory.” The concern was not the existence of theory itself, but the weak translation of theory into applied judgement and workplace competence.

Theme 7: Inadequate stakeholder integration in curriculum processes

While the importance of collaboration was universally acknowledged, participants reported that engagement is often ad hoc, tokenistic, or non-systematic. Industry input is frequently sought only during formal accreditation reviews rather than being embedded in ongoing curriculum development and review cycles. This finding suggests that accreditation cycles alone are insufficient mechanisms for curriculum responsiveness.

Table 6.4 lists the stakeholder groups that interviewees identified as essential to curriculum design.

Table 6.4: Frequency with which stakeholders were mentioned

Stakeholder	Respondents who mentioned the stakeholders.
Industry leaders and industry experts, or employers	R1; R2; R3; R4; R5; R6; R7; R8; R9; R12; R13; R14
Lecturers/Academics	R1; R2; R3; R4; R5; R6; R7; R8; R9; R11; R12; R13; R14
Professional bodies such as the South African Board for People Practices (SABPP) and the Institute of People Management (IPM)	R1; R2; R3; R4; R5; R6; R8; R10; R11; R12; R13
University alumni	R1; R2; R3; R5; R6; R7; R9; R10; R12
Government officials	R1; R2; R4; R8 (Department of labour); R10; R13
Politicians	R1; R3
Civil society/Community	R1; R2
Curriculum developer	R3
Students	R3; R12
South African Qualifications Authority	R3
Department of Higher Education and Training	R3; R13
University management	R3; R12 (Quality management council)
Advisory committee	R4; R6; R13

The hierarchy of stakeholders indicates that respondents prioritise relevance-producing actors (industry, academics, professional bodies) while still recognising the legitimacy of regulatory and societal actors. Table 6.4 further shows a clear hierarchy in respondents' perceptions of the importance of different stakeholders in curriculum design. Industry leaders, employers, and

industry experts were mentioned by almost all respondents, making them the most frequently cited stakeholder group. This reflects a strong consensus that curricula must be closely aligned with workplace realities, current skills demand and evolving professional practices. Lecturers and academics were mentioned with almost equal frequency, underscoring their central role in translating external demands into coherent academic curricula, pedagogical strategies, and assessment practices. Together, industry and academics form the core of an effective curriculum ecosystem, balancing relevance with academic rigour.

A second tier of stakeholders includes professional bodies (such as SABPP and IPM) and university alumni, both of which were mentioned by most respondents. Professional bodies are seen as critical in setting professional standards, ethical guidelines, and competency frameworks that ensure the credibility and professional recognition of qualifications. Alumni, by contrast, provide a valuable “bridge perspective”: they have recent experience of the curriculum and first-hand exposure to workplace expectations, enabling them to identify gaps between academic preparation and practical demands. Government departments and officials, including the Department of Labour and the Department of Higher Education and Training, were also mentioned, though less frequently, reflecting their regulatory and policy-setting role rather than direct involvement in day-to-day curriculum design.

Stakeholders such as students, civil society, politicians, SAQA, curriculum developers, university management, and advisory committees were mentioned less often, suggesting that respondents view their influence as more indirect or contextual. Nevertheless, their inclusion highlights the systemic nature of curriculum development. Students provide insight into learning experiences and accessibility; SAQA and DHET ensure alignment with national qualifications frameworks and quality assurance requirements; and civil society and government actors ensure that curricula remain responsive to broader socio-economic, transformation, and equity imperatives. Overall, the results indicate that effective curriculum development requires multi-stakeholder engagement, with industry, academics, and professional bodies playing a leading role, supported by regulatory, institutional, and societal stakeholders to ensure relevance, legitimacy, and sustainability.

Figure 6.3 provides a graphical representation of the frequency stakeholders mentioned by the study participants.

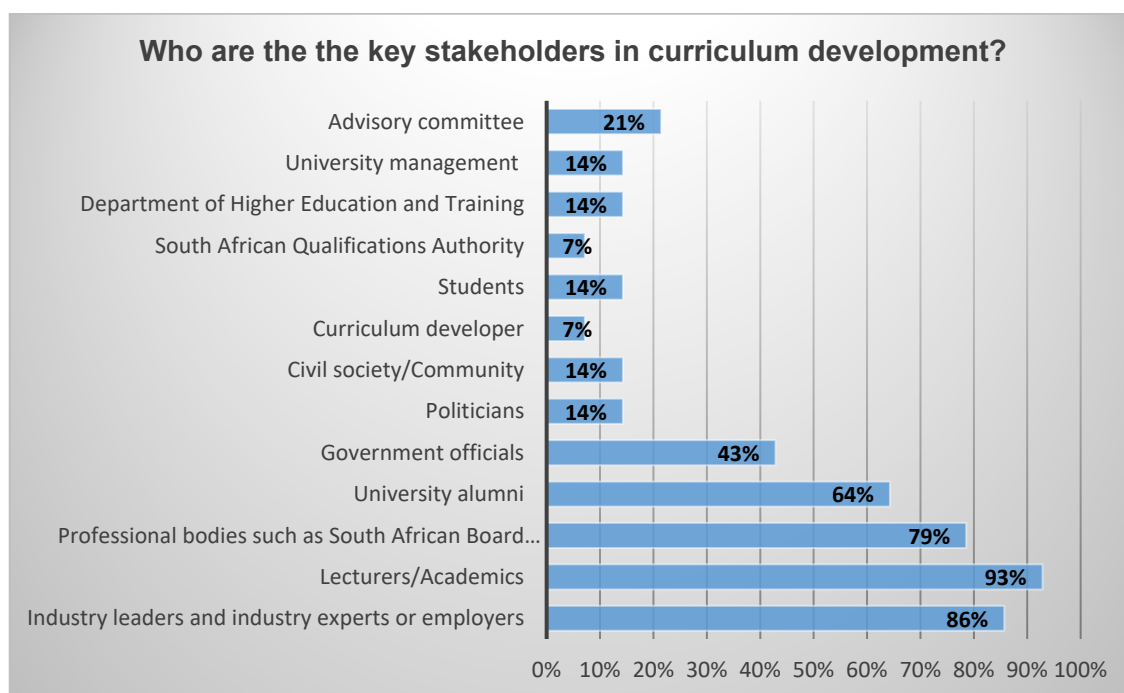


Figure 6.3: Stakeholders in curriculum design

Theme 8: Systemic inertia and capacity constraints

Multiple structural barriers were identified:

- **Assessment misalignment:** Heavy reliance on traditional examinations that test memory rather than competence application.
- **Academic workload and incentives:** High teaching loads and research pressures limit time for curriculum innovation and deep industry engagement.
- **Rapid technological change:** Curricula and academic expertise struggle to keep pace with the velocity of digital transformation in HR practice.
- **Regulatory and institutional bureaucracy:** Slow, rigid curriculum approval processes within universities hinder responsiveness.

Notably, several barriers were systemic rather than individual, indicating that staff motivation alone cannot resolve curriculum inertia.

Table 6.5 presents stakeholder views on who should be responsible for evaluating HRM curricula, highlighting the desired models of oversight and quality assurance.

Table 6.5: Who should evaluate the curricula of HRM qualifications?

Respondent	Responses
R1	Academic experts, curriculum developers, and professional bodies.
R3	Curriculum developers.

Respondent	Responses
R4	Unions.
R5	Internal and external advisory bodies.
R7	The designers of the curriculum.
R8	Industry partners and professional bodies.
R9	All stakeholders, including international.
R10	Higher education lecturers, together with the professional bodies, alumni
R2, R4, R6, R11, R12, R13	Advisory boards and advanced advisory councils that include industry experts, academic experts, Alumni, employers, and professional HR associations such as the South African Board for People Practices (SABPP).
R14	A board that may include members from professional practice, professional bodies, and other institutions.

Table 6.5 reflects a strong consensus among respondents that the evaluation of HRM curricula should not rest with a single actor, but should instead be undertaken by multi-stakeholder structures, most commonly in the form of advisory boards or councils. Most responses favoured multi-stakeholder advisory mechanisms rather than single-party evaluation. The most frequently cited evaluators include academic experts, curriculum developers, industry partners, and professional bodies, particularly the South African Board for People Practices (SABPP). This indicates a shared view that curriculum evaluation must balance academic integrity with professional relevance, ensuring that HRM qualifications remain both theoretically sound and aligned with evolving workplace expectations. The preference for advisory boards reflects a governance approach that balances competing interests through structured deliberation.

Industry partners, employers, and professional bodies are considered critical evaluators because they provide direct insight into current and emerging HRM practice, labour market demands, and professional standards. Their involvement helps ensure that curricula equip graduates with competencies that are immediately applicable in the workplace and consistent with professional accreditation requirements. Similarly, alumni were highlighted as important contributors, as they are uniquely positioned to assess curriculum effectiveness through their transition from university to professional practice, thereby identifying gaps between academic preparation and real-world HRM roles.

Academic experts, curriculum developers, and lecturers play an equally essential role in evaluation by safeguarding curriculum coherence, theoretical depth, pedagogical quality, and alignment with national qualifications frameworks. Their expertise ensures that curriculum

changes are educationally sound, appropriately scaffolded, and feasible within higher education structures. The inclusion of unions and broader stakeholder representation, as suggested by some respondents, further underscores the importance of ethical, regulatory, and employee-centred perspectives in HRM education. Overall, the findings suggest that curriculum evaluation in HRM should be conducted through inclusive, structured evaluation mechanisms that integrate academic, professional, and industry voices to ensure relevance, quality, and long-term sustainability of HRM qualifications.

Respondents were also asked about how HRM graduates should be assessed. The responses are summarised in Table 6.6. The responses indicate preferred combinations rather than mutually exclusive methods.

Table 6.6: How HRM graduates should be assessed

Respondent	Responses
R1	A combination of both examination and work-integrated learning and evaluation.
R2	Both the formal and the in-service evaluation.
R3	Formal, practical, and oral examinations.
R4	Examinations are a complete waste of time, as they assess human capacity in terms of memory retention and possibly writing skills. They need workplace-based projects, a portfolio of evidence, the design of individual portfolios of evidence, and yearly assessments for fewer subjects.
R5	Service training, group work.
R6	Formal examinations should be removed completely, and, in their place, you should have the in-service evaluation, you should have project evaluations and project assessments, such as an oral presentation, a report writing exercise, etc..
R7	All types of assessment are important, depending on what you want to assess, so it would be very difficult to single out one of them.
R8	Competent in both theory, which is the exams that they will do from university, as well as their ability to apply theory to practice.
R9	Academic evaluations, like practice, skill demonstration, and professional competence assessment, should be conducted to ensure they possess the necessary knowledge and skills.
R10	There is no one person who fits all, so there isn't a single answer to that; it would be a combination of those.

Respondent	Responses
R11	Skills assessments, continuous assessments (having tasks that they do in a real-life setup, going to an organisation), and a formal examination.
R12	There, you need a multifaceted approach. The formal examination will tell you whether the students have grasped the discipline's theoretical constructs, and the in-service evaluation will tell you whether they have applied them in practice.
R13	Role plays, case studies, project work presentations, and even in-service training, and a formal exam.
R14	A combination of both examination and work-integrated learning and evaluation.

Table 6.6 reveals a strong and consistent view among respondents that no single assessment method is sufficient to determine the employability of HRM graduates. Instead, there is overwhelming support for a multifaceted assessment approach that combines formal examinations with applied, workplace-based, and continuous assessment methods. Respondents consistently favoured assessment pluralism, where different methods are matched to different learning outcomes. While several respondents acknowledged the value of examinations for assessing theoretical understanding, many were critical of overreliance on exams, arguing that they privilege memory and written ability over applied competence. Respondents repeatedly emphasised work-integrated learning (WIL), in-service evaluation, projects, role plays, portfolios of evidence, presentations, and real-life organisational tasks as essential components of meaningful assessment.

A key theme emerging from the table is the distinction respondents make between knowing HRM concepts and being able to practise HRM effectively. Formal examinations were viewed as useful for confirming that graduates have grasped foundational theories, legislation, and principles. However, employability was seen to depend far more on assessments that require students to apply theory in authentic contexts. Methods such as role plays, oral presentations, report writing, and portfolio development were highlighted as particularly important because they assess communication skills, ethical judgement, problem-solving ability, and professional behaviour, capabilities repeatedly identified as critical for employability.

Importance of assessment methods for employability

The findings suggest that applied and authentic assessment methods are particularly important for ensuring the employability of HRM graduates. Work-integrated learning and in-service evaluations allow students to demonstrate competence in real organisational settings, providing evidence of readiness for professional practice. Portfolios of evidence enable graduates to showcase cumulative learning, reflective capability, and skill development over time, which is especially valuable in a profession that values ethical conduct, interpersonal competence, and adaptability. Group work and project-based assessments further support employability by developing collaboration, leadership, and problem-solving skills, while oral assessments and presentations strengthen professional communication and confidence.

Overall, the results indicate that assessment in HRM education should be purpose-driven, with different methods aligned to different learning outcomes. A blended assessment strategy ensures that graduates are not only theoretically knowledgeable but also capable of performing HRM roles effectively in complex, real-world environments. Such an approach supports the development of well-rounded, workplace-ready HRM graduates and aligns assessment practices with the broader employability expectations of employers, professional bodies, and the labour market.

