Challenges for Succession Planning of Senior Managers in the South African State-Owned Entities

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DECLARATION

I, ____________________, herby declare that the research report entitled **"Challenges for Succession Planning of Senior Managers in South African State-Owned Enterprises"** is my own original work, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree at the University of Witwatersrand (Wits) conducted under the supervision of Dr Zanele Ndaba. This thesis has not been submitted for any other degree or examination at any other institution. All sources used or quoted have been duly acknowledged and referenced in accordance with the academic integrity and ethical research standards.

Signed: …………………………………

On the ………………………………. Day of ………………………..2025

DEDICATION

First and foremost, thank you for giving me your sound mind, Jesus Christ, I couldn't have written this report without you. Thank you.

To my one and only wife, Lesego Kukame, thank you for your understanding, patience and wholehearted support throughout my MBA journey and the writing of this thesis.

To my daughter, Lesedi and my unborn child, whom I am yet to officially name. This one is for you.

The woman who has known me my whole life, the queen of my heart – my mamma, Debrah Kukame – Thank you.

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Abstract

This study examines the Challenges of Succession Planning of senior managers in South Africa's State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs). The purpose of the research is to evaluate the existing practices of succession planning (or the lack thereof) to ensure continuity within these entities. The motivation behind the study arose from the frequent turnover and departures of senior management in SOEs, which highlighted shortcomings in the succession planning practices for top senior managers.

Frequent departures of senior executives are a problem because they lead to senior executive gaps and organisational instability within State Owned Enterprises. The study seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of SOEs senior manager succession planning. Research questions are included. The study adopts a qualitative case study approach, employing semi-structured interview questionnaires to gather in-depth insights from senior management within SOEs. The analytical framework will analysed responses by identifying recurring challenges in succession planning. This methodological choice facilitated a comprehensive exploration of the challenges associated with succession planning.

Purposive sampling was utilised to select relevant SOEs and senior management participants, ensuring the inclusion of individuals with extensive knowledge and experience pertinent to the research focus. Ethical approval was obtained, and participants' confidentiality and anonymity were protected. The primary objective of this study was to investigate the challenges that impede the succession planning of senior managers in South African SOEs. It seeks to evaluate existing challenges. The findings of this study offered valuable insight into improving succession planning mechanisms within South African SOEs and ensuring organisational stability.

A purposive sample of 15 participants was selected to ensure data richness and thematic depth, while also mitigating the risk of saturation, where additional interviews were unlikely to yield new insights.

Challenges for Succession Planning of senior managers in the SOEs!

1. Introduction

Succession planning involves recognising critical roles within an organisation and developing a talent pipeline by equipping employees to step into these positions as vacancies arise due to retirements or departures. This process plays a vital role in maintaining organisational continuity and performance, especially during periods of management changes and organisational change (NIH, 2021). The primary objective of this study is to investigate the challenges that impede the succession planning of senior managers in South African SOEs. There is a frequent turnover of senior managers in SOEs and an apparent absence of effective succession planning practices, which has created a noticeable management gap.

2. Statement of Purpose

This study seeks to examine the key factors influencing succession planning in South African SOEs. It aims to investigate the high rate of senior executive turnover, evaluate how transitions between executive committee (Exco) members are managed, and ensure consistent organisational continuity with minimal disruptions.

3. Background of the Study

Hardly anything in an organisation is more critical than executive transitions; they are among the most critical events a company can face. They are characterised as high-tension events, which also rank as the top one in life's most difficult challenges (Keller, 2018). Loh (2021) highlights that when Thomas Kgokolo assumed the role of interim CEO of South African Airways (SAA), he became the airline's fifth CEO to hold the position within five years. Kilbride (2023) indicates that SAA has seen a total of 17 CEOs since 1994, marking the highest CEO turnover rate among South African State-Owned Enterprises, closely followed by Eskom with no less than 15 CEO during the same period. In most SOEs, very little is done to transfer employee skills before their departure from an organisation, a problem largely attributed to the inadequate corporate succession planning.

SOEs are essential in their role for advancing economic growth within emerging economies like South Africa, and subsequently crucial that corporate succession planning is prioritised within these organisations. Repeatedly, many organisations fail to adequately prepare for the departure of personnel, especially in strategically high-level positions (Pita, Mafini, & Dhurup, 2016). The absence of adequate succession planning can affect the business directly to the point of collapse when key participants exit the company (Maphisa, Zwane, & Nyide, 2017).

4. Problem Statement

According to Sithomola and Maluleke (2024), South African Airways (SAA) and the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) both experienced frequent turnover in their executives, with the average tenure of their CEOs lasting approximately one year and four months, and one year and nine months, respectively. Nyatsumba and Pooe (2023) note that Zukiswa Ramaisa was appointed as CEO in 2019 but vacated the role in 2020, leading to Philip Saunders taking over in the same year. Ward (2021) observes that in May 2021, SAA's business rescue practitioners handed control back to the interim board, which subsequently appointed Thomas Kgokolo, a Chartered Accountant and MBA graduate, as interim CEO to assist in the airline's recovery efforts. The problem is the continuous departure of senior executives and which jeopardises organisational continuity.

The departure of senior executives presents a complex challenge, as it damages the management structure, complicates succession planning and jeopardises long-term growth and stability of organisations (Tsipursky, 2024). It is very important to implement successful succession planning to mitigate the risk of institutional knowledge being lost, or, for that matter, the loss of staff with critical and scarce skills occupying key positions. According to Le Roes (2017), effectively managing the succession planning process is essential for ensuring the successful transition of employees into key positions throughout their professional life cycle. Many companies also fail to pay adequate attention to their management channels and succession processes, and many don't get as lucky as Microsoft did 21(Fernández-Aráoz, Nagel, & Green, 2021).

5. Research Objectives

The research objective is to investigate the challenges that impede the effective succession planning of senior managers in South African SOEs.

6. Research Questions

What are the challenges impeding the effective succession planning of senior managers in South African SOEs?

7. Rationale of the study

Succession planning is a practice that permits the continuous functioning of an organisation (Mfeka, 2021). The lack thereof means the organisation does not have the opportunity for continuous functioning. The study aims to fill this gap by applying succession planning practices. Succession management is the process by which organisations identify candidates early on and develop them to fill management roles. Effective succession management can provide organisations with an improved ability to maintain continuity of operations during management transitions with minimal disruption (Deloitte Development LLC, 2016).

8. Research Study context- What are SOEs?

State-Owned Enterprises are organisational entities created to achieve public policy objectives alongside commercial goals. They are entirely owned by national or provincial governments and operate similarly to private sector firms in terms of functionality (Bozec & Dia, 2007). These enterprises are integral to economic development and are established to fulfil purposes such as fostering economic growth, preventing the failure of private entities, and delivering essential services to citizens, who ultimately serve as the primary beneficiaries (Bozec, Zéghal, & Boujenoui, 2004).

Globally, SOEs contribute approximately 10% to the global Gross Domestic Product (GDP), underscoring their significant role in the international economy (Papenfuß et al., 2019). Within the jurisdictions of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), SOEs collectively employ more than six million individuals, representing a total economic value exceeding two trillion US dollars (Ciolomic & Beleiu, 2023). Their dual mandate of achieving both public and commercial objectives positions them as key instruments for sustainable development in both emerging and established economies.

9. Delimitations

This research paper strictly focused on **Challenges for Succession Planning of senior managers in SOEs,** not considering the private sector and multinationals within the country, to focus on public sector succession dynamics. The study explored SOEs within different sectors such as infrastructure, energy, public finance, research, human development, transportation, and energy.

At an organisational level, the study only focused on senior management, excluding lower management. Any succession planning issues happening at the junior levels are not addressed. Data spanning from 10 years to 20 years ago was considered. Qualitative data, i.e. semi-structured interviews, was the method used to collect the data. Only challenges for succession planning of senior managers in the SOEs were the key focus of the study, and not any other management challenges in the SOEs, or any political influences.

10. Assumptions

The study was based on the assumption that the readers understood the concepts of succession planning and transition management. It was also assumed that the participants interviewed were familiar with these concepts as defined in the study, and that they responded honestly and accurately based on their experiences and knowledge of the topic.

11. Literature review

10.1 Introduction

The literature review provided an in-depth appreciation of succession planning and transition management by various scholars and outlined the analytical framework adopted for this study. The research proposition was to explore relationships and patterns that emerged from the data.