6.4.3 Distinctive professional body perspectives

Professional body participants also highlighted reputational risk where graduates enter the labour market underprepared, potentially weakening confidence in HRM qualifications. Their responses therefore framed curriculum quality as both an educational and professional legitimacy issue. SABPP board members emphasised:

- **The standard-setting role:** Advocacy for explicit curriculum integration of national HR standards, governance frameworks, and ethical practice codes.
- **Quality assurance as partnership:** Positioning professional bodies as essential, active partners in continuous curriculum review and graduate competency assurance, not merely external accreditors.

6.5 SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter presented and interpreted the empirical findings generated through a thematic literature review and stakeholder interviews. The findings demonstrated broad consensus that contemporary HRM graduates require integrated technical-digital, strategic-cognitive, and relational-ethical capabilities. At the same time, participants identified persistent curriculum misalignments, including theory-practice disconnection, weak stakeholder institutionalisation,

outdated assessment approaches, bureaucratic inertia, and uneven responsiveness to technological change.

Importantly, these findings suggest that isolated curriculum adjustments are unlikely to be sufficient. Rather, coordinated governance, capability-based curriculum mapping, authentic assessment, and continuous stakeholder feedback are required. These empirically grounded design imperatives provide the direct evidential foundation for the Integrated Curriculum Development Framework developed in Chapter 7.

CHAPTER SEVEN

FRAMEWORK FOR CURRICULUM DESIGN FOR THE EMPLOYABILITY OF HRM GRADUATES IN SOUTH AFRICA

7.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the principal scholarly and practical contribution of the study: the development of an Integrated Curriculum Development Framework for HRM Programmes, together with its translation into structured evaluative instruments that support curriculum review, quality assurance, and continuous improvement. In direct alignment with the problem statement, research aim, and Research Objective 5 articulated in Chapter 1, the framework and its associated instruments are designed to address the systemic challenges in curriculum design, implementation, and governance that underpin the persistent misalignment between HRM graduate competence and professional expectations in South Africa. The chapter adopts a design-science orientation in which knowledge generation is expressed not only through explanation, but through the creation of practically useful artefacts grounded in evidence.

Chapter 1 established that the employability challenge facing HRM graduates is not primarily attributable to the absence of relevant curriculum content, but rather to fragmented curriculum processes, weak stakeholder integration, limited theory–practice alignment, misaligned assessment practices, and constraining institutional ecosystems. Chapter 6 empirically confirmed these issues through a thematic synthesis of the literature and stakeholder interviews, demonstrating that competence deficits arise from failures in curriculum design, implementation, and review, rather than from isolated knowledge gaps. This positions the framework as a response to the frequently observed gap between diagnosis-oriented higher education research and implementable curriculum solutions.

Building on these insights, this chapter moves beyond diagnosis to design-oriented synthesis. It integrates the theoretical foundations discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 with the empirical findings presented in Chapter 6 to construct a coherent, evidence-based framework that guides the design, delivery, evaluation, and renewal of HRM curricula, thereby strengthening graduate competence. The development of this framework is grounded in an interpretive, qualitative design logic that recognises curriculum development as a complex, iterative, and stakeholder-dependent system.

The Integrated Curriculum Development Framework is not proposed as a static or prescriptive model. Rather, it is conceptualised as a dynamic, systems-based structure that aligns

competence definition (the *what*), curriculum development processes (the *how*), institutional enablers and constraints (the *ecosystem*), and feedback and validation mechanisms (the *renewal loop*). In this way, the framework directly responds to the process failures identified in Chapter 6 and fulfils Research Objective 5 by translating empirical findings into a practical mechanism for curriculum enhancement. Systems-based curriculum frameworks are increasingly recommended where graduate outcomes depend on the interaction of multiple stakeholders, governance processes, teaching practices, and labour-market dynamics. The framework should therefore be interpreted as an adaptive governance architecture rather than a once-off curriculum template.

This chapter is structured in four sections. Section 7.2 synthesises the core theoretical principles from the literature that underpin the framework's design logic. Section 7.3 distills the key empirical directions derived from the findings in Chapter 6, which informed the framework's structure and components. Section 7.4 presents the Integrated Curriculum Development Framework in detail, explaining its elements, internal logic, and operational implications. Section 7.5 then extends the framework to applied governance instruments such as the HRM Curriculum Scorecard and the HRM Programme Accreditation Rubric demonstrating how it can be operationalised for curriculum evaluation, quality assurance, and continuous improvement within higher education institutions.

By explicitly linking empirical evidence, theoretical foundations, and design-oriented outputs, this chapter positions the framework as both a contribution to HRM curriculum scholarship and a practical tool for addressing the employability and competence challenges confronting HRM education in South Africa.

7.2 LITERATURE-BASED FRAMEWORK DIRECTIONS

The literature review established several foundational principles that directly inform the structure and intent of the proposed framework. These are synthesised here as core design imperatives, rather than as a list of discrete studies. The following design imperatives were abstracted from the reviewed literature through thematic synthesis and then cross-checked against empirical findings in Chapter 6.

1. The imperative for a competence-based, integrative design: The literature documents a clear shift from subject-based to competence-based curricula (Law, 2022). Competence-based education literature further emphasises demonstrable performance, progressive mastery, and alignment between outcomes, pedagogy, and assessment. This aligns with the

empirical finding that employers seek graduates who can apply integrated knowledge. Effective frameworks must therefore move beyond siloed knowledge transmission to foster the synthesis of technical-digital, strategic-cognitive, and relational-ethical competencies, a triad supported by both Bloom's revised taxonomy (Sobral, 2021) and contemporary HR capability models (SABPP, 2025).

2. The centrality of systematic, iterative development processes: Curriculum design is not a linear event but a formal, iterative cycle of planning, design, implementation, and evaluation (Tractenberg et al., 2020). This aligns closely with continuous improvement traditions in programme evaluation and quality management. This systems view also aligns with the study's theoretical lens, which dictates that the proposed framework must incorporate explicit feedback loops for continuous improvement, ensuring responsiveness to the changing PESTLE (political, economic, social, technological, legal, and environmental) external factors that affect graduate employability.

3. The necessity of stakeholder-co-created relevance: A recurring critique in the literature is the insularity of academic curriculum design. Scholars advocate for models that are inherently responsive to context and co-created with industry and professional stakeholders (Zhao & Watterston, 2021; Human, 2017). Stakeholder engagement is most effective when formalised through recurring governance structures rather than ad hoc consultation. This directly supports the empirical demand for structured, ongoing collaboration to ensure curricula meet the dual demands of professional standards (e.g., SABPP standards) and industry needs.

4. Aligning assessment with competence outcomes: The literature underscores that assessment drives learning. Constructive alignment theory similarly argues that students learn what assessment requires them to learn. Moving from assessing knowledge retention (a criticism of traditional exams) to assessing competence application in authentic scenarios is critical (Bloom, 1956; Heller, 2022). This principle addresses the identified gap where current assessment strategies fail to evaluate the very competencies stakeholders value most.

These synthesised directions provide the conceptual scaffolding for a framework that is simultaneously competence-based, iterative, stakeholder-co-created, and authentically assessed. Collectively, these imperatives justify a framework that combines capability logic, governance logic, and improvement logic.

7.3 EMPIRICAL DIRECTIONS FOR DEVELOPING THE FRAMEWORK

The framework is empirically grounded in the key themes derived from interviews with academics and SABPP board members. These findings move from identifying problems to defining the essential components of a solution. The empirical findings were not used merely illustratively; they functioned as design requirements informing framework architecture.

1. The tripartite competence deficit as the core problem: Data confirmed a critical misalignment: graduates often possess theoretical knowledge but lack the integrated technical-digital, such as HR analytics, strategic-cognitive-like business acumen, and relational-ethical, such as ethical leadership and cultural intelligence, which are the competencies required in the modern workplace. This deficit defines the core output the framework must produce. This explains why the framework foregrounds integrated competence clusters rather than isolated module outcomes.

2. The process gap: Weak links in curriculum development: Analysis identified the root cause of the deficit not merely in curriculum content, but in flawed processes:

- Fragmented stakeholder engagement: Input from industry and professional bodies is often ad hoc rather than structured and continuous.
- Pedagogical disconnect: Teaching and learning methods frequently fail to integrate theory with authentic practice and digital tool application.
- Assessment misalignment: Evaluations prioritise knowledge recall over competency demonstration.

These process weaknesses indicate that curriculum failure often occurs in translation between intention and enactment.

3. The enabling ecosystem - Contextual constraints: Stakeholders highlighted systemic barriers that any framework must help institutions navigate, including rigid curriculum approval bureaucracies, academic workload models that discourage innovation, and the rapid pace of technological change.

These empirical insights dictate that a viable framework cannot simply list desirable graduate attributes. It must explicitly model the collaborative processes needed to develop them and acknowledge the contextual factors that enable or constrain these processes. Accordingly, implementation feasibility became a central design criterion of the framework.

The resulting framework therefore reflects both normative aspiration and contextual realism.

7.4 THE INTEGRATED CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK FOR HRM PROGRAMMES

Integrating the theoretical imperatives and empirical foundations established in Chapters 2, 3, and 6, this section presents the Integrated Curriculum Development Framework for HRM Programmes. The framework represents the principal response to Research Objective 5, which sought not only to develop a guiding framework for strengthening HRM graduate competence and employability but also to enable its systematic enactment, evaluation, and continuous improvement within higher education institutions. This framework is depicted in Figure 7.1 which visually represents the interaction between competence inputs, development processes, ecosystem conditions, and renewal mechanisms.

Building directly on the theoretical synthesis and empirical findings of this study, the Integrated Curriculum Development Framework is proposed as a comprehensive design-and-governance mechanism for HRM curricula. Its purpose extends beyond articulating desirable graduate attributes. Instead, the framework explicitly models how competence expectations are translated into curriculum design, pedagogy, assessment, stakeholder engagement, and institutional governance processes. This responds directly to empirical evidence indicating that persistent misalignment between HRM curricula and professional expectations is primarily a process and governance problem, rather than a content deficiency alone.

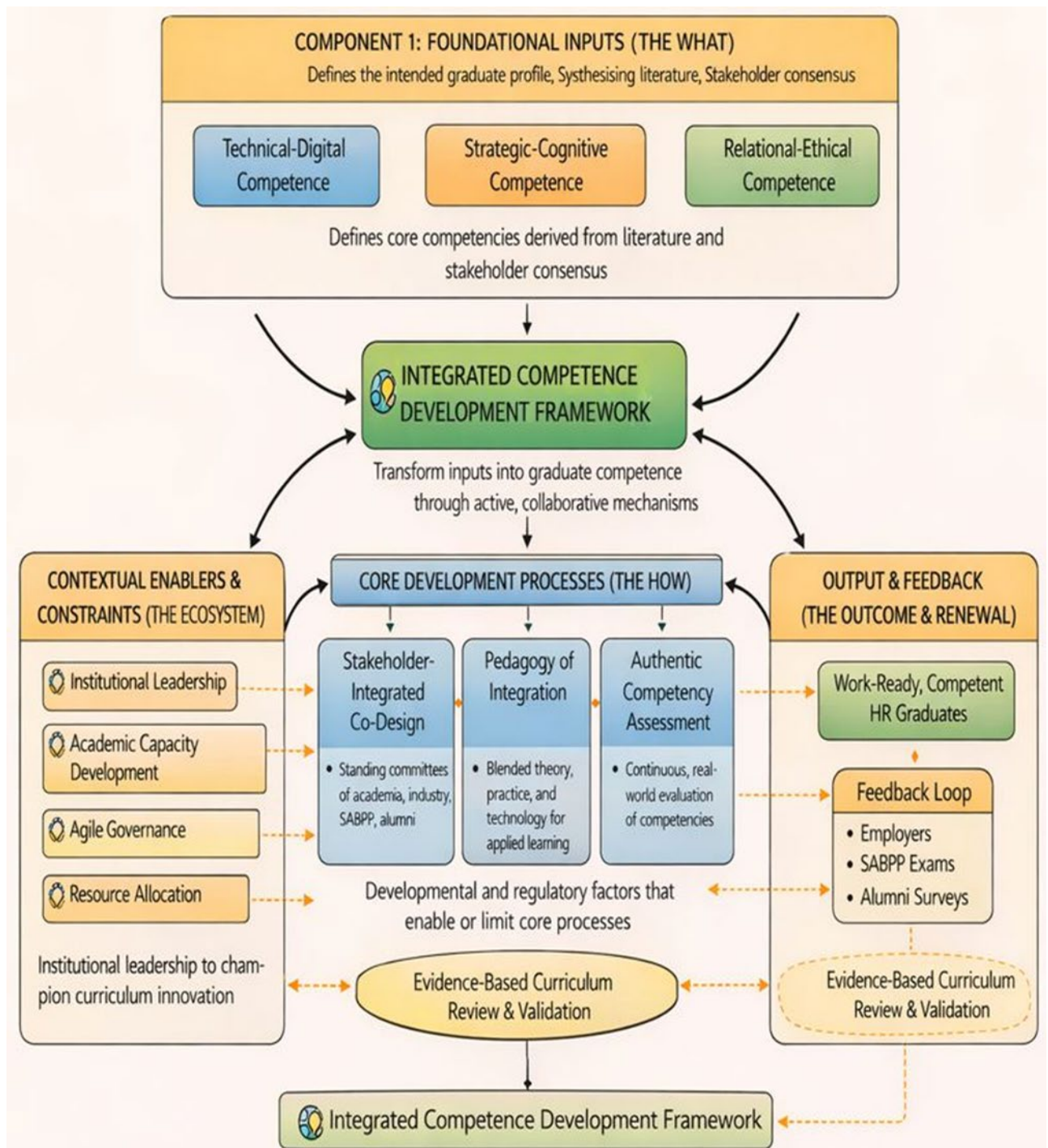


Figure 7.1: The Integrated Curriculum Development Framework for HRM Programmes in South Africa

Source: Developed by the researcher from literature synthesis and empirical findings

As illustrated in Figure 7.1, the framework conceptualises HRM curriculum development as a dynamic and cyclical system rather than a linear planning exercise. This systems-based orientation is intentional and grounded in the General Systems Theory, recognising that graduate competence emerges from the interaction between curriculum inputs, developmental

processes, contextual enablers, and continuous feedback. By foregrounding these interactions, the framework addresses the fragmentation, ad hoc decision-making, and compliance-driven curriculum review practices identified in Chapter 6. This cyclical logic avoids the common limitation of treating curriculum review as episodic compliance activity.

Foundational competence inputs: defining the “what”

At the top level of Figure 7.1, the framework identifies Foundational Inputs that establish the competence architecture underpinning HRM programmes. Drawing on both literature and stakeholder validation, the framework adopts a tripartite competence model comprising technical-digital, strategic-cognitive, and relational-ethical competencies. These competence domains define the intended HRM graduate profile and directly respond to empirical findings that graduates often possess theoretical knowledge but lack integrated, applied capability. The tripartite model also aligns with findings in Chapter 6 where respondents repeatedly clustered desired capabilities around relational, digital-analytical, strategic, and ethical domains.

Positioning these competencies as explicit curriculum inputs ensures coherence across learning outcomes, module content, pedagogical strategies, and assessment design. In doing so, the framework addresses the frequently observed inconsistency between stated graduate attributes and enacted curriculum practices. Importantly, the framework requires that competence definitions be evidence-based and stakeholder-informed, reinforcing alignment with professional standards and labour market expectations. Institutions may operationalise this component through graduate attribute statements, curriculum maps, and programme-level capability matrices.

Core development processes: operationalising the “how”

At the centre of Figure 7.1 are the Core Development Processes, which operationalise the transformation of competence inputs into demonstrable graduate capability. This component is critical to addressing Research Objective 5, as it directly addresses stakeholder concerns about weak theory–practice integration, fragmented stakeholder involvement, and misaligned assessment practices. These processes should be sequenced across annual review cycles with clear accountability for ownership and monitoring.

The framework identifies three interrelated processes: stakeholder-integrated curriculum co-design, pedagogy of integration, and authentic competency assessment. Each process is grounded in empirical findings and designed to function synergistically rather than independently. Stakeholder-integrated co-design ensures that curriculum decisions are informed by sustained collaboration with industry, professional bodies, and alumni, rather than

episodic consultation. The pedagogy of integration embeds applied learning, digital tools, and problem-based approaches that enable students to synthesise knowledge across domains. Authentic competency assessment ensures that assessment practices evaluate the application of competence in realistic professional contexts rather than the recall of theoretical content. Examples include simulations, HR analytics dashboards, consulting cases, role plays, reflective portfolios, and workplace-based projects.

By embedding these processes at the core of the framework, the study addresses the identified gap between curriculum intent and curriculum enactment, repositioning teaching and assessment as central mechanisms for competence development rather than peripheral considerations. Rubric-based judgement criteria should explicitly indicate how competence progression is evidenced from first to final year.

Contextual enablers and constraints: acknowledging the ecosystem

Figure 7.1 further demonstrates that the successful implementation of the framework depends on contextual enablers and constraints within the institutional ecosystem. These include leadership commitment, academic capacity development, governance agility, workload models, and resource availability. This component responds directly to empirical findings that curriculum innovation is often constrained by structural and organisational factors beyond the control of individual academics. This component recognises that excellent curriculum design can fail under weak institutional conditions.

By explicitly incorporating these ecosystem conditions, the framework strengthens its practical feasibility and avoids the limitation of treating curriculum reform as a purely pedagogical issue. Instead, it positions HRM curriculum development as an institutional capability that requires aligned leadership, policy support, and resourcing. This acknowledgement enhances the framework's applicability within real-world higher education contexts and reinforces its value as a governance-oriented model. Universities may therefore require change-management strategies, resourcing plans, staff development pathways, and expedited approval channels.

Outputs, feedback, and validation: embedding continuous renewal

On the right-hand side of Figure 7.1, the framework specifies its intended output: the development of work-ready, competent HRM graduates capable of making meaningful contributions to contemporary organisational contexts. Crucially, the framework does not conceptualise this output as an endpoint. Instead, it embeds a formalised feedback and validation loop through which evidence from employers, professional bodies (such as the SABPP), alumni, and graduate outcomes informs ongoing curriculum review and refinement.

Suggested indicators include graduate employment rates, time-to-employment, alumni progression, employer satisfaction, professional registration, and student self-efficacy measures.

This feedback mechanism directly addresses the problem identified in Chapter 1 regarding the absence of structured, evidence-based mechanisms for evaluating curriculum effectiveness. It provides the conceptual foundation for the HRM Curriculum Scorecard and Programme Accreditation Rubric, which are developed later in this chapter. These instruments translate the framework's components into observable criteria and performance levels, enabling institutions to monitor alignment, diagnose gaps, and support continuous improvement and accreditation defensibility. Closing the feedback loop transforms graduate outcome data into curriculum intelligence.

7.4.1 Significance of the integrated framework

Taken together, the Integrated Curriculum Development Framework represents the study's principal theoretical and applied contribution by linking competence design, enactment processes, institutional capability, and evidence-based renewal within one coherent system. The framework demonstrates that HRM graduate competence is optimised when clearly articulated competence inputs are developed through robust, collaborative processes, supported by enabling organisational conditions, and continuously validated through stakeholder feedback and outcome evidence.

By explicitly aligning curriculum design, delivery, evaluation, and renewal to competence development and employability outcomes, the framework advances HRM education beyond content alignment toward a capability-driven, evidence-based, and systemically governed model. In doing so, it makes both a theoretical contribution to HRM curriculum scholarship and a practical contribution to institutional governance and quality assurance, laying the foundation for the scorecard and accreditation rubric presented in subsequent sections. Unlike static competency lists, the framework explains how competence is produced, sustained, measured, and improved.

7.5 HRM CURRICULUM SCORECARD

To translate the Integrated Curriculum Development Framework into a practical mechanism for curriculum evaluation and improvement, this study introduces the HRM Curriculum Scorecard. The scorecard serves as a structured, evidence-based tool for systematically assessing the extent to which HRM curricula are designed, delivered, and reviewed to support

the development of work-ready graduate competence. Its primary value lies in operationalising abstract competence constructs into measurable criteria that can be applied consistently across programmes and institutions. By aligning curriculum inputs, developmental processes, institutional enablers, and feedback mechanisms, the scorecard enables curriculum designers, academic leaders, and external stakeholders to identify strengths, diagnose gaps, and prioritise targeted interventions. Importantly, the scorecard shifts curriculum evaluation from a compliance-oriented exercise to a developmental and reflective process, supporting continuous improvement, stakeholder accountability, and evidence-informed decision-making in HRM education. Balanced scorecard approaches in higher education are increasingly used to integrate academic, stakeholder, operational, and outcome indicators into a single strategic dashboard.

The value of the HRM curriculum scorecard involves the following:

- Operationalises the framework into measurable criteria
- Assesses the extent to which an HRM curriculum succeeds in developing graduate competence in line with the Integrated Curriculum Development Framework
- Translates abstract competence discourse into actionable curriculum decisions
- Directly supports Objective 5 (framework application and validation)
- Suitable for internal review, external accreditation, and continuous improvement

The scorecard is developmental rather than punitive and should ideally be used for self-evaluation before external review. The HRM curriculum scorecard provides a high-level, strategic snapshot of how effectively an HRM programme develops graduate competence. It is designed for senior academic leadership and governance structures to support evidence-based decision-making, resource allocation, and strategic alignment. Table 7.1 provides the scoring scale for the HRM curriculum scorecard, which uses a 5-point Likert-type scale.

Table 7.1: Scoring scale for the HRM curriculum scorecard

Score	Descriptor
0	Not evident
1	Minimally evident (informal / ad hoc)
2	Partially evident (inconsistent)
3	Mostly evident (structured, but room for improvement)
4	Fully evident (embedded, systematic, evidence-based)

Table 7.2 presents the practical HRM curriculum scorecard, which is derived directly from the Integrated Curriculum Development Framework (Figure 7.1). A five-point scale was selected because it allows meaningful differentiation while remaining practical for review panels. It is designed as a diagnostic and developmental tool, not merely an audit instrument, and can be

used by programme review panels, curriculum committees, HRM departments, and professional bodies (e.g., for advisory or accreditation input). The structure mirrors the framework components (inputs → processes → ecosystem → outputs and feedback), ensuring conceptual alignment between the Framework and the scorecard.

Table 7.2: The HRM curriculum scorecard

Foundational inputs – the “what”				
Criterion	Key Indicators	Score (0–4)	Evidence / Notes	Priority Action
A1. Explicit graduate competence profile	Graduate profile explicitly defines technical-digital, strategic-cognitive, and relational-ethical competencies			
A2. Literature-informed competence design	Competencies are grounded in current HRM, HRD, and employability literature			
A3. Stakeholder-informed competence inputs	Employers, alumni, and professional bodies contributed to defining competencies			
A4. Alignment across curriculum documents	Competence profile is consistently reflected in outcomes, modules, and assessments			
A subtotal: / 16				
Stakeholder-Integrated Curriculum Co-Design				
B1.1 Formal co-design structures	Standing committees / advisory boards with industry and professional bodies			
B1.2 Lifecycle engagement	Stakeholders involved in design, delivery, review, and validation			
B1.3 Documented decision-making	Evidence of stakeholder input influencing curriculum changes			
B1 subtotal: / 12				
Pedagogy of Integration				
B2.1 Theory–practice integration	Modules explicitly link theory to applied HR practice			
B2.2 Digital integration	HR technologies, analytics, and digital tools embedded in learning activities			
B2.3 Active learning approaches	Use of simulations, case-based learning, projects, WIL, and problem-based learning			
B2.4 Progressive competence development	Learning activities scaffold competence development across levels			
B2 subtotal: / 16				
Authentic Competency Assessment				

B3.1 Authentic assessment design	Use of portfolios, integrated projects, simulations, and workplace tasks			
B3.2 Continuous assessment	Formative assessment supports competence development over time			
B3.3 Assessment alignment	Assessment explicitly evaluates the application of competencies			
B3.4 Transparent criteria	Rubrics linked to defined competencies			
B3 subtotal: ____ / 16				
SECTION B TOTAL: ____ / 44				
Contextual enablers and constraints – the ecosystem				
C1. Institutional leadership support	Senior leadership actively supports curriculum innovation			
C2. Academic capacity development	Staff receive CPD in digital pedagogy, assessment, and HR practice			
C3. Governance agility	Curriculum approval and revision processes enable timely updates			
C4. Resource alignment	Adequate digital, financial, and staffing resources support delivery			
C5. Workload recognition	Curriculum innovation recognised in workload and performance models			
C subtotal: ____ / 20				
Outputs, feedback, and validation – the outcome and renewal				
D1. Graduate employability outcomes	Evidence of work-ready HR graduates (employment, roles, progression)			
D2. Employer feedback	Systematic collection and use of employer feedback			
D3. Alumni feedback	Alumni surveys inform curriculum refinement			
D4. Professional body alignment	Curriculum aligned with professional standards (e.g., SABPP)			
D5. Evidence-based review cycles	Regular curriculum review informed by performance data			
D subtotal: ____ / 20				
OVERALL SCORE SUMMARY				
Section	Maximum	Score		
Section A: Foundational Inputs	16			
Section B: Core Processes	44			
Section C: Ecosystem	20			
Section D: Outputs & Feedback	20			
TOTAL 100				

SCORE INTERPRETATION (Scores should be interpreted alongside qualitative evidence rather than mechanically.)		
Interpretation	Score	
Fragmented curriculum with limited competence coherence	0–39	
Emerging alignment; significant gaps in process integration	40–59	
Largely aligned competence-based curriculum; targeted improvements needed	60–79	
Fully integrated, evidence-based competence development system	80–100	

Weighting of sections may be adjusted institutionally, although the current weighting intentionally prioritises curriculum processes because these were identified as the primary source of competence misalignment.