10.2 Evolution of Succession Planning

Succession planning has undergone significant changes over the past seven decades, evolving from a narrow focus on immediate replacements (Lupena, 2023). Mehrabani and Mohamad (2011) mention that for decades, the concept of succession planning was primarily about replacement planning, where specific individuals were chosen to fill key roles and not skills, talents being looked at as the need for the organisation's future. In today's dynamic world, the environment is unpredictable and organisations flatter, the old view does not work. Now, organisations need high-potential people, developing general competencies, and creating flexibility. Estedadi and Hamidi (2015) support the findings of Mehrabani and Mohamad (2011) and Cadmus (2006) that it should have a clear vision and strategic plan, appropriate talent management through strategic succession planning programs for long-term organisation survival. Henri Fayol (1841-1925) was one of the founders and pioneers of succession planning who recognised and documented the need for it. Succession plans throughout the centuries have been developed and implemented for organisations by effective management (Henderson, 2006).

12. Succession Planning

According to Manzini and Malatjie (2023), succession planning is a valuable strategy that organisations should consider, and if implemented, succession planning has the capability of professionalising the public service. Barnett and Davis (2008) define succession planning as a structured process, a reliable and repeatable process that involves identifying and preparing a potential successor to assume the new role. Al Suwaidi, Jabeen, Stachowicz-Stanusch, and Webb (2020) also state how important succession planning is for organisational growth and business sustainability. Moore (2013) describes that strong succession planning is where crucial knowledge is transmitted, where mentoring is provided, current client relationships are preserved and new ones developed, as well as grooming those who will take over in the future. It is an organised process through which professional and personal improvements are aligned with organisational strategies and employees are prepared to fill key positions (Tabatabaee, Lakeh, & Tadi, 2014). It is, however, unfortunate that few organisations attempt to introduce the concept and practice thereof. There is no prioritisation of succession planning by the Free State Provincial government directorate in South Africa; this is due to high rates of management erosion in the ranks (Phathela, 2022). Martin and O'Shea (2021) emphasise that having formal succession planning in place can enable skilled and knowledgeable internal candidates to fill key vacancies. A significant proportion of organisations worldwide lack formal succession planning, with 67% of organisations operating without one and 45% not having plans for their executives. This gap highlights the challenges of translating from theory to practice (Tamunomiebi & Okwakpam, 2019).

As organisations evolve to become more dynamic, effective succession planning may become limited due to organisations placing more focus on talent management and development processes, forgetting that the same incumbents do not want to wait long periods of time before they can secure the management positions (Buthelezi, 2018).

The goal is to create a succession-planning talent pool that ensures a smooth transition when key positions become vacant (Quen, 2024). Tabatabaee, Lakeh, and Tadi (2014) have identified that most succession plans for key positions in government organisations are informal, and planning is almost non-existent. Mehrabani and Mohamad (2011) point out that organisations are increasingly compelled to adopt strategies such as succession planning and management. These approaches aim to enhance employees' knowledge, skills, talents, and overall capabilities. Succession planning helps companies ensure the continuity and preparedness of managers for key executive positions and puts the diversity issue on the corporate agenda. Further, it guides the development activities of key executives and contributes to shareholder value (Conner & Ulrich, 1996). Both Al Suwaidi, Jabeen, Stachowicz-Stanusch, and Webb (2020) and Conner and Ulrich (1996) agree that many organisations' succession planning processes do not always deliver their full potential.

12.1 Challenges of succession planning

Process of identifying potential successors

According to Okwakpam (2019), every business is guaranteed to experience the need for succession, whether due to stepping down, disciplinary issues or even death. If Potential successors are not identified, it can lead to grave consequences such as the closure of the business. Candidates not being identified has a direct impact on bottom-line results and contributes to organisational decline (Pandey & Sharma, 2014). Mehrabani and Mohamad (2011) say that Friedman in 1984 defined succession planning as a system which is an ongoing process.

Employee retention

Employee retention is the ability of the company to retain its employees and the practice and company's ability to reduce the turnover rate of workers (Javed & Jaffar, 2019). Both Najam ul Hassan and Siddiqui (2020) and Tetteh and Asumeng (2020) mention that the lack of succession planning leads to employee turnover because it mutually reinforces and threatens the organisation's capability to earn higher profits. Tamunomiebi and Okwakpam (2019) mention that the link between succession planning and HR outcomes concerning employee retention is unclear.

Lack of Knowledge Transfer

Transferring organisational knowledge is challenging during management change, and a gap is occurring, especially with the Baby Boomers retiring (Grossman, 2014). Ejakpomewhe (2017) supports Grossman's (2014) assertion that this problem is caused by the lack of effective succession planning to facilitate the transfer of technical expertise from retiring employees to younger employees. Replacing employees and not developing them was a big and common mistake by organisations (Mehrabani & Mohamad, 2011). Appelbaum et al. (2012) argue that organisations often fail to establish effective communication with dissatisfied employees, in contrast to those who are content in their roles. They also note that motivation tends to decline as employees approach retirement.

Lack of Mentorship

Ard and Beasley (2022) emphasise that mentoring is an essential component of succession planning because it contributes to continuity. Organisations often fail to use managerial personnel effectively for development and succession planning (Groves, 2007).

13. Analytical framework

This study employed a qualitative approach to analyse the challenges associated with succession planning for senior managers in South African State-Owned Enterprises. The analytical framework outlined the systematic process used to examine data collected through semi-structured interviews. Participant responses were analysed to identify recurring challenges in succession planning, guided by themes that emerged from the literature review. The framework involved coding interview data by tagging relevant statements and categorising them into overarching themes, such as mentorship gaps.

14. Conclusion

The literature review of the study highlighted succession planning and appreciation for it, exploring **Challenges for Succession Planning of senior managers in the SOEs**, followed by an analytical framework, indicating data being collected and how the data will be analysed.

15. Research Propositions

State-owned enterprises in South Africa face significant challenges in succession planning due to political interference and organisational culture.

Senior management transitions in South African SOEs are more successful when informal networks and mentoring play a role in preparing future managers.

The effectiveness of transition management in South African SOEs is influenced by the alignment of organisational goals and management development strategies.

16. Research Methodology

16.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the research methodology adopted for the study on **Challenges for Succession Planning of senior managers in the SOEs**. This chapter provides a detailed explanation of the research design, approach, and methods used to collect and analyse data. This chapter begins by presenting the research model and approach that guided the study, followed by the design employed to examine the selected SOEs. The data collection methods included semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. They are given in detail, along with the rationale for their use. Furthermore, the chapter outlines the sampling strategy used to select participants, ensuring the study captures diverse senior managers involved in succession planning.

To provide background, on the participants interviewed, a summary table of anonymised biographical information is included in Annexure E. The table outlines each participant's role, sector affiliation and years of experience within the sector. This helps situate their perspective within the broader institutional and professional landscape. The information is presented in a generalised format to preserve anonymity while supporting the credibility and depth of the qualitative analysis.

17. Research Design

Fossey et al. (2002) describe qualitative research as developing an understanding of experiences of people’s lives and social worlds; it also designates certain facets of a phenomenon (Carr, 1994). Werdiningsih (2022) highlights that research conducted in natural settings often involves direct participation by researchers, characterised by empirical language and a primary emphasis on processes rather than outcomes. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of phenomena as they unfold in their authentic contexts. The focus of qualitative research is on the sentiments and viewpoints gathered using various instruments and research techniques and places more emphasis on quality than quantity (Dhobi, 2023).

This type of research deals with the collection and analysis of written and verbal data (Jansen & Warren, 2020). A notable weakness of this type of research is the direct involvement of the researcher, which raises the risk of introducing bias into the study (Fossey et al., 2002). Making use of multiple methods makes qualitative research more credible because the strengths of one research tool supplement the weaknesses of the other (Mwita, 2022).

18. Data Collection Methods

18.1.1 Population

The selected population comprised individuals recognised for their extensive knowledge and experience within the organisations and served as cornerstones for an inquiry to unlock hidden data (Thomas, 2023). The conversation aims to unfold the meaning of their experiences and to uncover their lived world (Ruslin et al., 2022). In this study, senior management in SOEs was defined as individuals occupying executive roles responsible for shaping and executing organisational strategy. The participants interviewed included those in senior executive positions as well as key stakeholders involved in or influencing succession planning.

18.1.2 The sample

Mugo (2002) defines sampling as a set of respondents who are selected from a larger population for the purpose of a survey with the aim of drawing conclusions about populations. Acharya et al. (2013) call it a subset of the population selected to be representative of a larger population. The number of participants targeted between 15 and 20, as recommended by Baker and Edwards (2012), or until data saturation was achieved. Ultimately, 15 individuals were interviewed. The participants interviewed included individuals occupying senior executive positions and members of the executive leadership team.

18.1.3 Sampling Method

Sampling Method is the procedure of choosing a subdivision from the chosen population of research (Berndt, 2020), i.e. a small group is chosen to represent the whole (Rai & Thapa, 2015) and should be as accurate as possible to avoid errors and bias for maximum representativeness (Tyrer & Heyman, 2016).