7.6 HRM PROGRAMME ACCREDITATION RUBRIC

Given that the HRM curriculum scorecard may be used for both internal programme reviews and external accreditation, it was deemed necessary to develop an accreditation rubric. Developing an HRM programme accreditation rubric based on the HRM curriculum scorecard is both methodologically sound and practically justified. The scorecard provides a structured, evidence-based articulation of the core competence domains, curriculum design principles, and contextual imperatives that define quality and relevance in HRM education. Translating these criteria into an accreditation rubric enables a systematic, transparent evaluation of HRM programmes against clearly defined performance levels, rather than a binary, compliance-driven judgement. The rubric, therefore, operationalises the scorecard by converting its dimensions into measurable standards that can be applied consistently across institutions, supporting comparability, fairness, and defensibility in accreditation decisions. Moreover, the rubric strengthens alignment between curriculum design, graduate competence outcomes, and professional and regulatory expectations, ensuring that accreditation judgements are anchored in the same integrated competence logic that informed curriculum development. In this way, the accreditation rubric functions not only as a quality assurance instrument but also as a developmental tool that guides programme enhancement, continuous improvement, and alignment with evolving HRM practice and labour market demands. Rubrics are widely recognised for improving transparency, consistency, and criterion-referenced judgement in quality assurance contexts.

The accreditation rubric is designed to support programme accreditation and re-accreditation, as well as quality assurance, by providing transparent, standardised criteria aligned with the Integrated Curriculum Development Framework.

The rubric serves as an applied evaluative instrument designed to operationalise the Integrated Curriculum Development Framework for HRM Programmes and to support systematic curriculum review, quality assurance, and accreditation decision-making. The derivation and validation processes were explicitly aligned with Research Objectives 5 and 6, ensuring methodological coherence and rigor.

Derivation of the accreditation rubric

The derivation of the rubric followed a theory–data–application sequence, consistent with qualitative instrument development in applied educational and Human Resource Management research.

Phase 1: Theoretical grounding

The first phase involved a systematic synthesis of the theoretical and empirical literature reviewed in Chapters 2 and 3. Key constructs relating to competence development, employability, HRM curriculum design, and professional education were extracted and grouped thematically. Particular attention was given to frameworks emphasising:

- competence-based education and capability development,
- theory–practice integration,
- stakeholder engagement in curriculum design,
- authentic assessment of professional competence, and
- institutional enablers of curriculum innovation.

These constructs provided the conceptual domains that underpin the Integrated Curriculum Development Framework and, by extension, the rubric's structure.

Phase 2: Framework-to-criteria mapping

In the second phase, each component of the Integrated Curriculum Development Framework (Figure 7.1) was systematically translated into observable and assessable criteria. This ensured construct validity by maintaining direct alignment between the framework and the evaluative instrument.

Specifically:

- **Foundational inputs** were operationalised as criteria relating to the clarity, coherence, and evidence base of the HRM graduate competence profile.
- **Core development processes** were translated into criteria assessing stakeholder-integrated curriculum co-design, pedagogy of integration, and authentic competency assessment.

- **Contextual enablers and constraints** informed criteria relating to leadership support, academic capacity development, governance responsiveness, and resource alignment.
- **Outputs and feedback loops** were operationalised as criteria evaluating graduate employability evidence, stakeholder feedback mechanisms, and evidence-based curriculum review cycles.

This mapping process ensured that each rubric criterion could be traced to both the conceptual framework and the study's empirical findings. This traceability strengthens construct validity because every criterion can be linked back to theory and evidence.

Phase 3: Performance-level construction

The third phase involved constructing four performance levels (non-compliant to fully compliant/exemplary) for each criterion. These levels were designed to:

- reflect progressive stages of curriculum maturity,
- distinguish between superficial compliance and embedded practice, and
- enable diagnostic as well as summative evaluation.

Descriptors for each level were written in behavioural, evidence-based language, allowing evaluators to anchor their judgments in documented practices rather than on perceptions alone. This approach enhances reliability and consistency across reviewers.

Role of the rubric in addressing Research Objective 5

The accreditation rubric directly fulfils Research Objective 5 by translating the Integrated Curriculum Development Framework into a concrete evaluative tool that guides curriculum improvement. It further addresses this research objective by embedding validation and feedback mechanisms within the rubric itself, enabling systematic review, evidence-based judgement, and continuous curriculum renewal.

Methodological contribution

Methodologically, the rubric represents an applied extension of qualitative framework development, demonstrating how empirically grounded conceptual models can be translated into practical governance instruments within HRM education. The rubric may also function formatively by helping programmes identify maturity stages and prioritise development actions. The rubric bridges the gap between theory and institutional practice, offering a replicable approach for evaluating competence-based programmes in knowledge-intensive professional fields. Table 7.3 provides the performance levels and descriptors for the accreditation rubric.

Table 7.3: Performance levels and descriptors

Level	Descriptor
Level 1	Non-compliant
Level 2	Partially compliant
Level 3	Substantially compliant
Level 4	Fully compliant / Exemplary

Table 7.4: Accreditation rubric

Criterion	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
FOUNDATIONAL CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK (THE WHAT)				
Defined graduate competence profile	No explicit competence framework	Generic outcomes stated	Clear competence profile defined	Evidence-based, stakeholder-validated competence framework
Alignment across the curriculum	No alignment	Partial alignment	Consistent alignment across modules	Fully integrated and coherently scaffolded
CORE DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES (THE HOW)				
Stakeholder-Integrated Curriculum Co-Design				
Industry and professional engagement	Absent	Ad hoc consultation	Formal advisory structures	Continuous co-design and documented influence
Pedagogy of Integration				
Theory–practice integration	Content-driven	Some applied components	Applied learning embedded	Fully integrated, scaffolded applied pedagogy
Digital competence integration	Absent	Optional	Embedded in selected modules	Systematically embedded across the programme
Authentic Competency Assessment				
Assessment design	Traditional exams only	Mixed methods	Competency-focused assessment	Authentic, continuous, workplace-aligned assessment
CONTEXTUAL ENABLERS (THE ECOSYSTEM)				
Institutional leadership	No support	Passive support	Active endorsement	Strategic leadership and resourcing
Academic capacity development	None	Limited	Structured CPD	Ongoing, competency-focused development
Governance responsiveness	Rigid	Slow	Moderately responsive	Agile and innovation-enabling
OUTPUTS, VALIDATION AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT (OBJECTIVE 5)				

Criterion	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Graduate employability evidence	None	Anecdotal	Tracked outcomes	Strong, verified employability data
Feedback mechanisms	Absent	Informal	Formal but irregular	Systematic, evidence-driven feedback loop
Curriculum review cycle	Irregular	Compliance-driven	Scheduled reviews	Continuous, evidence-based renewal
ACCREDITATION DECISION GUIDANCE				
Predominantly Level 1–2			Accreditation not recommended	
Predominantly Level 3			Accreditation recommended with conditions	
Predominantly Level 4			Accreditation recommended (good/exemplary practice)	

Note: Accreditation decisions should consider overall profile rather than single isolated criteria.

Accreditation judgements should be made by panels using multiple evidence sources, including documentation, interviews, module artifacts, and performance data. The two-instrument approach enables strategic oversight and quality assurance. The HRM curriculum scorecard serves as a diagnostic tool, while the Accreditation rubric provides a detailed evaluation of compliance. Decision-making across all phases of curriculum development is simplified by the HRM curriculum scorecard, which provides a basis for resource prioritisation. On the other hand, the Accreditation rubric serves as a measurement tool for determining the accreditation status of curricula and enables standardisation across qualifications.

Together, the HRM curriculum scorecard and Accreditation Rubric extend the Integrated Curriculum Development Framework into actionable governance instruments, enabling institutions to move beyond conceptual alignment toward measurable, accountable, and continuously improving HRM education.

7.7 VALIDATION OF THE ACCREDITATION RUBRIC

The validation of the HRM Programme Accreditation Rubric was guided by established principles of qualitative trustworthiness, namely credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Rather than relying on statistical validation, which would be inappropriate given the instrument's interpretive and applied nature, the study adopted a systematic qualitative validation strategy consistent with framework development research in Human Resource Management and higher education. Validation in qualitative instrument development focuses on trustworthiness, usefulness, coherence, and evidential grounding rather than psychometric prediction alone.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the extent to which the instrument accurately represents the phenomenon under investigation, and in this case, the development of graduate competence in HRM programmes. Credibility was established through theoretical triangulation, empirical grounding, and alignment with the framework.

First, the rubric criteria were derived directly from the Integrated Curriculum Development Framework, developed through a synthesis of contemporary literature and empirical data from stakeholder interviews. Each criterion can be explicitly traced to a corresponding framework component, ensuring conceptual fidelity. Future studies may further strengthen credibility through Delphi review with national experts.

Second, the rubric's credibility was enhanced through stakeholder-informed validation. Perspectives from academic staff, HR practitioners, and professional stakeholders were compared with the proposed criteria to ensure the rubric reflected authentic expectations for HR graduate capability and curriculum quality. This alignment between stakeholder experience and rubric content ensured that the instrument resonates with lived organisational and professional realities.

Finally, the rubric's credibility is reinforced by its explicit alignment with Research Objectives 5 and 6, ensuring that it measures precisely what the study set out to develop and validate.

Dependability

Dependability concerns the stability and consistency of the instrument over time and across evaluators. To enhance dependability, the rubric was constructed using clearly defined criteria and performance-level descriptors that minimise ambiguity and subjective interpretation.

Each rubric dimension is anchored in observable curriculum practices (e.g., documented stakeholder engagement structures, assessment artefacts, curriculum review cycles), enabling evaluators to apply the rubric consistently across programmes. Internal coherence checks were conducted to ensure that criteria were logically organised, non-overlapping, and aligned across framework components.

Furthermore, the rubric was designed to support auditability, allowing institutions or accreditation panels to trace evaluative judgements back to concrete sources of evidence. While formal inter-rater reliability testing fell outside the scope of this qualitative study, the rubric's structured nature strengthens procedural consistency and supports dependable

application in accreditation contexts. Standardised reviewer training and moderation protocols would further enhance dependable use.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the extent to which findings and instruments are shaped by the data rather than by researcher bias. In this study, confirmability was enhanced through transparent derivation procedures and reflexive alignment with empirical evidence.

The development of the rubric followed a documented sequence from the literature review through framework development to instrument construction. Decisions regarding criterion inclusion, wording, and performance levels were grounded in documented theoretical constructs and empirical themes rather than personal preference. Maintaining an audit trail of derivation decisions is recommended when the rubric is implemented institutionally.

Additionally, the rubric's alignment with the Integrated Curriculum Development Framework ensures that it functions as a derivative artefact, reflecting collective stakeholder perspectives and established theory rather than the researcher's subjective interpretation. The explicit articulation of assumptions, criteria, and intended use further strengthens confirmability by making the evaluative logic visible and open to scrutiny.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which the rubric can be applied in contexts beyond the immediate study setting. While the rubric was developed within the South African higher education context, its design intentionally supports analytical rather than statistical transferability. Because the criteria focus on process quality rather than discipline-specific content, adaptation to adjacent business programmes may also be possible.

Overall, the validation evidence suggests that the rubric is conceptually coherent, practically usable, and sufficiently robust for pilot implementation, while also remaining open to future refinement through wider application.

Content and construct validation

Content validity was established through alignment with:

- the Integrated Curriculum Development Framework,
- the literature on HRM competence development and professional education, and
- the empirical themes generated from stakeholder interviews.

Construct validity was reinforced by ensuring that each rubric criterion reflected a clearly defined construct within the framework and that no criterion operated independently of the curriculum development logic.

Stakeholder-informed validation

The rubric was further refined through iterative comparison with stakeholder perspectives captured during the qualitative data collection phase. Insights from academic staff, industry practitioners, and professional stakeholders informed the phrasing and emphasis of criteria, particularly those relating to employability, assessment authenticity, and stakeholder engagement. This process enhanced the rubric's ecological validity and practical relevance.

Analytical and procedural validation

Reliability and usability were strengthened through:

- internal coherence checks to avoid overlap or redundancy between criteria,
- alignment of language across performance levels, and
- ensuring that evidence requirements were realistic and accessible within institutional contexts.

Although formal inter-rater reliability testing was beyond the scope of this qualitative study, the rubric was designed to facilitate transparent, auditable decision-making and thereby support consistency across accreditation panels.

The rubric is grounded in broadly applicable HRM principles—competence development, stakeholder engagement, authentic assessment, and institutional enablement—that are relevant across diverse higher education and professional education contexts. Rich descriptions of each criterion and performance level enable institutions to determine the degree of contextual fit and adapt the rubric to their specific regulatory, disciplinary, or organisational environments.

By framing criteria in terms of process quality and evidence, rather than prescriptive content, the rubric facilitates informed adaptation while preserving conceptual integrity. This enhances its utility for both national and international HRM programme review and accreditation purposes.

Taken together, the validation of the accreditation rubric demonstrates strong alignment with the principles of qualitative trustworthiness. Credibility is ensured through empirical and theoretical grounding; dependability through structured, transparent criteria; confirmability

through traceable derivation and reflexive design; and transferability through rich description and analytical generalisation. This rigorous validation approach positions the rubric as a trustworthy, defensible, and practically valuable instrument for evaluating and improving HRM curricula.

7.8 SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter fulfilled the study's central design-oriented objective by developing an integrated, evidence-based response to the persistent misalignment between HRM graduate competence and professional expectations. Drawing on the theoretical foundations established in Chapters 2 and 3 and the empirical findings presented in Chapter 6, the chapter proposed the Integrated Curriculum Development Framework for HRM Programmes as a coherent system for guiding curriculum design, delivery, evaluation, and renewal within higher education institutions.

The framework was presented not merely as a conceptual model, but as a dynamic, systems-based mechanism that defines the required graduate competence profile, specifies the collaborative curriculum development and pedagogical processes necessary to develop those competencies, acknowledges the institutional enablers and constraints that shape curriculum enactment, and embeds feedback loops to support continuous validation and improvement. In doing so, the framework directly addresses Research Objective 5 by translating empirical insights into an actionable structure that can strengthen curriculum responsiveness and graduate employability.

To ensure that the framework could be operationalised and evaluated in practice, the chapter further translated its core components into two complementary governance instruments: the HRM Curriculum Scorecard and the HRM Programme Accreditation Rubric. The scorecard provides a structured, diagnostic tool for systematically assessing curriculum coherence, stakeholder integration, pedagogical alignment, and competence development within HRM programmes. The accreditation rubric extends this evaluative logic into external quality assurance contexts by articulating transparent performance criteria and levels that support defensible, criterion-referenced accreditation and re-accreditation decisions.

This chapter transformed the study's theoretical insights and empirical findings into an integrated suite of curriculum governance artefacts: the ICDF, the HRM Curriculum Scorecard, and the HRM Programme Accreditation Rubric. Together, these outputs demonstrate how HRM education can move from fragmented and compliance-driven curriculum reform toward a coherent, capability-based, evidence-informed model of professional preparation. The final

chapter consolidates the study's contributions, implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research and implementation.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

8.1 INTRODUCTION

This final chapter synthesises the study's findings and consolidates its theoretical, methodological, and practical contributions. The evidence presented across the preceding chapters demonstrates how the study addresses the central research problem: the persistent misalignment between HRM graduate competence and the evolving expectations of professional practice in the South African higher education context. Final chapters in doctoral research should do more than summarise prior chapters; they should demonstrate how the thesis advances knowledge, solves a meaningful problem, and creates pathways for future inquiry.

Consistent with the study's design-oriented nature, this chapter not only restates the findings but also critically integrates them to demonstrate how the research objectives were systematically achieved and culminated in the development of an Integrated Curriculum Development Framework, an HRM Curriculum Scorecard, and an HRM Programme Accreditation Rubric. These outputs collectively address the identified need for both conceptual guidance and operational mechanisms to enhance curriculum responsiveness, graduate competence development, and quality assurance in HRM education. In this study, contribution is expressed through conceptual integration, empirical insight, and the creation of implementable curriculum governance artefacts.

The chapter proceeds by synthesising the key findings for each research objective, highlighting how empirical evidence and theoretical insights informed the framework and its associated evaluative instruments. It then discusses the theoretical and practical implications of the study, presents actionable recommendations for key stakeholders, acknowledges the study's limitations, and outlines directions for future research. The chapter concludes by reflecting on the broader significance of the study for HRM education, curriculum governance, and employability enhancement within South Africa and comparable contexts. The chapter therefore interprets the study's significance at theoretical, institutional, professional, and policy levels.

8.2 SYNTHESIS OF KEY FINDINGS

This section synthesises the study's key findings in relation to the research aim and objectives, demonstrating how each objective was addressed through a combination of a thematic literature review and stakeholder-informed empirical inquiry. Rather than presenting findings in isolation, the synthesis highlights how the objectives collectively informed the development of an integrated, evidence-based response to the identified challenges in curriculum and employability. The synthesis indicates that no single isolated intervention can adequately address graduate competence gaps; rather, curriculum quality emerges from the interaction of multiple design and governance variables.

8.2.1 Achievement of the research objectives

Objective 1: To examine existing national and international literature on HRM competence requirements and curriculum design

The thematic literature review confirmed a global and national shift towards competence-based education within professional disciplines, including HRM. The literature consistently identified three interdependent competence domains, which are technical-digital, strategic-cognitive, and relational-ethical as central to contemporary HRM practice. In addition, the review established that effective HRM curricula are characterised by theory–practice integration, stakeholder involvement, authentic assessment, and iterative review processes. These insights provided the conceptual and empirical foundation for defining the graduate competence profile and curriculum design principles underpinning the Integrated Curriculum Development Framework. Importantly, the literature review also revealed that many existing employability studies focus on outcomes while paying less attention to the processes of curriculum production.

Objective 2: To explore stakeholder perspectives on the competencies required for effective HRM practice

Stakeholder interviews with HRM academics and representatives from the South African Board for People Practices (SABPP) validated the competence domains identified in the literature, while adding important contextual nuance. Stakeholders emphasised that graduates often possess foundational theoretical knowledge but lack the applied capabilities, digital fluency, strategic business understanding, and ethical judgment required for effective workplace performance. These findings reinforced the need for a curriculum model that prioritises

competence integration and practical application rather than knowledge accumulation alone. The convergence between literature and stakeholder evidence strengthens confidence in the validity of the identified competence domains.

Objectives 3 and 4: To assess curriculum alignment and identify gaps and challenges

The analysis revealed that misalignment between HRM curricula and professional expectations is sustained by systemic and procedural weaknesses rather than isolated content deficiencies. Key gaps included fragmented stakeholder engagement, limited theory–practice integration, assessment practices that prioritise knowledge recall over competence demonstration, and institutional constraints such as rigid governance processes and academic workload pressures. These findings underscore the need for a framework that addresses curriculum design, enactment, and review as interconnected processes within a broader institutional ecosystem. These findings indicate that misalignment is systemic rather than attributable to isolated lecturer or module shortcomings.

Objective 5: To develop a framework and operational instruments to guide curriculum improvement

In response to the identified gaps, the study developed the Integrated Curriculum Development Framework for HRM Programmes, which conceptualises curriculum development as a dynamic system linking competence inputs, developmental processes, contextual enablers, and continuous feedback mechanisms. To address the absence of structured evaluative mechanisms highlighted in the problem statement, the framework was operationalised through the development of an HRM Curriculum Scorecard and an HRM Programme Accreditation Rubric. These instruments translate the framework’s principles into measurable criteria and performance levels, enabling systematic curriculum evaluation, quality assurance, and continuous improvement. The integrated nature of these outputs is significant because universities often possess fragmented tools rather than coherent curriculum governance systems.

Taken together, the achievement of the research objectives demonstrates that strengthening HRM graduate competence requires an integrated approach that combines conceptual clarity, process integrity, and governance mechanisms. The synthesis of findings confirms that the framework, scorecard, and accreditation rubric function collectively as a coherent response to the research problem, rather than as standalone outputs.

Collectively, the objectives were achieved through a cumulative logic in which literature generated conceptual insight, empirical data identified real-world constraints, and design outputs translated knowledge into practical solutions.

8.3 CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

8.3.1 Theoretical contribution

This study makes an original theoretical contribution by integrating General Systems Theory, competence-based education, employability capability perspectives, and stakeholder theory into a coherent explanation of how HRM curricula generate graduate outcomes. Existing literature often treats competencies as static lists or focuses narrowly on graduate outcomes. By contrast, the present study theorises competence development as an emergent product of interacting curriculum inputs, pedagogical processes, institutional enablers, and feedback mechanisms. In doing so, it foregrounds process integrity and ecosystem conditions as under-theorised determinants of employability success.

8.3.2 Practical implications

The practical value of the study lies in converting abstract curriculum principles into actionable governance tools that can be used by decision-makers. The findings and the proposed framework, HRM curriculum scorecard and the Accreditation rubric have direct implications for different stakeholders:

- **For universities/curriculum designers:** The framework and the HRM curriculum scorecard are blueprints for moving from isolated curriculum updates to systemic, partnership-based programme reform. It argues for investing in structured stakeholder collaboration and reforming assessment policies. This is particularly relevant where institutions face pressure to improve graduate outcomes with constrained resources.
- **For professional bodies like the SABPP:** The study reinforces their role beyond accreditation towards being active partners in co-design and providing continuous, data-driven feedback on graduate preparedness. It also positions professional bodies as knowledge brokers between academia and industry.
- **For industry:** It provides a clear mandate and structure for deeper, more systematic engagement with universities to shape a future-ready HR talent pipeline. Structured engagement may reduce onboarding costs and improve graduate readiness.
- **For policymakers:** It highlights the need to support flexible, responsive curriculum governance and incentivise work-integrated learning partnerships within the higher education sector. Policy incentives for cooperative education and responsive curriculum governance may accelerate national skills alignment.

- **For students and graduates:** More coherent curricula, authentic assessment, and work-integrated learning may strengthen confidence, identity capital, and labour-market transition readiness.

8.4 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the empirical findings, theoretical synthesis, and the Integrated Curriculum Development Framework, the following recommendations are advanced to support the systematic strengthening of HRM graduate competence and curriculum responsiveness in South African higher education. Each recommendation is directly linked to the identified curriculum misalignments, process gaps, and governance constraints discussed in Chapters 6 and 7 and collectively gives effect to Research Objective 5.

Recommendations are prioritised according to feasibility, systemic leverage, and alignment with the empirical findings.

- **Institutionalise structured stakeholder co-design mechanisms**

Universities are strongly encouraged to establish formal, standing HRM Curriculum Advisory Committees with clearly defined mandates, membership, and review cycles. These committees should include representatives from industry, the South African Board for People Practices (SABPP), alumni, academic staff, and, where appropriate, current students. Unlike ad hoc consultation, these structures should be embedded within institutional governance processes and operate across the full curriculum lifecycle, including design, delivery, review, and validation.

This recommendation directly responds to the study's finding that fragmented and episodic stakeholder engagement is a primary contributor to curriculum–practice misalignment. A minimum meeting cycle of twice a year with documented action tracking is recommended. The Integrated Curriculum Development Framework and the HRM Curriculum Scorecard can be used to structure stakeholder deliberations, document input, and ensure that contributions translate into demonstrable curriculum change rather than symbolic consultation.

- **Reform assessment policy to prioritise authentic competency demonstration**

Academic departments should revise the assessment strategies for the HRM programme to substantially increase the weighting of authentic, competency-based assessments. These should include integrated projects, workplace simulations, portfolios of evidence, problem-based case analyses, and work-integrated learning (WIL) evaluations. As a guideline,

programmes should progressively increase the proportion of authentic assessment to a substantial level, while retaining examinations where appropriate for selected learning outcomes.

This recommendation addresses the empirically identified misalignment between assessment practices and the competencies valued by employers and professional bodies. The HRM Programme Accreditation Rubric provides a defensible structure for evaluating the extent to which assessment strategies genuinely assess competence application rather than theoretical recall, thereby supporting quality assurance and accreditation processes.

- **Invest in academic capacity development and enable agile curriculum governance**

University leadership should prioritise targeted investment in academic capacity development to support competence-based, digitally integrated pedagogy and assessment. This includes structured professional development in areas such as HR analytics, digital HR technologies, authentic assessment design, and industry-engaged teaching practices. Importantly, such curriculum innovation efforts should be explicitly recognised within academic workload models and performance management systems. Annual staff capability audits may help identify priority development needs.

In parallel, institutions should streamline curriculum approval and review processes to enable timely responsiveness to labour market and professional changes. This recommendation addresses the structural and bureaucratic constraints identified in the findings and reinforces the framework's emphasis on governance agility as a critical enabler of curriculum responsiveness.

- **Formalise and expand work-integrated learning (WIL) as a core curriculum component**

It is recommended that universities embed structured, credit-bearing WIL components as non-negotiable elements of HRM programmes. These placements should be formally integrated into curriculum design, supported through sustained industry partnerships, and assessed using clear competency-based criteria. Where feasible, policy incentives and institutional support mechanisms should be explored to expand access to high-quality WIL opportunities. Where placement capacity is limited, virtual consulting projects, simulations, and community-based alternatives may supplement traditional placements.

This recommendation directly addresses the persistent theory–practice disconnect identified across both literature and stakeholder interviews. Within the Integrated Curriculum Development Framework, WIL functions as a critical site for authentic learning, assessment, and feedback, enabling the continuous validation of curriculum relevance and graduate readiness.

- **Institutionalise the use of the HRM Curriculum Scorecard for continuous improvement**

Universities are recommended to adopt the HRM Curriculum Scorecard as a formal internal review and monitoring instrument for HRM programmes. The scorecard should be used periodically to evaluate curriculum coherence, stakeholder integration, assessment alignment, and evidence of graduate outcomes. Its use should be embedded within institutional quality assurance cycles rather than limited to episodic programme reviews. Initial implementation may begin as a pilot self-review before integration into formal quality cycles.

This recommendation addresses the identified absence of structured, diagnostic mechanisms for curriculum evaluation. By providing measurable criteria aligned with the Integrated Curriculum Development Framework, the scorecard supports evidence-based decision-making, targeted interventions, and transparent accountability.

- **Integrate the accreditation rubric into external quality assurance processes**

Professional bodies and quality assurance agencies are encouraged to adopt or adapt the HRM Programme Accreditation Rubric for programme accreditation, re-accreditation, and quality audit processes. The rubric enables a shift from binary, compliance-driven judgements toward developmental, criterion-referenced evaluation aligned with competence development and employability outcomes. External implementation should ideally include reviewer calibration sessions to improve consistency.

This recommendation strengthens the study's contribution to governance and policy by demonstrating how empirically grounded academic research can inform more robust, defensible, and equitable accreditation practices within the South African higher education system.