Purposive Sampling: Used for selecting respondents who have a high chance of providing beneficial material or news (Campbell et al., 2020). Bullard (2019) says it's subjective sampling because researchers deliberately select participants on the grounds of specific characteristics and relevancy to their study, with the aim of including participants from different backgrounds to reduce bias and equal representation of the larger population. Tongco (2007) aligns with the view expressed by Campbell et al. (2020) and Bullard (2019), acknowledging the inherent bias associated with purposive sampling while noting that such bias enhances efficiency. Tongco (2007) further adds that purposive sampling is particularly effective when studying specific cultural domains with knowledgeable experts.

19. Research Instrument & Interview Limitations

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary research instrument for data collection in this study (Sathiyaseelan, 2015). This method required that the same words should not be repeated in each question, and the same meaning should be conveyed equally across participants for it to be reliable and valid (Barriball & While, 1994). This type of interview allows for the acquisition of in-depth information and evidence from interviewees while considering the focus of the study. The researcher also learns about their subjects' experiences, feelings, and hopes, and understands the worlds in which they live (Ruslin et al., 2022). This approach is not without challenges. Interviewers may be tempted to ask leading questions, which can influence participants' responses. Similarly, participants might provide answers they believe the interviewer wants to hear (George, 2022). Furthermore, the Hawthorne effect may arise, where participants alter their behaviour due to the feeling of being observed, ultimately affecting the validity of the research (Nikolopoulou, 2022). The data collection process for this study prioritised the convenience and comfort of participants, ensuring that interviews were conducted at a mutually agreed-upon time and location. Efforts were made to create an environment free from distractions and maintain professionalism and adhere to ethical standards throughout the process. Each interview was scheduled to last approximately 60 minutes and was audio-recorded upon obtaining the explicit consent of participants.

20. Data analysis strategies and interpretation

21.1 Thematic analysis

It is the process of recognising patterns or themes within qualitative data and using the relevant patterns in the data to address the issue in the research (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Thematic analysis is a flexible and useful research tool which potentially provides rich and detailed data from data extracts. Researchers develop themes and provide interpretation using the participants' own words in light of their own views (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Peel, 2020). The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim to maintain the accuracy and integrity of the participants' responses. Throughout the interview process, the researcher maintained a reflective journal to document personal observations, contextual insights, and emerging impressions. The resulting data were systematically organised and thoroughly described, followed by interpretive analysis aimed at uncovering underlying patterns and dimensions relevant to the study's focus on succession planning (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Interviews were recorded using both mobile and Microsoft Teams platforms to ensure data consistency. Recordings were played back and transcribed manually into Microsoft Word. To ensure accuracy, the researcher reviewed each transcript, also re-listened to the recording to allow for correction and clarification of participant responses. All participants were asked the same set of semi-structured questions in a consistent order, with flexibility for follow-up questions where relevant. The questions were grouped into themes and numbered according to the interview questions. For example, responses to question 8, which focused on the mentoring theme, were grouped under that particular theme. During transcription, responses were sorted and compiled under their respective themes, allowing for coherent and structured presentation of data. This thematic grouping enabled the identification of patterns across participants and supported a systematic analysis aligned with the study's objective.

21. Quality Assurance

External Validity (Transferability): This concept was used to reflect and ensure findings in the study that could be applicable in other contexts of qualitative research (Stalmeijer, Brown, & O'Brien, 2024). It will help other researchers to assess how applicable the findings are to their own research.

Internal Validity (Credibility): Credibility of the research findings was ensured by asking participants to review and verify the accuracy of their interview transcripts and the researchers' to establish the cause-and-effect relationship between the treatment and the observed outcome (Slack & Draugalis Jr, 2001).

Reliability (Dependability): The study ensured dependability so that the research findings remain consistent and replicable by other researchers.

22. Ethical Considerations

All individuals who were participating in the study were informed about what the study was about and how their data would be used. The PoPI Act, which is for the right to privacy and safeguarding personal identifiable information (PII) (Botha, Eloff, & Swart, 2015), was strictly adhered to throughout the study. To ensure confidentiality and protect participant identity, no names, job titles, or specific organisational names are reported. All participants and their respective organisations were anonymised and are referenced in generalised terms throughout the study.

The study report was submitted for review and approval by the relevant ethics committee of the University. This section outlines the ethical principles that were upheld throughout the research process to ensure the protection of participants' rights and privacy. The study adhered to established ethical standards, including informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the minimisation of potential harm.

23. Conclusion

This research proposal outlines a comprehensive study on the **Challenges for Succession Planning of senior managers in the SOEs**. It addresses a notable gap which the study aims to evaluate, i.e., current succession planning challenges of senior managers in SOEs. The reason for the frequent departures tells us that there is a succession planning issue. Using qualitative research via semi-structured interviews and questionnaires, the research will provide valuable insights into improving succession planning within SOEs. The literature review highlighted analytical frameworks which support the investigation. The Research Methodology presented the intended research instruments, design, and sample population. Ethical considerations and quality assurance will guide the study's credibility, reliability, and transferability. Ultimately, this research intends to contribute to more sustainable and efficient management transitions in the SOEs.

24. Research findings

24.1 Introduction

The research findings identified in this section present key findings that are produced in a number of themes that are organised into thematic categories relating to challenges for succession planning of senior managers in the South African State-owned enterprises. The findings addressed the question of the frequent turnover and departures of senior managers in these organisations, which highlighted a shortcoming of succession planning in these organisations. The themes are drawn from and closely reflect the core issues raised from the literature review. The findings present discussions which have been structured into five broad categories that elaborate on the core issues of the challenges of succession planning and the participants' lived experiences. The research findings are as follows: Process for identifying potential successors, employee retention, knowledge transfer, mentorship, and challenges. The categorised themes are not mutually exclusive. Each can be embedded into the other. The themes are presented in the order in which the structured interview sessions were conducted with the participants for ease of reading and progressive order.

25. Discussions of Research Findings

25.1 Process for Identifying Potential Successors

From the number of senior managers interviewed from the different state-owned enterprises, there were a number of different responses from the participants in relation to the process for identifying potential successors. The participants interviewed in this research are not given any pseudonyms, and their responses are captured as per theme during the interview. Some participants' responses are echoed below:

“The process has historically not been formal—it’s largely been informal. But recently, we’ve started moving toward formalising it. In the past, it was mostly based on recommendations. You know, someone who's a specialist in a certain area would groom someone else, and when a vacancy or new opportunity came up, that person would be recommended to take over.

Now, with all the new regulations and legislation aimed at increasing competition and transparency, that informal approach is being challenged. Just recommending someone isn’t enough anymore—you’ve got to open things up to internal and external competition.”

One participant shared, “We didn’t have any formal process in place for the organisation. We only really started doing something about it, I think, sometime last year—and even then, we only had one meeting.”

In contrast, another participant noted, “There is a well-documented process here.” They went on to explain how the process is meant to function in theory, including how potential successors are identified and what criteria they need to meet. “You also need to be given acting powers—like if I’m on leave or sick—then the manager who's part of the succession plan must act in my position so they can learn how to make decisions. So yes, there is that kind of formal process here. It does exist.”

“When I first arrived here, I was told that there were people who were part of the succession plan. Then this position became vacant—they applied, but unfortunately, they weren’t appointed. So I ask myself, why introduce a formal process if you’re not going to implement it?”

There are requirements that incumbents need to fulfil and be in possession of, i.e. relevant qualifications for the senior manager position. Being in an acting role without the relevant qualification can end up to not being considered for the role when someone else who has the relevant qualification who external.

“If you’re a senior manager and were to leave tomorrow—let’s, say within finance—you’ve got different divisions: financial reporting, supply chain, portfolio units, and credit risk management. So which one takes priority? You’d choose someone from a unit who has a helicopter view of the organisation. You select a person from the finance division and vet them based on qualifications, years of experience, critical work requirements, their performance over the past three years, and their organisational knowledge.”

“I’ve been here for about 15 years. We don’t necessarily have a promotion policy. You can groom people, but that doesn’t guarantee they’ll move up. When a position becomes vacant, it’s open to anyone—internal and external. Even if someone is acting in the role, they’re not guaranteed the position.”

“The process is that when you do your performance management, you identify your best performers. You look at their performance over time, then start understanding their ambitions for future growth, and begin equipping them for those potential roles.”

Another participant elaborated further: “The organisation goes through a structured process to develop a talent management and succession framework. Once talent is identified, we typically use what we call a 9-box grid to assess successors on two fronts—potential and performance.” They added, “This is a really formalised process. The organisation tries to grow its own timber—and by that, I mean promote people from within rather than always going outside, even though promotion is not guaranteed."

A different view highlighted that identifying successors goes beyond formal reviews: "It's more of a day-to-day thing. When someone does their work, how they handle delegation, how they execute tasks—you start to get a sense. Then during performance reviews, you talk about their aspirations—short, mid, and long term. I think all of that gives you an indication as a manager that this person could be a potential successor."

Interestingly, two senior managers from the same organisation gave differing yet complementary views. One stated, "Processes of succession planning in this company are not widely socialised." Another echoed this, saying, "There might be people in the company's talent pool, but they don't even know they're in it. I only found out because my old boss told me." They went on to clarify that even their development journey was self-initiated: "Everything I've done to prepare myself has been because I took the initiative—not because HR told me what to do to get ready for a management role."

"We don't have a succession planning process at the company that I work at" The participant continued to say that "it's not something that anyone tells you to do, it is your prerogative, depending on who your team is, you will identify potential successors and then start training them to take up from you, if I decided not to train my successor or my right handman, then I would leave and have that succession plan in place. It is their prerogative to choose whether they will train someone to take over from them or not, it is not a company formalised process.

There is a majority of concession across board from all the participants interviewed, which was the presence of a process or structured process for identifying potential successors, however, the echoing point across is that withing the presence of a formalised process being in place, the actual implementation and carrying out, following and adhering to the process is a different reality all together.

25.2 Employee Retention

25.2.1 Succession Planning affecting employee turnover

One theme echoed across all participants was the impact of succession planning—or the lack thereof—on employee turnover and morale. In every organisation interviewed, senior managers reported that employee morale was low, and that unclear or poorly managed succession planning contributed directly to staff exits. As one participant put it, “People didn’t know where they fit in terms of the organisational structure.”

Two participants from separate entities shared aligned experiences that highlighted the consequences of such gaps. One explained, “We had prepared someone to take over a specific role. That person was a specialist, and we had invested heavily in him. But when the position became available, we opened it to external candidates as well. Based on employment equity and other considerations, our internal candidate—who happened to be Caucasian—was not selected. We had to appoint someone from outside. Within eight months, the internal candidate left. All the preparation and investment we had made crumbled, and that area never recovered.”

Another participant offered a broader reflection on the organisational climate: “The morale is very low, to be honest with you. Most people within this organisation are actually looking for better opportunities elsewhere.”

A recurring trend highlighted by participants is the challenge of employee retention, particularly in relation to succession planning. Many participants expressed concern over the frequent practice of advertising senior-level positions externally, even when internal candidates have been acting in or groomed for those roles. This practice often leads to frustration and ultimately attrition among long-serving employees. As one participant noted, “Current recruitment at senior levels in this organisation has always been about candidates from outside.” Another added, “You can act in a position for two to three years and still not get that position,” while another emphasised, “There are so many executive positions; if someone feels like it’s taking too long, they can find that opportunity elsewhere—and they will leave.”

A contrasting perspective, however, reveals a deeper organisational attitude: some leaders within state-owned enterprises reportedly do not view succession planning as a credible or necessary tool for retaining talent. One participant explained, “I don’t think the company is actively trying to retain talent, particularly through succession planning. I say this because even very senior executives have made comments that they don’t believe in succession planning. There’s no such thing as a position being prepared for someone to just naturally grow into.”

Some participants also reflected on how broader dissatisfaction with organisational culture or treatment leads employees to leave, regardless of employment prospects. “Nowadays, if something doesn’t work for someone, they’ll resign and stay at home—even without a job,” one remarked. Others suggested that retention in some cases is not due to positive succession efforts but rather driven by economic insecurity. “The unemployment rate in South Africa is high—it’s not easy for someone to leave and find another job the next day. That, unfortunately, becomes the retention strategy.”

Lastly, participants pointed out an ironic pattern: although organisations invest in training and upskilling incumbents, the absence of structured and implemented succession planning results in those same individuals becoming more marketable and leaving. As one participant aptly put it, “One of the successes of this company is that it invests in training its people, but once you’ve trained and equipped those people, they become more attractive in the labour market.”

25.2.2 Skilled people leaving before they step into senior roles

When participants were asked what happens when skilled employees leave before stepping into senior roles, there was a shared sense of concern and frustration across the various state-owned enterprises. One participant summarised the impact simply: “It creates a huge vacuum.” Many of these organisations experience a compounded dilemma—individuals who are being groomed or acting in preparation for senior roles often exit the organisation, while the person they were meant to replace may simultaneously depart due to retirement or other reasons. This dual loss leaves institutions in a vulnerable position. One senior manager reflected, “We end up asking people who are supposed to retire to stay a bit longer, because now all of a sudden we realise that we haven’t transferred some of the skills or some of the knowledge that they have. It’s a general problem within this institution.” Another noted, “Performance management in the government is really very weak.”

There was also a strong sentiment of regret among senior managers regarding the departure of skilled employees. As one put it, “I’m very much for maximising internal candidates, letting them progress, because it motivates others and sends the message that we care. But when that person leaves—especially if they were one of the top performers—it can be very demotivating. What I’ve seen is that it opens a kind of gate. Others start to think it’s fine to just leave.” Participants also acknowledged a reactive rather than proactive approach to succession planning. One respondent reflected, “I don’t know whether it’s just not understanding the impact of what would happen if we don’t do proper succession planning, but somehow, we become more reactive than proactive.” The lack of adequate succession planning presents these encounters.

25.2.3 Succession Planning aids employee retention

When asked whether they believed adequate succession planning contributes to employee retention, all participants responded with a resounding yes. One participant affirmed, “I will definitely agree with it,” while another explained, “Of course, I’ll stay in an organisation where I know the company is building me up to become something. Even if the company is going through a few hurdles, I don’t think I’ll be prone to thinking of jumping ship—because I know what my career path looks like.”

Another participant emphasised that the challenge lies not in the absence of succession planning frameworks but in their execution: “It’s not that organisations don’t know what to do, and it’s not that they don’t have the necessary policies that speak to succession planning but something happens on the execution part of things.”

Another participant not only agreed that succession planning supports retention but also stressed the importance of implementing it honestly and with purpose. “Yes, it will help, provided it’s being implemented accordingly and honestly. Don’t do things for the sake of doing them. If you do things with purpose, employees will show commitment. They will pay you back, they will stay in the organisation.”

This sentiment underscores that many succession planning policies are either poorly executed or inconsistently applied. Additionally, some participants highlighted how being overlooked or mistreated can lower employee morale and cause dissatisfaction. Such discontent does not remain isolated—disgruntled employees may influence others, spreading negativity within the organisation. As one participant pointed out, “An unhappy employee can be very quick to disseminate that unhappiness to fellow employees in other divisions when they meet over tea or coffee outside the organisation.”

25.3 Knowledge Transfer

25.3.1 Knowledge transfer during senior role departure in the workplace

When asked about the processes in place for knowledge transfer upon the departure of senior personnel, participants across various state-owned enterprises acknowledged a significant gap. One participant candidly admitted, “Look, we don’t have a programme which talks to that. If it’s there, I don’t know about it—and if I don’t know about it, it means it’s not being applied, which means it can just be a piece of paper.” In most cases, knowledge transfer is not systematically managed but rather occurs informally through on-the-job training. As some described it: “We look at knowledge transfer more like training,” and “It’s basically on-the-job training… it's more around the people just looking at what I’m doing and learning.”

The process also appears to depend heavily on the individual senior manager’s willingness to share knowledge. Some take the initiative to document their work meticulously, while others leave behind no records. “It's a mixed bag,” explained one respondent. “We have some individuals who are meticulous—they document everything: meeting minutes, notes, processes—and you can track exactly what they’ve been doing. I still have files from people who left 20, 25 years ago. Those are incredible resources. But then you also have people who’ve been around forever, and when they leave, nothing is documented. They say, ‘No, I left everything there,’ but you look, and there’s nothing. So, it really depends some people value leaving a legacy, and others don’t.” Another participant added, “You want each line manager to identify a successor and engage them to start transferring knowledge to that individual and give them opportunities to act in the role when you're not there.”

Documentation practices vary between entities. In some, there is a formal requirement to record work processes for future incumbents. In others, it is left to the discretion of the departing manager. A recurrent issue raised was the timing of this documentation, often only requested when the employee gives notice of resignation. “What happens, which is a serious risk, is that when someone resigns or shows intention to leave, they are suddenly told to prepare a close-out report for the past five years. And they’re doing it during their notice period.” Some companies have taken initiatives to enforce documentation: “The company has started documenting business processes to force people to record what they do.” Others described a more informal practice of preparing a comprehensive “handover file,” which includes all outstanding matters for the incoming employee.

However, due to the highly specialised and long-tenured nature of work in some SOEs, transferring knowledge cannot always be accomplished in a short time frame. “It’s years and years of knowledge, it’s not something that you can actually transfer in a short period of time,” said one participant. Another elaborated, “You can phone them years later and they’ll still answer, because that’s just the dynamic of where we work. You can’t teach the fundamentals of, say, what happened in construction in 2010—it’s too far back. People stay here for years and become subject matter experts. It’s very hard to replace or transfer that knowledge. So when someone leaves, there are massive gaps we have to try and fill.”