Taken together, these recommendations operationalise the Integrated Curriculum Development Framework by linking curriculum design, pedagogy, assessment, stakeholder engagement, and governance within a coherent improvement system. Their implementation would enable higher education institutions to move beyond fragmented reform initiatives

toward sustained, evidence-based enhancement of HRM graduate competence, thereby improving employability outcomes and strengthening the societal relevance of HRM education.

- **Develop graduate outcomes intelligence systems**

Universities should systematically collect data on graduate destinations, time-to-employment, employer satisfaction, and alumni progression to support evidence-based curriculum renewal.

8.5 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND FUTURE RESEARCH

8.5.1 Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the empirical phase focused on one disciplinary field (HRM) within the South African context, which may limit direct transferability to other disciplines or countries. Second, the qualitative sample was intentionally small and expertise-based, supporting depth rather than statistical generalisation. Third, stakeholder categories did not include large numbers of employers or graduates directly, which may have enriched perspective diversity. Fourth, although the proposed framework and instruments are evidence-informed, they were developed within a thesis context and require field testing under live institutional conditions. Finally, rapidly changing technological and labour-market conditions may require periodic refinement of the framework over time.

8.5.2 Future research directions

Future inquiries should shift from conceptual development to implementation testing, comparative validation, and impact measurement. To build on this study, future research should:

1. **Action-research implementation:** Pilot the Integrated Curriculum Development Framework in one or more universities, using an action-research methodology to document the implementation challenges, refinements, and impact on graduate employment outcomes. Such studies could evaluate change readiness, staff uptake, and student outcomes.
2. **Comparative sector studies:** Investigate whether the identified competency triad and process gaps are consistent across other professional disciplines such as Accounting, Engineering, Marketing, Public Administration, and Information Systems to develop cross-faculty curriculum reform principles.
3. **Longitudinal graduate tracking:** Conduct longitudinal studies tracking HRM graduates from the university through their early career, using mixed methods to understand how specific curriculum experiences translate into workplace competence and career

progression. This would help distinguish short-term employability from sustainable employability.

4. **Employer return on investment (ROI) analysis:** Research the return on investment for businesses that engage deeply in curriculum co-design, quantifying benefits in terms of reduced graduate training time, improved retention, and innovation in people practices.
5. **Validation and reliability testing of the Scorecard and Rubric:** Future research should empirically test the psychometric properties of the HRM curriculum scorecard and accreditation rubric. Studies could examine inter-rater reliability among accreditation panel members, internal consistency across competence domains, and construct validity in relation to recognised HRM competence frameworks. Such research would enhance the robustness and defensibility of rubric-based accreditation decisions within the South African higher education quality assurance system.
6. **Alignment with National Qualifications and Quality Assurance Frameworks:** Further research should explore the extent to which the scorecard and rubric align with the requirements of the South African Qualifications Authority, the Council on Higher Education, and the Higher Education Quality Committee. Comparative analyses could assess how effectively the rubric supports programme accreditation, re-accreditation, and quality audits, and whether refinements are required to better support regulatory compliance and developmental quality assurance.
7. **Impact on curriculum design and programme improvement:** Longitudinal studies could investigate how the use of the HRM curriculum scorecard and accreditation rubric influences curriculum renewal, pedagogical innovation, and programme coherence over time. Research could examine whether institutions that adopt the rubric demonstrate stronger alignment between learning outcomes, assessment practices, and graduate competence development compared to those using traditional accreditation approaches.
8. **Graduate employability and labour market outcomes:** Future research should examine the relationship between rubric-aligned HRM curricula and graduate employability outcomes, including work readiness, professional competence, and career progression. Mixed-methods studies involving employers, graduates, and professional bodies could provide evidence of whether the competence-based accreditation approach improves the relevance and responsiveness of HRM programmes to South Africa's evolving labour market.
9. **Comparative and cross-disciplinary applications:** Comparative studies could investigate the transferability of the HRM curriculum scorecard and accreditation rubric to other professional disciplines within the social sciences and management fields. Additionally, cross-national research could compare the South African model with

competence-based accreditation frameworks used in other emerging and developed higher education systems.

10. **Digitalisation and data-driven accreditation:** Future research may examine how the scorecard and rubric can be embedded into digital accreditation platforms, enabling data-driven programme monitoring, benchmarking, and continuous quality improvement. Studies could explore the use of learning analytics and institutional data to support evidence-based accreditation aligned with the rubric.
11. **International benchmarking:** Compare the South African ICDF model with curriculum governance approaches used in emerging and developed higher education systems

8.6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study aimed to address a critical and persistent challenge in South African higher education: the misalignment between Human Resource Management (HRM) graduate competence and the evolving expectations of professional practice and the labour market. The findings demonstrate that this misalignment cannot be resolved through isolated curriculum adjustments or the incremental addition of new content. Rather, the evidence confirms that the challenge is systemic, rooted in fragmented curriculum design processes, weak theory–practice integration, ad hoc stakeholder engagement, and assessment and governance mechanisms that prioritise compliance over competence development. The evidence suggests that employability challenges are better understood as curriculum system failures than as simple student deficits.

Through a rigorous synthesis of literature and stakeholder perspectives, the study established that the employability of HRM graduates is fundamentally shaped by the interaction between clearly defined competence expectations, integrative pedagogical and assessment practices, sustained stakeholder collaboration, and enabling institutional conditions. The Integrated Curriculum Development Framework proposed in this study responds directly to this complexity by conceptualising HRM curriculum development as a dynamic, cyclical system rather than a linear academic exercise. In doing so, the framework reframes graduate competence as an outcome of coordinated processes and governance structures rather than as a by-product of curriculum content alone. This reframing has important implications because it shifts responsibility from individual graduates alone to shared institutional and stakeholder accountability.

Importantly, the study advances beyond conceptual critique by translating the framework into two complementary governance instruments: the HRM Curriculum Scorecard and the HRM Programme Accreditation Rubric. These instruments address a key gap identified in the

problem statement, namely the absence of structured, evidence-based mechanisms to evaluate curriculum alignment, diagnose competence development gaps, and support continuous improvement. By operationalising abstract competence principles into observable criteria and performance levels, the scorecard and rubric enable transparent, defensible, and developmental curriculum evaluation within both internal quality assurance and external accreditation contexts. Their inclusion strengthens the study's practical relevance and ensures that the framework can be enacted, monitored, and validated in real institutional settings. In this sense, the thesis contributes not only diagnosis but implementable reform architecture.

Collectively, the framework, scorecard, and accreditation rubric constitute an integrated contribution that bridges the longstanding divide between theory, practice, and governance in HRM education. The study demonstrates that meaningful curriculum reform requires not only clarity regarding *what* competencies graduates should possess but also robust mechanisms governing *how* those competencies are developed, assessed, reviewed, and sustained over time. In this regard, the research contributes to HRM education scholarship by foregrounding process integrity, stakeholder co-creation, and institutional enablement as critical yet under-theorised dimensions of graduate competence development.

From a theoretical perspective, the study extends employability scholarship by demonstrating how competence outcomes are co-produced through interacting systems of curriculum design, pedagogy, governance, and stakeholder feedback. From a practical perspective, it provides universities and professional bodies with decision tools that can support more transparent, evidence-informed, and defensible curriculum renewal.

In conclusion, this thesis demonstrates that strengthening HRM graduate employability requires a decisive shift from content-centred curriculum reform toward a competence-driven, systemically governed model of professional education. The Integrated Curriculum Development Framework, HRM Curriculum Scorecard, and HRM Programme Accreditation Rubric together offer an original and practically relevant pathway for achieving this shift. By integrating theory, evidence, and governance practice, the study provides a sustainable foundation for enhancing the relevance, responsiveness, and public value of HRM education in South Africa and potentially in comparable higher education contexts.

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ANNEXURE A: ETHICAL CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE



College of Economic and Management Sciences_ERC Human Resource Department

Date: 18/05/2024

Dear: Mr Tendency Beretu

**Decision: Ethics Approval from
May 2024 to May 2029**

NHREC Registration # : (if applicable)

Ref #: 2165

Name: Mr Tendency Beretu

Student #: 68965990

Staff #:

Researcher: Mr Tendency Beretu

Cape Town

Cape Town

68965990@mylife.unisa.ac.za 0784039512

Supervisor: Dr Jo-Anne Botha bothaj1@unisa.ac.za

Co-Supervisor: Prof Mariette Coetzee Coetzm@unisa.ac.za

Co-Researcher(s):

Email address:

A competency-based industry 4.0 curriculum design framework for developing human resource management graduate employability in South Africa.

Qualification: Doctor of Philosophy in Human Resource Management

Thank you for the application for research ethics clearance by the College of Economic and Management Sciences_ERC Human Resource Department for the above-mentioned research study Ethics approval is granted for five years.

The **low-risk application** was **reviewed** by College of Economic and Management Sciences_ERC Human Resource Department on 16 April 2024 in compliance with the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics and the Standard Operating Procedure on Research Ethics Risk Assessment. The application was approved on 16 May 2024.

The proposed research may now commence with the provisions that:

1. The researcher(s) will ensure that the research project adheres to the values and principles expressed in the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics.
2. Any adverse circumstance arising in the undertaking of the research project that is relevant to the ethicality of the study should be communicated in writing to the College of Economic and Management Sciences_ERC Human Resource Department.
3. The researcher(s) will conduct the study according to the methods and procedures set out in the approved application.
4. Any changes that can affect the study-related risks for the research participants, particularly in terms of assurances made with regards to the protection of participants' privacy and the confidentiality of the data, should be reported to the Committee in writing, accompanied by a progress report.

5. The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to any applicable national legislation, professional codes of conduct, institutional guidelines and scientific standards relevant to the specific field of study. Adherence to the following South African legislation is important, if applicable: Protection of Personal Information Act, no 4 of 2013; Children's act no 38 of 2005 and the National Health Act, no 61 of 2003.
6. Only de-identified research data may be used for secondary research purposes in future on condition that the research objectives are similar to those of the original research. Secondary use of identifiable human research data requires additional ethics clearance.
7. No field work activities may continue after the expiry date (31 May 2029). Submission of a completed research ethics progress report will constitute an application for renewal, for Ethics Research Committee approval.

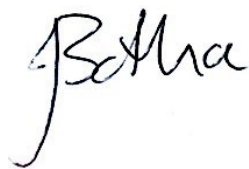
Additional Conditions

1. Disclosure of data to third parties is prohibited without explicit consent from Unisa.
2. De-identified data must be safely stored on password protected PCs.
3. Care should be taken by the researcher when publishing the results to protect the confidentiality and privacy of the university.
4. Adherence to the National Statement on Ethical Research and Publication practices, principle 7 referring to Social awareness, must be ensured: "Researchers and institutions must be sensitive to the potential impact of their research on society, marginal groups or individuals, and must consider these when weighing the benefits of the research against any harmful effects, with a view to minimising or avoiding the latter where possible." Unisa will not be liable for any failure to comply with this principle.

Note

The reference number 2165 should be clearly indicated on all forms of communication with the intended research participants, as well as with the Committee.

Kind regards,



Dr Jo-Anne Botha

Chair of College of Economic and Management Sciences_ERC Human Resource Department

E-mail: Bothaj1@unisa.ac.za



Professor Maelekanyo Christopher Mulaudzi

Executive Dean / By delegation from the Executive Dean of College of Economic and Management Sciences_ERC Human Resource Department

E-mail: tshilmc@unisa.ac.za

ANNEXURE B: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Telephone interview guide

Interviewee No: _____

Greetings, _____. I am calling as, communicated earlier, to seek your responses on some questions as part of my PHD study titled: **A competency-based industry 4.0 curriculum design framework for developing human resource management graduate employability in South Africa.**

This can take 25-30minutes of your time. Your participation is voluntary.

Are you willing to participate?

Yes / No / Not now. If **not now**, when can I call you back? _____

Before we carry on, please note that all the information I am collecting is confidential and will be used only for the study. As mentioned previously, no one's name/details will be linked to the published study. You are also welcome to withdraw from the interview at any time.

Are you	An employed HRM graduate in industry?	A Board member at the South African Board of People Practice (SABPP)?
Tick appropriate		
What is it that you do that is related to HRM (brief description)		

Section 1: Curriculum planning

1.1 In your opinion, what makes a new HRM graduate employable?

1.2 Considering Industry 4.0, what would you change in the curriculum taught in higher education (HE) institutions to ensure that graduates enter the workplace with transferable employability competencies?

1.3 In your view, who (individuals or institutions) should be involved in curriculum planning for higher education HRM students to increase the employability of the HRM graduates?

1.4 What should be included in the curriculum for HE HRM 4.0 graduates that will help them to be effective HRM professionals?

1.5 Which capacities in HRM professionals do you think create value for their employers?

Section 2: Curriculum design inputs

2.1 Would you change the role description of an HRM professional to accommodate the 21st-century workplace imperatives? If so - why? If not - why?

2.2 How would you change the role description of an HRM professional to accommodate the 21st-century workplace imperatives?

Section 3: Curriculum implementation

3. What kind of practical experience/exposure do you think should be required of HRM 4.0 graduates? Why are they required?

Section 4: Curriculum design outputs

4. Which five specific competencies should an HRM 4.0 graduate in South Africa display when they enter the workplace? Why these five?

Section 5: Assessment and curriculum evaluation

5.1 What makes you value a specific qualification above others for HRM 4.0 professionals? Why do you value a specific qualification above others for HRM 4.0 professionals?