25.3.2 Effectiveness of knowledge transfer

When participants were asked how effectively knowledge is passed on when a senior manager leaves the company, it turns out that subject matter experts transfer knowledge more effectively than those without technical expertise.

“I would say it’s very effective, especially when it comes to the subject matter experts. We had someone who ran a series of workshops and training sessions, including one-on-one engagements. People could ask her specific questions about challenges they were facing. They could, you know, give practical examples like, ‘I’m on this screen, and this is what I’m encountering.’ Yes, I attended the training, so it was very effective.

It’s not just the initial training, whether delivered in a classroom, trial, or physical session, but even afterwards. When I go to practice what I learned, I can call and say, ‘I’m stuck. This is how I’m stuck,’ or ‘I tried this and here’s where I got stuck.’ Then the person would guide me and show me, ‘No, when you encounter something like this, this is how you approach it.’ So, it becomes really effective.

In terms of continuity, you’re upskilling other people. You’re basically making them subject matter experts, too. So, once you leave, you’ve left confident people on that subject you’ve left other subject matter experts—and in that way, the knowledge continues.”

25.3.3 Challenges observed when a new senior manager takes over from the previous one

The analysis of participants’ responses revealed a complex interplay of organisational and relational dynamics shaped by experiences with senior managers. The findings highlight a workplace marked by low employee morale, resistance to change and new leadership, a blame game culture, lack of competencies and technical skills, and difficulties adapting to organisational culture and flexibility.

“And our work, in a way, is very technical. It requires technical expertise. So somebody who doesn’t have the specific background or experience finds it difficult to catch on. It’s very operational, if I can put it like that. Even at higher levels, you need to have operational insights. So, if you come in from outside as a senior person, yes, it might work because you can’t expect technical people to do the work for you. But if you don’t understand some of the technical aspects, it can be quite challenging.”

In cases where a lack of capacity negatively affected organisational performance, the organisation stepped in to manage the situation by involving the incumbent to help bridge the gap and minimise impact.

“I’ve seen instances where the incumbent inherited the role but wasn’t ready yet. You then experience gaps and poor performance, and the challenge becomes how to capacitate that individual later to close the gap.”

“In such instances, you try to manage the situation by getting help to close the gap as soon as possible, so the impact on the organisation is minimised.”

Within these state-owned enterprises (SOEs), a recurring pattern of blame was also observed. New managers often blamed existing personnel for organisational disorder or inefficiencies, suggesting that those in place lacked the competence or failed to maintain operational standards. This blame game exacerbated tensions and hindered collaboration during leadership transitions.

"So, when a new manager takes over from the previous one here, which I think is somewhat unique to this organisation, there's always a blame game. The new manager claims that everyone currently here doesn't know what they're doing, that everything is a mess. People can't even do basic things."

Another participant from a different SOE echoed similar challenges:

"Someone will come in and say, 'This is not how they should have done it,' and some don't want to let go of their projects."

Another important theme that emerged was the internal response to appointing a new senior manager. Rather than a smooth transition, participants revealed underlying resistance among existing staff, marked by animosity, distrust, and sometimes overt or covert attempts to undermine the new manager's authority and effectiveness.

"In an environment where morale is low, toxicity is high."

"We've been sitting here for years waiting for that position; what happens often is there's an element of sabotage."

"What I'm saying is from my HR experience, there are people who have acted in the HR executive position for years. Then, when a new executive is brought in from outside, those people start sabotaging the newcomer."

A further significant point raised was around organisational culture and purpose. Participants indicated that problems arise when new senior managers stepping in don't understand why the organisation exists.

“I’ve seen this often. You bring someone in, and they don’t understand our mission. They bring their own assumptions and try to reshape everything based on that; they don’t build, they disrupt.”

25.4 Mentorship

25.4.1 Mentorship for future senior managers

When participants were asked whether their organisations have formal mentorship programs aimed at developing future senior managers, responses revealed a wide spectrum of experiences and perspectives.

Participant responses reflect a diverse and complex landscape of mentorship within their organisations. While some organisations had clear structures ranging from formal programs supported by service providers to internally coordinated matching systems, many others reported either informal setups or a complete lack of sustainable mentorship initiatives.

“Yes, we do have different programs. Some are more informal — individuals draft their own development plans, and then we try to find ways to resource those plans.”

“I don’t know, maybe it’s there, but I don’t know. Yeah. As I say, the only mentorship program I know is with an engineering consulting company contracted to help us with the delivery of our capital projects.”

In organisations with existing programs, mentorship was often described as voluntary and largely self-driven. Individuals were encouraged to engage with mentors, often through partnerships with professional bodies or internal coaching schemes. However, this encouragement was not always backed by accountability or oversight, leaving mentorship as a matter of personal choice rather than institutional culture.

“Yes, there is a form of mentorship, so I almost want to say mentorship is your own prerogative — you’re not forced to be mentored. If you choose not to have a mentor, you don’t have to. We do promote having an internal coach and a mentor. Internally, you should have a coach, but for your career, you should have a mentor. We sign up with a lot of professional bodies—there’s a whole lot of bodies that you can join, that have mentors in your field or profession. So normally, you would be encouraged to do it, but it’s not forced.”

Some participants highlighted targeted mentorship efforts for senior management, such as year-long programs with structured modules or academy-based development tracks that pair emerging leaders with both mentors and coaches.

“But what I know is that at senior management level, last year 2024, the senior managers went through mentorship via a service provider who was brought in to run the program. The majority of senior managers were subscribed to the mentorship, which lasted for a year. There were modules and subjects that were discussed regarding mentorship.”

“Yes, they do. So, when you come out of the Academy and are identified as a future leader, you are allocated a mentor and a coach who helps you through the entire journey and prepares you for the next position, should the opportunity arise.”

“Yes, we do. We have mentorship programs there’s mentorship for youth and general mentorship for anyone. Usually, there’s an open period during the year when mentors raise their hands to say, ‘I’m able to mentor, and these are my expertise areas.’ Then, people looking for mentorship indicate their interest, and there’s a matching exercise to connect mentees with mentors, so they can take it forward. So, yes, we do.”

Despite these positive examples, a common concern was the sustainability of such efforts. Several participants indicated that mentorship programs had been implemented in the past but lost momentum or dissolved due to changes in executive management, and new leaders often not following through on previous initiatives. Others criticised mentorship efforts as superficial or symbolic, existing more on paper than in practice.

“When leadership changes, sometimes programs fall through the cracks especially if they were initiatives of the previous leader. Now, we’re trying to revive them.”

“So, it’s something that we had before, but it died down.”

“They claim they do, on paper, but in practice, there’s nothing. OK, yeah. So, if you went to our HR now, they might show you some initiative on mentorship—maybe one or two people mentored. But to be honest, it’s not at a scale where I would say it’s really efficient or effective. As I sit here, I’ve never heard of an initiative to ensure people are mentored within the company or organisation.”

25.4.2 Effectiveness of the current mentorship programs in preparing potential successors for senior management roles

Building on earlier insights about the fragmented presence of mentorship structures in some organisations, participants' feedback on their effectiveness paints a varied picture, largely dependent on contextual factors.

Several responses pointed out that the success of mentorship initiatives hinges on the quality of the mentor-mentee relationship.

"It depends greatly on the two individuals—the mentor and the mentee. They need to have a common understanding and be able to have frank discussions. The relationship should be based on mutual understanding. There should be no animosity between them."

"So, I think it depends on the mentor and how committed they are. Some are more committed than others. But as long as both mentors and mentees are committed to the process, it becomes effective. So, how effective the program is depends on the two parties involved and their level of commitment."

However, other participants were sceptical about the overall effectiveness of their organisations' programs. Some estimated low success rates of around 20% to 30%, mainly due to a lack of key ingredients—the "right mentor" and the "right mentee." Others recalled formal reviews concluding that mentorship programs had not delivered the expected leadership outcomes, seeing the programs as more symbolic than impactful, existing on paper but not in practice.

"If I had to give it a number, I'd say around a 20 to 30% success rate. A lot of programs don't succeed because all the ingredients need to come together: the right mentor, the right mentee, and the right environment. Often, we only get one or two successes out of ten."

"Yeah, I was in the meeting when it was reviewed last year—it was not successful."

There was strong consensus that mentorship effectiveness depends heavily on interpersonal dynamics like mutual respect, clarity of purpose, and open communication between mentors and mentees.

25.5 Challenges of succession planning for senior managers

Participants highlighted a range of critical barriers that hinder effective succession planning for senior management roles. A recurring theme was the lack of intentionality—organisationswere often described as reactive rather than proactive, with succession planning falling low on the priority list.

"I think the challenge is, it's not a priority for some. Some do view it as a priority, but we are very much in firefighting mode a lot of the time. So, when you're calm, stable, and hitting your targets, your focus can be on fundamentals that build a solid foundation. But when you're firefighting, you lack the ability to look at those things because you're just too busy."

Structural limitations were also cited, especially in organisationswith lean hierarchies where upward movement is restricted unless existing senior personnel vacate their roles. Senior managers tend to stay in positions for long periods without exiting, so the incumbent hoping to succeed might not find the opportunity. Some are reluctant to let go of control and influence.

“The main challenge is people not wanting to leave. If someone doesn’t vacate their position, you can’t move up. The structure is lean—someone has to go for someone else to grow.”

Allegations of favouritism and perceptions of inequity and entitlement surfaced when newer, qualified staff were earmarked over long-serving employees without formal credentials, breeding resentment and mistrust. Also mentioned was the lack of desire to upskill by further study in order to qualify for particular roles. The desire for succession might be there, but the initiative to actually upskill is often missing; there is a level of comfort and a lackadaisical attitude toward earning higher qualifications.

“Our current acting CEO couldn’t apply because he didn’t meet the requirements. If you’re acting and want the role permanently, you must upskill yourself get the right qualifications. Acting gives you exposure, but it’s no guarantee.”

“You will find individuals who are good at what they do but don’t have the will to do anything beyond their current role.”

“Others are not willing to study further to be capacitated.”

“They want to grow but don’t want to suffer to get what it takes to be at a higher level.”

“They want it just given to them, feeling entitled because ‘I’ve been here maybe 10 years, so I should be given a higher rank.’ But they don’t want to go through the process of gaining more understanding, training, and capacitation.”

"It's also that transformation challenge when you say, 'This is the person identified for the position,' it can cause problems. People look at the identified person and think there's favouritism. For example, the identified person has qualifications and came here later, was interviewed, but others have been here 20 years with zero qualifications. So, the older employees feel undervalued."

Another challenge lies in employee readiness and motivation. Some may be highly competent but lack the ambition or willingness to take on senior responsibilities, "putting your head on the block," as one participant put it. Others resist the idea of mentorship and upskilling successors, seeing it as a waste of time or a burden.

"Some people don't even want to be CEOs."

"It's because when you move from one level to the next, there's an added level of responsibility. If you're not used to it, or don't like putting your head on the block and making tough decisions, you won't step up even if you're capable."

"Others are very good and can grow or empower others, but they don't have the interest in doing that. For them, training someone else feels like a waste of time."

In conclusion, participants acknowledged the importance of succession planning and recognised its vital need; however, it is often obstructed by structural rigidity, interpersonal politics, and, most of all, a lack of institutional commitment.

26. Conclusion

Chapter four provided a comprehensive account of the research findings related to succession planning and organisational continuity. Key areas examined included the processes used to identify potential successors for senior management, the influence of succession planning on employee retention and turnover, and whether participants believed that adequate succession planning contributes to employee retention. Findings also explored how knowledge transfer typically occurs when senior managers exit their roles, and challenges were observed when new senior managers take over from the previous ones.

The chapter also assessed the availability and effectiveness of mentorship programs for developing future senior managers and maintaining consistency. Finally, the challenges for succession planning for senior managers, the dynamics involved that affect organisational stability.

27. Conclusions and recommendations

27.1 Introduction

In this chapter, an amalgamation of data that emerged from the qualitative semi-structured interviews offered in chapter four is provided. This study's primary objective is where the discussion is structured around namely to examine the challenges hindering the succession planning of senior managers in South African SOEs.

27.1.1 Challenges hindering the succession planning of senior managers in South African SOEs

27.1.2 Process for potential successors

To begin understanding what hinders succession planning for senior managers, it is essential to first examine the processes organisations use to identify potential successors. Insights gathered from various senior managers across different state-owned enterprises indicate a wide spectrum of approaches, ranging from formal, structured procedures to entirely informal, discretionary practices.

While some organisations have made efforts to institutionalise succession planning through frameworks like the 9-box grid, performance tracking, and leadership acting roles, others still rely heavily on informal recommendations or individual managerial discretion. Even in cases where formal procedures exist, many participants pointed out a clear disconnect between documentation and implementation. Some senior managers discovered they were part of succession pools only through informal channels, and others emphasised that mentorship and development often relied more on personal initiative than on HR-led strategies. A recurring concern was that acting in a senior role or being groomed did not guarantee promotion, especially if qualifications or internal processes were not aligned. Ultimately, the findings reveal that while formal succession planning processes may exist on paper, their effectiveness is undermined by inconsistent application, lack of transparency, and limited strategic follow-through.

27.1.3 Employee retention

To understand the effectiveness of succession planning, it is crucial to assess its impact on employee retention. This section summarises participants' insights on how succession planning influences turnover, the departure of skilled individuals before promotion, and whether well-executed succession strategies foster loyalty and commitment.

27.1.3.1 Succession Planning Affecting Employee Turnover

Participants consistently reported that poor or inconsistent succession planning negatively affects employee morale and turnover rates. Many internal candidates who were groomed or acted in roles for extended periods were ultimately overlooked, leading to frustration and departures. External recruitment for senior roles, even when internal talent existed, was frequently cited as demotivating. A few respondents noted that some senior leaders don't believe in or support succession planning, further diminishing its influence as a talent-retention tool. While some employees remain due to limited external opportunities, others leave out of dissatisfaction—sometimes without securing new jobs—highlighting the emotional and cultural toll of being sidelined. Furthermore, although organisations invest in employee training, the absence of clear progression pathways often results in trained individuals leaving for better prospects elsewhere.

27.1.3.2 Skilled People Leaving Before They Step into Senior Roles

A recurring concern was that high-potential employees often exit the organisation before ascending into senior roles, creating operational gaps. This loss is particularly damaging when compounded by the departure or retirement of current senior managers, leaving organisations scrambling to retain institutional knowledge. Senior managers acknowledged that this attrition sends a discouraging signal to remaining staff, sometimes triggering a cascade of resignations. The consensus is that inadequate or delayed succession planning fosters reactivity instead of foresight, weakening the internal leadership pipeline and organisational resilience.

27.1.3.3 Succession Planning Aids Employee Retention

Despite the challenges, all participants agreed that effective succession planning—when properly implemented—can significantly enhance employee retention. Knowing that an organisation is intentionally building future leaders motivates individuals to stay, even during times of uncertainty. However, participants emphasised that policies alone are not enough; execution must be deliberate, fair, and transparent. Where succession is handled with purpose and integrity, employees are more likely to remain loyal, driven by a sense of inclusion and growth. In contrast, a lack of follow-through or perceived inequities may breed discontent, which can quietly spread across teams and undermine broader morale.

27.1.4 Knowledge transfer

When trying to understand what hinders succession planning for senior managers in state-owned enterprises (SOEs), knowledge transfer stands out as a critical factor.

27.1.4.1 Knowledge transfer during senior role departure

Across most entities, there is no formal or consistently applied process to ensure that institutional knowledge is passed on when a senior leader exits. Many participants described knowledge transfer as informal, mostly "on-the-job training," or simply observing someone's work. As one participant bluntly put it, "If it's there, I don't know about it… it means it's not being applied—it's just a piece of paper." In some cases, outgoing managers leave behind detailed documentation, but this depends entirely on their personal initiative. More often, documentation only happens once the person resigns, leaving successors scrambling to fill knowledge gaps in a short notice period. In roles requiring years of technical experience, participants said it's often "very hard to replace or to transfer," especially when institutional memory is concentrated in long-serving individuals.

27.1.4.2 Effectiveness of knowledge transfer and challenges with incoming senior manager

The effectiveness of knowledge transfer varies widely. Where subject matter experts are involved, it can be powerful—one manager shared how a colleague ran workshops and stayed available for support: "When I got stuck, I could call her, and she would guide me." However, this level of dedication is rare. Many organisations face serious challenges when a new senior manager takes over, including resistance from long-term staff, skill mismatches, and even sabotage: "We've been sitting here for years waiting for that position… sabotage is bound to happen." Some new managers face resentment and are undermined by those who feel overlooked, while others struggle to adjust due to a lack of technical background. Without a consistent culture of knowledge sharing and support, succession becomes reactive, strained, and often ineffective.

27.1.5 Mentorship

To better understand the leadership development landscape, the study explored whether organisations have mentorship programs designed to prepare future senior managers, and how effective those programs are in practice. The findings reveal both promising efforts and critical shortcomings, pointing to inconsistent execution across entities.