5.2 Who should evaluate the curricula of HRM qualifications in terms of the attainment of appropriate skills, competencies, and behaviours of recently graduated HRM students in South Africa?

ANNEXURE C: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Ethics clearance reference number:

Research permission reference number (if applicable):

05/03/2024

Title: A competency-based Industry 4.0 curriculum design framework for developing human resource management graduate employability in South Africa.

Dear Prospective Participant

My Name is Tendency Beretu, and I am doing research with Dr J Botha (Senior Lecturer) and Prof Mariëtte Coetzee (Professor) in the Department of Human Resource Management towards a Doctor of Philosophy in Human Resources Management at the University of South Africa. We are inviting you to participate in a study titled: A competency-based industry 4.0 curriculum design framework for developing human resource management graduate employability in South Africa.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

This study is expected to collect important information that could help develop a framework for curriculum design that inculcates employability proficiencies in HRM graduates. This will help design a curriculum that enhances graduates' employability skills.

WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO PARTICIPATE?

I selected you based on your expertise in human resource management and your knowledge of the HR curriculum and graduate employability attributes. I got your contact details from your Head of Department, Head of Research, and the alumni office, as they checked your publications, current activities, research areas of interest, ability to answer the designed interview guide questions, and your vast knowledge in the field of HR. The approximate number of participants is +/-16 people.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?

This research will employ both quantitative and qualitative approaches to collect rich data on the subject matter and draw informed conclusions for research-informed recommendations.

The study will involve interviews with HRM academics, recently graduated HRM professionals who are currently employed, and officials from the South African Board for People Practices (SABPP). The role of the participants will be to answer the interview questions to the best of their ability, using Microsoft Teams/Zoom or direct calls, which will be recorded with the participants' consent. The questions to be asked are as follows:

In your opinion, what makes a new HRM graduate employable?

- 1.1 What would you change in the curriculum taught in higher education (HE) institutions to ensure that graduates enter the workplace with transferable employability competencies?
- 1.2 In your view, who (individuals or institutions) should be involved in curriculum planning for higher education HRM students to increase the employability of the HRM graduates?
- 1.3 What should be included in the curriculum for HE HRM graduates that will help them to be effective HRM professionals?

Which capacities in HRM professionals do you think create value for their employers?

- 2.1 Would you change the role description of an HRM professional to accommodate the 21st-century workplace imperatives? If so - why? If not - why?
 - 2.2 How would you change the role description of an HRM professional to accommodate the 21st-century workplace imperatives?
3. What kind of practical experience/exposure do you think should be required of HRM graduates? Why are they required?
4. Which five specific competencies should an HRM graduate in South Africa display when they enter the workplace? Why these five?
- 5.1 What makes you value a specific qualification above others for HRM professionals? Why do you value a specific qualification above others for HRM professionals?
 - 5.2 Who should evaluate the curricula of HRM qualifications in terms of the attainment of appropriate skills, competencies, and behaviours of recently graduated HRM students in South Africa?

The interviews are expected to take between 20 to 25 minutes.

CAN I WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY EVEN AFTER HAVING AGREED TO PARTICIPATE?

Participating in this study is voluntary, and you are under no obligation to consent to participation. If you decide to participate, you will be given this information sheet to keep and asked to sign a written consent form. You are free to withdraw at any time, without providing a reason.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

Your participation in this research can help develop a solution to curb the ongoing high unemployment rate among graduates, as HRM graduates will become future-fit and employable through the design of higher education curricula.

ARE THERE ANY NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES FOR ME IF I PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH PROJECT?

There are no negative consequences for participating in the research project.

WILL THE INFORMATION THAT I CONVEY TO THE RESEARCHER AND MY IDENTITY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

The information you convey to the researcher will be securely stored and not disclosed to third parties without participants' informed consent.

You have the right to insist that your Name will not be recorded anywhere and that no one, apart from the researcher and identified members of the research team, will be aware of your involvement in this research [*this measure refers to confidentiality*]. No one will be able to connect you to the answers you give [*this measure refers to anonymity*]. Your answers will be assigned a code number or a pseudonym, and you will be referred to in this manner in the data, in publications, and in other research reporting methods, such as conference proceedings [*this measure ensures confidentiality*].

Your answers may be reviewed by individuals responsible for ensuring that research is conducted properly, including the transcriber, external coder, and supervisors. Information that identifies you will be available only to the researcher, unless you provide permission for others to view the records.

Create a sentence to inform participants or to request permission for the use of the de-identified data for research-related purposes, such as a research report, journal articles, and/or

conference proceedings. A report of the study in the form of a thesis and articles submitted for publication will not reveal any confidential information. It is sometimes impossible to make an absolute guarantee of confidentiality or anonymity, for example, when focus groups are used as a data collection method; however, all responses reported in the study will be de-identified.

Include a description of what a focus group is and state: *While every effort will be made to ensure that participants do not share the information you provide during the focus group, I cannot guarantee that other participants will keep it confidential. I shall, however, encourage all participants to do so. For this reason, I kindly request that you refrain from disclosing personally sensitive information during the focus group.*

HOW WILL THE RESEARCHER(S) PROTECT THE SECURITY OF DATA?

Hard copies of all answers will be stored by the researcher for 5 years in a locked cupboard/filing cabinet at the researcher's home. The published thesis will be available on Unisa's repository. All electronic information will be stored on a password-protected computer. Future use of the stored data will be subject to further Research Ethics approval if used for purposes unrelated to the study's initial aim and objectives. Hard copies will be destroyed, and electronic copies will be permanently deleted from the computer's hard drive using relevant software.

WILL I RECEIVE PAYMENT OR ANY INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?

There are no payments associated with participating in this research.

HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICS APPROVAL?

This study has received written approval from the Research Ethics Review Committee of the College of Economic and Management Sciences, Human Resource Department. A copy of the ethics certificate is available upon request.

HOW WILL I BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS/RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH?

If you would like to be informed of the final research findings or require any further information, you may contact Tendency Beretu at telephone 0784039512 or email tendy27@gmail.com.

Should you have concerns about the way in which the research has been conducted, you may contact Dr J Botha at Bothaj1@unisa.ac.za or Prof Mariëtte Coetzee at Coetzm@unisa.ac.za.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and for participating in this study.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tendency Beretu', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Tendency Beretu

ANNEXURE D: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

I, _____ (participant name), confirm that the person asking my consent to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits, and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the study as explained in the information sheet.

I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the study.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable).

I am aware that the findings of this study will be processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings, but that my participation will be kept confidential unless otherwise specified.

I agree to the recording of the interview.

I have received a signed copy of the informed consent agreement.

Participant Name & Surname... (please print)

Participant Signature.....Date.....

Researcher's Name & Surname **Tendency Beretu** (please print)

Researcher's signature Date 05/03/2024



ANNEXURE E: GATEKEEPER PERMISSIONS

1



GATEKEEPER RESEARCH PERMISSION APPLICATION FORM

A. GATEKEEPER CONTACT INFORMATION

TO:

Name of organisation/company/stakeholder/community leader – referred to as the 'gatekeeper':

Cape Peninsula University of Technology

Contact person (name and surname):

Ms Nosiphosethu Lorraine Brandau

Designation/position within company/organisation/community:

Human Resource Departmental Secretary

Email:

brandaun@cput.ac.za

Contact number:

0214609016

B. APPLICANT INFORMATION**FROM:**

Name and surname of applicant/student/researcher:

Tendency Beretu

Degree registered for or research for non-degree purposes:

HRM Doctor of philosophy

Department and College:

Dept of Human Resource Management College of Economic and Management Sci

Email:

68965990@mylife.unisa.ac.za

Contact number:

0784039512

Address:

605 Newgrounds Living, 1-9 Church St, Wynberg, Cape Town, 7800

Details of supervisor (if applicable):

Dr J Botha and Prof Mariëtte Coetzee

Email of supervisor (if applicable):

bothajl@unisa.ac.za; coetzm@unisa.ac.za

Supervisor's position, e.g. lecturer/senior lecturer/professor, etc.:

Dr. Jo-Anne Botha Senior Lecturer and Professor Mariette Coetzee

Supervisor's Department:

Department of Human Resource Management

Funding Body (if applicable):

NA

Reason for funding (if applicable):

NA

C. REQUEST FOR SUPPORT/ ACCESS TO DATA/INFORMATION/ PARTICIPANTS

I/We are requesting your assistance in a study entitled:

A framework for curriculum design for developing employability proficiency

Overview of study (100-200 words)

- What, how and why of the study
- Objectives, time and resources used/required
- Deadline/timelines for the project = possibility of follow up interviews? If further information will be required

What: The study is about designing a curriculum for human resource management which enhances employability proficiency of human resource management (HRM) university graduates in South Africa.

How: The researcher will construct a framework that will enhance employability proficiency of human resource management (HRM) university graduates in South Africa through collecting data from published articles (systematic literature review), structured interviews and questionnaires which will be distributed to the targeted population (officials from SABPP, IPM, academics in the HR department and alumni of HR).

Why: This research is significant because the skills that the employers require will be revealed and curriculum development strategies will be developed on how to overcome the mismatch between what employers expect and what higher education institutions deliver.

Objectives:

- To conceptualise employability proficiencies important for future-fit HRM graduates.
- To develop a theoretical framework for curriculum design to enhance the employability proficiency of HRM graduates in South Africa.
- To conceptualise curriculum design practices that facilitate the development of employability proficiencies of HRM graduates

My/our request is/are for: (Tick appropriate options and/or add additional information.)

- ☒ Permission and/or support to conduct a study about or within the organisation/company/stakeholder group/community
- ☒ Access to possible participants and assistance for recruitment and identification purposes
- ☒ Assistance in the recruitment process of possible participants via internal communication
- ☒ Permission to distribute questionnaire/survey/research information to potential participants
- ☐ Access to organisational data - not in the public domain
- ☐ Other (specify below):

Provide a full description of the intended research sample. Motivate why the data must be gathered from the specific stakeholder group/organisation/company/community.

For the thematic analysis, a literature study of scientific journals such as Web of Science and AOSIS which are reputable sources on employability and curriculum development as well as official policy documents of the SABPP and government will be studied. The target population for the empirical section of this study involves recently graduated HRM professionals who were taught the current curriculum, academics in the HRM Department who are teaching the current curriculum and SABPP officials. The SABPP is a recognised professional body for HRM practitioners and professionals in South Africa. The chosen possible interviewees are considered to have adequate knowledge of the expectations of HR graduates in South African organisations and the curriculum design of tertiary institutions. The membership base and connections between the SABPP and tertiary institutions is that the SABPP is the accrediting body for the HR programmes of tertiary institutions in the skills development framework. The interviews will be done with +/-13 people and the surveys will be sent to +/-45 people.

Explain how the participant identification and recruitment process of your research adhere to the Protection of Personal Information Act 4 of 2013.

Participants will be identified and recruited through a gatekeeper. Confidentiality will be ensured throughout the process; therefore, participants will not be asked for any information that may compromise their identity. No harm or victimisation will fall on participants. Participants can indicate at any given time if they want to opt out. The researcher will remain as objective as possible and use his integrity to guide this research project. The study will follow standards relevant to credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and reflexivity of the research.

Provide a description of the data collection tools (e.g. interview, questionnaire, questions).

The researcher will use a structured interview guide and a questionnaire which will be constructed on second phase of the research data collection.

Provide a description of the data gathering process that will be followed. (What will be expected of the research participants and exactly how will the data be collected?)

The interviews will be conducted with officials at the South African Board of People Higher Education in South Africa. The chosen possible interviewees are considered to have adequate knowledge of the expectations of HR graduates in South African organisations and the curriculum design of tertiary institutions. The researcher will get informed consent from the participants before conducting the interviews or answering the questionnaires. With permission from the interviewees, a tape recorder or cellphone will be used to record the interviewees before they are transcribed verbatim and then response patterns identified to establish how well the proposed framework is supported.

Indicate who will have access to the raw data and in what format?

The researcher and the data analysts who will receive it in coded format.

Provide a full description of the perceived and actual risks of the study to participants and the organisation/company/stakeholder group/community. (Keeping national disasters in mind.)

This is a low-risk study. It is believed that no risk will pertain to participants as the interviewer will be probing their ideas on how employability capacities can be inculcated into the HRM HE curriculum. The researcher will provide the supervisors' contact details to the gatekeeper and the participants. The supervisors will liaise with any participant who perceived the possibility of personal risk.

Describe the potential benefits of the study to the organisation/company/stakeholder group/community.

This research will contribute to the existing body of expertise on curriculum creation for future-fit HRM graduates and provide best practice guidelines for academics to facilitate the provision of quality higher education in the field of HR. Universities and other tertiary institutions will use the research to analyse their current curricula and address any gaps they may perceive in their curriculum design the perceived gaps which will be highlighted through this research. Thus, if viewed from this perspective, this research will aid in curricula development methods that are being used already.

How will risks be mitigated and managed? (Keeping national disasters and relevant protocol in mind.)

Should there be any risks, the researcher will liaise with the gatekeeper to manage any risk if it arises. The researcher will bear in mind the ethical way of dealing with risks if they arise.

Explain the extent and processes to which confidentiality of information will be maintained by the researcher.