27.1.5.1 Mentorship for future senior managers

While some SOEs have structured mentorship programmes ranging from formal initiatives led by external service providers to internal academy-based tracks, many others rely on informal, voluntary, or ad hoc systems. “Mentorship is your own prerogative... we encourage it, but it’s not forced,” one participant noted. In some cases, new managers are matched with mentors and coaches upon being identified as future leaders. Others described mentorship as episodic or symbolic, existing "on paper but not in practice." A recurring issue was the collapse of mentorship programmes following leadership changes: “When leadership changes, sometimes programmes fall through the cracks.” This has left many employees without sustained support, even when initial structures were promising.

27.1.5.2 Effectiveness of current mentorship programs

The effectiveness of mentorship programs in preparing successors for senior leadership roles varied widely. Where programs were seen as successful, participants attributed impact to strong mentor-mentee relationships grounded in mutual respect, shared goals, and regular engagement. However, many participants expressed scepticism, citing low success rates (as low as 20–30%) and inadequate program design. The lack of alignment between the right mentor, mentee, and organisational environment was repeatedly mentioned as a limiting factor. In some organisations, mentorship efforts were reviewed internally and found to be ineffective, reinforcing the perception that the mentorship function was not delivering on its intended leadership outcomes. Across the board, participants agreed that success depends less on having a program on paper and more on the commitment, communication, and clarity between the individuals involved.

27.1.6 Challenges for succession planning for senior managers

The research revealed a broad set of challenges that hinder effective succession planning for senior management. A major theme among participants was the lack of strategic intent succession planning is often not treated as a priority.

participants pointed to a range of structural, cultural, and behavioural obstacles. A key issue is the lack of intentionality; succession planning is frequently deprioritised as organisations remain in “firefighting mode,” reacting to crises instead of building leadership pipelines. As one participant stated, “If you are calm, stable and hitting your targets, then your focus could be on fundamentals... but if you’re in firefighting, you lack the ability to look at those things.” Lean organisational structures further complicate matters, as promotion is often only possible when a senior post is vacated. “The main challenge is people not wanting to leave,” said one respondent, “The structure is lean someone has to go for someone else to grow.”

Favouritism, entitlement, and resistance to upskilling emerged as dominant concerns. Participants described a culture where long-serving staff feel overlooked when newer, more qualified individuals are identified for leadership. “These ones have been here 20 years with zero qualification… now the person that comes five years later is identified,” noted one manager. Meanwhile, acting roles create false expectations, with some failing to meet basic requirements. “Acting gives you exposure, but it’s no guarantee.” Others resist senior roles entirely, lacking interest in added responsibility: “They want the role, but they don’t want to suffer to get what it takes.” Some staff view mentoring as “a waste of time.”

Succession planning is very well acknowledged as vital; however, the commitment to the implementation thereof is unfortunately a different matter altogether.

27.2 Conclusion

The findings from this study paint a compelling picture of the current state of succession planning within state-owned enterprises, highlighting both structural intent and operational gaps. While several organisations have made progress in formalising the process of identifying potential successors through tools like talent pools, performance reviews, and leadership development initiatives, there remains a significant disconnect between policy and practice. This gap affects not only leadership continuity but also employee retention, morale, and institutional knowledge retention.

Mentorship emerged as a potentially powerful lever for preparing future leaders, yet its impact is diluted by inconsistent execution, limited accountability, and fluctuating organisational support. Knowledge transfer, too, is often reactive and unstructured, leading to capability gaps when seasoned leaders exit without passing on critical expertise. The study also surfaced enduring challenges that hinder succession planning altogether, from entrenched hierarchies and perceptions of favouritism to a lack of motivation among potential successors and resistance from current leaders. Collectively, these themes underscore the need for a more intentional and sustained approach to succession planning one that prioritises both people and implementation to ensure successful organisational continuity.

27.3 Recommendations

27.3.1Processes for Identifying Potential Successors

Organisations should formalise and institutionalise transparent succession planning frameworks that are consistently applied across all divisions. This includes establishing clear criteria for readiness, such as performance metrics, leadership potential, qualifications, and organisational knowledge, supported by structured tools like talent matrices or 9-box grids. Performance management discussions should explicitly incorporate career aspirations and development planning, ensuring that potential successors are not only identified but also nurtured through deliberate developmental pathways. Furthermore, succession planning efforts should be communicated openly to reduce ambiguity and foster employee trust in the process.

27.3.2 Employee Retention: Factors Affecting Turnover and Skilled Employee Attrition

To mitigate employee turnover linked to succession issues, organisations must integrate retention strategies with career development opportunities. Internal talent should be prioritised for advancement where possible, and clarity regarding promotion potential must be upheld to maintain morale. Establishing merit-based promotion policies, coupled with consistent feedback loops, can alleviate perceptions of unfairness. Moreover, exit interviews and retention diagnostics should be utilised to gain insights into turnover triggers. Addressing these insights through policy revisions and employee engagement initiatives can improve tenure among high-potential staff, especially those close to stepping into senior roles.

27.3.3 Knowledge Transfer and Leadership Transitions

To preserve institutional knowledge, organisations must implement systematic knowledge transfer mechanisms tied to succession planning. Structured handover processes, shadowing periods, and role-specific documentation should be embedded into the exit protocols for senior managers. Leadership continuity can also be supported through phased transitions, where incoming leaders are given opportunities to learn from outgoing incumbents before assuming full responsibility. In parallel, senior managers should be held accountable for identifying and preparing successors early, minimising operational disruption during leadership changes.

27.3.4 Mentorship for Future Senior Managers and Its Effectiveness

Effective mentorship should be repositioned as a strategic organisational function rather than an optional or informal practice. Institutions must establish mentorship frameworks that pair emerging leaders with experienced managers, based on compatibility in career paths and leadership philosophy. These programs should include clearly defined objectives, timeframes, and feedback mechanisms to ensure alignment with leadership development goals. Moreover, mentorship participation should be formally recognised within performance evaluations of both mentors and mentees to enhance accountability and organisational buy-in.

27.3.5 Overcoming Challenges in Succession Planning

Addressing the systemic barriers to succession planning requires a cultural shift that values leadership development as a strategic imperative. Organisations should embed succession planning into their annual strategic cycle and allocate dedicated resources to support its implementation. Leadership should be trained to embrace openness in identifying successors, avoiding favouritism or entitlement-based promotion narratives. In addition, capacity-building programs aimed at enhancing qualifications and readiness among internal candidates must be encouraged and incentivised. Finally, succession planning must be regularly reviewed and refined to adapt to organisational changes, ensuring sustained relevance and effectiveness.

28. Suggestions for Further Research

While this study offers valuable insights into succession planning practices within state-owned enterprises, several areas need further exploration in future research. First, the processes for identifying potential successors could benefit from longitudinal studies that examine the evolution and outcomes of formalised succession plans over time. Such research could assess the correlation between clearly defined processes and actual leadership mobility, providing evidence for refining internal talent development models.

Second, in light of widespread concerns around employee turnover and retention, further research should explore the psychological contract between employees and organisations, particularly how perceived fairness, transparency, and access to advancement opportunities influence retention decisions. Quantitative studies might also investigate retention rates among staff exposed to structured development programs compared to those who are not.

Third, the area of knowledge transfer remains underdeveloped in succession planning literature. Future research could analyse the effectiveness of specific handover strategies and tools used during leadership transitions, as well as the organisational enablers and barriers that influence successful institutional knowledge preservation.

Regarding mentorship, further inquiry is warranted into the institutional design of mentorship systems, particularly in terms of monitoring, evaluation, and feedback mechanisms. Comparative case studies across sectors could yield useful insights into which mentorship structures are most effective at preparing successors for complex leadership roles.

Lastly, the challenges inherent in succession planning—particularly those related to organisational culture, generational divides, and power dynamics would benefit from more focused, qualitative inquiry. Future research could explore the lived experiences of both incumbents and emerging leaders to better understand how internal resistance, favouritism perceptions, and skill gaps affect leadership continuity. Additionally, studies that assess the role of leadership mindset and political will in enabling or constraining succession planning efforts could further enrich the academic discourse in this field.

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ANNEXURE A: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This annexure contains the semi-structured interview guide used to collect data from senior managers in selected SOEs.

Interview Guide:
Challenges for Succession Planning of Senior Managers in SOEs
In-depth semi-structured interview – Audio recorded

Participant Details:
Name:
Title/Position:
Organisation:
Date of Interview:
Location:
Interview Conducted By: Samuel Kukame
Semi-Structured Interview Guide Interview Questions (10 Questions).

Process for Potential Successors

1. What is the process of identifying potential successors for executives?

Employee Retention

2. How has succession planning affected/influenced employee turnover, positively or negatively?
3. What happens when skilled people leave before they can step into the senior roles?
4. Do you think adequate succession planning aids with employee retention? How does/doesn't it impact it?