Confidentiality will be ensured throughout the process; therefore, participants will not be asked for any information that may compromise their identity. No harm or victimisation will fall on any person who takes part in the research. Participation will be voluntary as well and participants can indicate at any given time if they want to opt out. The researcher will remain as aim as possible and use his integrity to guide this research project. The study will follow standards relevant to credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and reflexivity of the research.

List the expected deliverables of the study. (For example, a research report, journal articles and/or conference proceedings. Also indicate how privacy will be protected in any publication of the information.)

The research findings will be published in accredited journals, will be put into a maintained as no personal information will be asked. The participant's details will not be published. Since it is a requirement for completion of the qualification, two articles will be submitted for review to scholarly journals prior to the submission of the thesis.

How will the organisation/company/stakeholder group/community be informed of the results or outcomes? (If applicable.)

The researcher will contact the gatekeeper and will share the results after publication if the participants are keen about the research findings.

Attach a copy of the research instrument (questionnaire/interview schedule/focus group questions) to your email and mark as Annexure A

C. OFFICIAL USE ONLY – TO BE COMPLETED BY COMPANY/ORGANISATION/COMMUNITY

Decision:

- ☒ Permission granted.
☐ Permission with conditions is granted.
☐ No permission could be granted at this time.

Special Conditions (if any – Expectations of the outcomes of the study must be stated. For example: Will feedback/a report be required before submission of the publication?):

The following person and/or department/and or committee has been appointed to assist the researcher in the data collection process (if applicable):

HR department at Cape Peninsula University of Technology

By signing this form, you are indicating that you have read the description of the study, have the legal and delegated authority to grant permission for the study on behalf of the company/organisation/stakeholder/community and that the company/organisation/stakeholder/community in principle agrees to the terms as described in the short questionnaire that follows:

1. I/We have reviewed the application form and received a copy of it. The purpose and nature of this study are clear, and all questions and issues of concern have been answered to satisfaction.

- ☒ Yes
☐ No

2. I/We (name of the person responsible and/or name of company/organisation/stakeholder/community)

Ms Nosipho sethu Lorraine Brandau HR departmental secretary at Cape Peninsula



agree to support this study and hereby grant permission for the data generated from this research to be used in the researcher's publications on this topic.

☒ Yes

☐ No

Signature

Brandau N

Name and surname of the person with delegated authority to grant permission on behalf of the company/organisation/stakeholder/community

Mrs Taryn Claire Kroukamp HR department at Cape Peninsula University of Technology

Designation/Position

Acting head of department

Email:

kroukamp@cpu.ac.za

Contact number:

0214603259

Date:

26-February - 2024

Official stamp (if available):

Department of Human Resource Management

26 FEB 2024

Cape Peninsula University of Technology



GATEKEEPER RESEARCH PERMISSION APPLICATION FORM

A. GATEKEEPER CONTACT INFORMATION

TO:

Name of organisation/company/stakeholder/community leader – referred to as the 'gatekeeper':

South African Board for People Practices (SABPP)

Contact person (name and surname):

Dr Ajay Jivan

Designation/position within company/organisation/community:

HOD: Research and Assurance

Email:

ajay@sabpp.co.za

Contact number:

011 045 5400

B. APPLICANT INFORMATION**FROM:**

Name and surname of applicant/student/researcher:

Tendency Beretu

Degree registered for or research for non-degree purposes:

HRM Doctor of philosophy

Department and College:

Dept of Human Resource Management College of Economic and Management Sci

Email:

68965990@mylife.unisa.ac.za

Contact number:

0784039512

Address:

605 Newgrounds Living, 1-9 Church St, Wynberg, Cape Town, 7800

Details of supervisor (if applicable):

Dr J Botha and Prof Mariëtte Coetzee

Email of supervisor (if applicable):

bothaj1@unisa.ac.za; coetzm@unisa.ac.za

Supervisor's position, e.g. lecturer/senior lecturer/professor, etc.:

Dr. Jo-Anne Botha Senior Lecturer and Professor Mariette Coetzee

Supervisor's Department:

Department of Human Resource Management

Funding Body (if applicable):

NA

Reason for funding (if applicable):

NA

C. REQUEST FOR SUPPORT/ ACCESS TO DATA/INFORMATION/ PARTICIPANTS

I/We are requesting your assistance in a study entitled:

A framework for curriculum design for developing employability proficiency

Overview of study: (100-200 words)

- What, how and why of the study
- Objectives, time and resources used/required
- Deadline/timelines for the project - possibility of follow up interviews? If further information will be required

What: The study is about designing a curriculum for human resource management which enhances employability proficiency of human resource management (HRM) university graduates in South Africa.

How: The researcher will construct a framework that will enhance employability proficiency of human resource management (HRM) university graduates in South Africa through collecting data from published articles (systematic literature review), structured interviews and questionnaires which will be distributed to the targeted population (officials from SABPP, IPM, academics in the HR department and alumni of HR).

Why: This research is significant because the skills that the employers require will be revealed and curriculum development strategies will be developed on how to overcome the mismatch between what employers expect and what higher education institutions deliver.

Objectives:

- To conceptualise employability proficiencies important for future-fit HRM graduates.
- To develop a theoretical framework for curriculum design to enhance the employability proficiency of HRM graduates in South Africa.
- To conceptualise curriculum design practices that facilitate the development of employability proficiencies of HRM graduates

My/our request is/are for: (Tick appropriate options and/or add additional information.)

- ☒ Permission and/or support to conduct a study about or within the organisation/company/stakeholder group/community
- ☒ Access to possible participants and assistance for recruitment and identification purposes
- ☒ Assistance in the recruitment process of possible participants via internal communication
- ☒ Permission to distribute questionnaire/survey/research information to potential participants
- ☐ Access to organisational data - not in the public domain
- ☐ Other (specify below):

Provide a full description of the intended research sample. Motivate why the data must be gathered from the specific stakeholder group/organisation/company/community.

For the thematic analysis, a literature study of scientific journals such as Web of Science and AOSIS which are reputable sources on employability and curriculum development as well as official policy documents of the SABPP and government will be studied. The target population for the empirical section of this study involves recently graduated HRM professionals who were taught the current curriculum, academics in the HRM Department who are teaching the current curriculum and SABPP officials. The SABPP is a recognised professional body for HRM practitioners and professionals in South Africa. The chosen possible interviewees are considered to have adequate knowledge of the expectations of HR graduates in South African organisations and the curriculum design of tertiary institutions. The membership base and connections between the SABPP and tertiary institutions is that the SABPP is the accrediting body for the HR programmes of tertiary institutions in the skills development framework. The interviews will be done with +/-13 people and the surveys will be sent to +/-45 people.

Explain how the participant identification and recruitment process of your research adhere to the Protection of Personal Information Act 4 of 2013.

Participants will be identified through a gatekeeper, where the organisation will share the research request in their member mailer and social media. Confidentiality will be ensured throughout the process; therefore, participants will not be asked for any information that may compromise their identity. No harm or victimisation will fall on any person who takes part in the research. Participation will be voluntary as well and participants can indicate at any given time if they want to opt out. The researcher will remain as objective as possible and use his integrity to guide this research project. The study will follow standards relevant to credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and reflexivity of the research.

Provide a description of the data collection tools (e.g. interview, questionnaire, questions).

The researcher will use a structured interview guide and a questionnaire which will be constructed on second phase of the research data collection.

Provide a description of the data gathering process that will be followed. (What will be expected of the research participants and exactly how will the data be collected?)

The interviews will be conducted with officials at the South African Board of People Practice (SABPP), employed HRM graduates in industry and academics in an institution of higher education in South Africa. The chosen possible interviewees are considered to have adequate knowledge of the expectations of HR graduates in South African organisations and the curriculum design of tertiary institutions. The researcher will get informed consent from the participants before conducting the interviews or answering the questionnaires. With permission from the interviewees, a tape recorder or cellphone will be used to record the interviewees before they are transcribed verbatim and then response patterns identified to establish how well the proposed framework is supported.

Indicate who will have access to the raw data and in what formats?

The researcher and the data analysts who will receive it in coded format.

Provide a full description of the perceived and actual risks of the study to participants and the organisation/company/stakeholder group/community. (Keeping national disasters in mind.)

This is a low-risk study. It is believed that no risk will pertain to participants as the interviewer will be probing their ideas on how employability capacities can be inculcated into the HRM HE curriculum. The researcher will provide the supervisors' contact details to the gatekeeper and the participants. The supervisors will liaise with any participant who perceived the possibility of personal risk.

Describe the potential benefits of the study to the organisation/company/stakeholder group/community.

This research will contribute to the existing body of expertise on curriculum creation for future-fit HRM graduates and provide best practice guidelines for academics to facilitate the provision of quality higher education in the field of HR. Universities and other tertiary institutions will be able to use the proposed framework to analyse their current curricula and address any gaps they may perceive in their curriculum design the perceived gaps which will be highlighted through this research. Thus, if viewed from this perspective, this research will aid in curricula development methods that are being used already.

How will risks be mitigated and managed? (Keeping national disasters and relevant protocol in mind.)

Should there be any risks, the researcher will liaise with the gatekeeper to notify them if any risk arises. The researcher will bear in mind the ethical way of dealing with risks if they arise.

Explain the extent and processes to which confidentiality of information will be maintained by the researcher.

Confidentiality will be ensured throughout the process; therefore, participants will not be asked for any information that may compromise their identity. No harm or victimisation will fall on any person who takes part in the research. Participation will be voluntary as well and participants can indicate at any given time if they want to opt out. The researcher will remain as aim as possible and use his integrity to guide this research project. The study will follow standards relevant to credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and reflexivity of the research.

List the expected deliverables of the study. (For example, a research report, journal articles and/or conference proceedings. Also indicate how privacy will be protected in any publication of the information.)

The research findings will be published in accredited journals, will be put into a thesis which will be published as well. The privacy of the participants will be maintained as no personal information will be asked. The participant's details will not be published. Since it is a requirement for completion of the qualification, two articles will be submitted for review to scholarly journals prior to the submission of the thesis.

How will the organisation/company/stakeholder group/community be informed of the results or outcomes? (If applicable.)

The researcher will contact the gatekeeper and will share the results after publication about the research findings.

Attach a copy of the research instrument (questionnaire/interview schedule/focus group questions) to your email and mark as Annexure A

C. OFFICIAL USE ONLY – TO BE COMPLETED BY COMPANY/ORGANISATION/COMMUNITY

Decision:

- ☐ Permission granted.
- ☒ Permission with conditions is granted.
- ☐ No permission could be granted at this time.

Special Conditions (if any – Expectations of the outcomes of the study must be stated. For example: Will feedback/a report be required before submission of the publication?):

Please note that the SABPP only assists the researcher with communicating a link and brief descriptor of the research to its members. This is under the strict condition that participation in your study is voluntary and consent-based; and that anonymity and confidentiality throughout the research process and subsequent publications will be ensured. The SABPP will not share its members' personal and contact details (such as email addresses) with the researcher; and will review and evaluate the member details requested in the researcher's instruments. The SABPP does not and will not endorse, promote, and certify the researcher, the research and the findings and publication thereof. The SABPP will exercise its discretion regarding the sharing and dissemination of the research and findings.

Upon agreement with the conditions stipulated in the permission letter, dated 08 February 2024, and signature to all the terms and conditions laid out in that letter, SABPP provides only provisional and conditional permission to conduct the research with the SABPP members subject to receipt of ethical clearance from the University of South Africa, receipt of the final survey questionnaire, and final review of your application along with all research instruments by the SABPP. Final permission will only be granted with these requirements being met.

The following person and/or department/and or committee has been appointed to assist the researcher in the data collection process (if applicable):

By signing this form, you are indicating that you have read the description of the study, have the legal and delegated authority to grant permission for the study on behalf of the company/organisation/stakeholder/community and that the company/organisation/stakeholder/community in principle agrees to the terms as described in the short questionnaire that follows:

1. I/We have reviewed the application form and received a copy of it. The purpose and nature of this study are clear, and all questions and issues of concern have been answered to satisfaction.

- ☒ Yes
- ☐ No

2. I/We (name of the person responsible and/or name of company/organisation/stakeholder/community)

Dr Ajay Jivan, SABPP

agree to support this study and hereby grant permission for the data generated from this research to be used in the researcher's publications on this topic.

☐ Yes

☐ No

Signature

Subject to final approval by the SABPP *Aj*

Name and surname of the person with delegated authority to grant permission on behalf of the company/organisation/stakeholder/community

Ajay Jivan

Designation/Position

Head: Research and Assurance

Email:

ajay@sabpp.co.za

Contact number:

0110455400

Date:

26/02/2024

Official stamp (if available):

ANNEXURE F: EDITING OF THESIS

B Nel
Translator and text editor

Contact number:	0727597412
Address:	Kareeberg 73 Olympus, Pretoria
Email:	Bibinat14@gmail.com

To whom it may concern

This is to confirm that I, B. Nel, was responsible for the language editing of Mr. Tendency Beretu's doctoral thesis. In the course of this work, I utilised AI-assisted tools and editing software to support the editing and structuring of the content, while retaining full responsibility for the final edited version. The title of the study was:

A COMPETENCY-BASED INDUSTRY 4.0 CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK FOR DEVELOPING HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

The author is responsible for addressing all the suggested changes and queries. Furthermore, I do not accept responsibility for any changes made to the document after it was submitted.

B Nel