Knowledge Transfer

5. How do people usually pass on their knowledge when they leave a senior role in your company?
6. How effectively is the knowledge passed?
7. What challenges have you observed when a new senior manager takes over from someone else?

Mentorship

8. Does your organisation have mentorship for future senior managers?
9. How effective are current mentorship programs in preparing potential successors for senior management roles?

Challenges

10. What, in your view, are the challenges for succession planning for senior managers in your company?

Annexure B: Participant Information Sheet

Wits Business School

Sculpting global leaders

Dear Sir / Madam

My name is Samuel Kukame. I am a Masters student in Business Administration at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. My supervisor is Dr Zanele Ndaba. I am conducting a research study about Succession Planning. The study title is **Challenges for Succession Planning of Senior Managers in the SOEs**.

I am inviting you to take part in an interview/. If you decide to take part, your participation in this research study will last about 60 minutes The interview will take place at [convenient place at during work hours.

With your permission, I would like to audio record the interview/. This data will be stored in my laptop for 5 years and/or deleted after 5 years. Only the researcher will have access to the data.

The interview will be confidential and anonymous. When I share the results of the research study, I will not include your name or anything else that could identify you. With your permission, other researchers may use the data collected from this research study, but your name and any personal information will not be used or passed on.

If you decide to take part in the research study, it should be because you want to volunteer. You do not have to take part. You can stop being in the study at any time. You do not have to answer any questions if you do not want to. You will not get any direct benefits if you choose to join the research study. You will not lose any services, benefits or rights you would normally have if you decide not to join. Taking part in the research study will not cost you anything. You will not be paid for being in this research study.

The risks for this research study are no more than what happens in everyday life, OR some of the questions asked may make you feel sad or upset. If this happens, I will stop the interview and continue another time.

This research study will be written up as a research report. The report will be available on the university library website. If you would like to receive a summary of this report, I will be happy to send it to you.

If you have any questions during or afterwards about this research study, feel free to contact me or my supervisor on the details listed below. If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical procedures of this research study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), telephone +27(0) 11 717 1408, email hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za

Yours sincerely,
Samuel

Researcher:
Samuel Kukame, 579610@students.wits.ac.za 072-596-7990

Supervisor:
Dr., Zanele Ndaba, Zanele.ndaba@wits.ac.za

ANNEXURE C: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Title of project Challenges for Succession Planning of Senior Managers in SOEs

Name of researcher Samuel Kukame

I, …………………………………………., agree to participate in this research project.

I agree to the following:

(Please circle the relevant options below)

The research study was explained to me. I understand what this study is about.	YES	NO
I understand that I can volunteer to take part in the study	YES	NO
I agree that the interview/focus group/other activity may be audio recorded	YES	NO
I agree that direct quotations from my interview/focus group/other activity may be used by the researcher in their research report/ manuscript/book chapter	YES	NO
I agree that my participation will remain anonymous (my name or other identifying data will not be used by the researcher in their research report/manuscript/book chapter)	YES	NO
I agree that other researchers may use the information I provide in my interview/focus group/other activity (depending on their own ethics clearance being obtained) but my name and any personal information will not be used or passed on	YES	NO

……………………………………… (signature)
……………………………………… (name of participant)
……………………………………… (date)

……………………………………… (signature)
……………………………………… (name of researcher/person seeking consent)
……………………………………… (date)

ANNEXURE D: ETHICS CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

Graduate School of Business Administration
University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

Wits Business School

Wits Business School Ethics Committee
Constituted under the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical)

Ethics Clearance Certificate

Ethics protocol number: WBS/BA579610/234

This certificate is only valid with a legitimate ethics protocol number and signed by the Researcher (below).

This certificate is only valid if accompanied by formal permission from the relevant stakeholder(s).

Project title	Challenges for succession planning of senior managers in the SEOs
Investigator / Researcher	MR Samuel Kukame
Nature of Project	MBA (Research Article)
Decision of the Committee	Approved, provided stakeholders and participants are guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality.
Issue Date of Certificate	24/10/2024
Expiry date	Date of submission of the project / research report
Chairperson	Dr Ayanda Magida ☎ +27 11 717 3953 ayanda.magida@wits.ac.za

Declaration by Researcher

One copy must be signed by the Researcher and returned to the Chairperson of the Wits Business School Ethics Committee.

I fully understand the conditions under which I am authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure to be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I undertake to resubmit the protocol to the Committee.

Signature

25/10/2024
Date:

ANNEXURE E: ORGANISATIONAL DESCRIPTIONS

ORGANISATION	PARTICIPANT ID	YEARS OF EXPERIENCE	ROLE LEVEL	SECTOR
ORGANISATION A	PATRICIPANT B	OVER 10 YEARS	SENIOR MANAGER	State-owned enterprise in the aviation infrastructure sector.
ORGANISATION B	PATRICIPANT C	OVER 10 YEARS	SENIOR MANAGER	State-owned enterprise in the forestry and natural resources sector.
ORGANISATION C	PATRICIPANT D	OVER 20 YEARS	EXECUTIVE	Public research institutions focused on scientific and industrial innovation.
ORGANISATION D	PATRICIPANT F	OVER 15 YEARS	EXECUTIVE	Non-profit organisation involved in national disability advocacy and inclusive access.
ORGANISATION E	PATRICIPANT G	OVER 10 YEARS	SENIOR MANAGER	State-owned enterprise in national utility infrastructure and energy.
ORGANISATION F	PATRICIPANT H	OVER 20 YEARS	SENIOR MANAGER	State-owned entity offering special risk insurance services within the financial sector.
ORGANISATION G	PATRICIPANT I	OVER 20 YEARS	EXECUTIVE	A development finance institution supporting

				industrial and economic growth.
ORGANISATION H	**PATRICIPANT J**	**OVER 25 YEARS**	**EXECUTIVE**	Regulatory authority overseeing safety compliance in national transport systems.
ORGANISATION I	**PATRICIPANT K**	**OVER 15 YEARS**	**EXECUTIVE**	A government agency responsible for taxation and revenue collection.
ORGANISATION J	**PATRICIPANT L**	**OVER 20 YEARS**	**SENIOR MANAGER**	State-owned enterprise managing public rail transportation and commuter services.
ORGANISATION K	**PATRICIPANT M**	**OVER 10 YEARS**	**SENIOR MANAGER**	Public entity engaged in national content dissemination and cultural programming.
ORGANISATION L	**PATRICIPANT N**	**OVER 15 YEARS**	**SENIOR MANAGER**	Regulatory authority in regional transport logistics and mobility compliance.
ORGANISATION M	**PATRICIPANT O**	**OVER 10 YEARS**	**SENIOR MANAGER**	Public entity operating in affordable housing finance and human settlements development.

ANNEXURE F: TITLE APPROVAL

UNIVERSITY OF THE
WITWATERSRAND,
JOHANNESBURG

Private Bag 3 Wits, 2050
Fax:
Tel:

Reference: Ms Jennifer Mgolodela
E-mail: jennifer.mgolodela@wits.ac.za

16 January 2025
Person No: 579610
PAG

Mr S Kukame
58 Lydia street Brichleigh North
Birchleigh Ext 3
1618
South Africa

Dear Mr Samuel Kukame

Master of Business Administration: Approval of Title

We have pleasure in advising that your proposal entitled *Challenges for succession planning of senior managers in the SEOs* has been approved. Please note that any amendments to this title have to be endorsed by the Faculty's higher degrees committee and formally approved.

Yours sincerely

Mrs Marike Bosman
Faculty Registrar
Faculty of Commerce, Law and Management

ANNEXURE G: SUBMISSION CHECKLIST

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

WITS FACULTY OF COMMERCE, LAW & MANAGEMENT

THESIS/DISSERTATION/RESEARCH REPORT – FIRST SUBMISSION CHECKLIST *(for Examination)*

**** This checklist must be completed and included as part of the submission. ****

Name of Candidate:	Samuel Kukmae	
Person/Student Number:	579610	
Qualification:	Masters of Business Administration	
Title:	Challenges for Succession Planning of Senior Managers in SOEs	
Supervisor(s):	Dr Zanele Ndaba	
Contact Details:	Cell number(s):072 596 7990	Email:579610@students.wits.ac.za

FIRST SUBMISSION CHECKLIST *(for Examination)*		
Has this research been submitted with the consent of the supervisor? (Y/N)		
Student to submit:	Electronic copy of research in PDF *(Hard copy may be required upon request from the examiner)*	Y
	Full Turn-it-in Report *(signed by Supervisor)* *** For WBS – this report does not require the Supervisor's approval ***	Y
	Confirmation of Ethics *(Clearance/Waiver certificate)*	Y
	Overall Supervisor Evaluation form *(MBA candidates ONLY)*	Y
Supervisor to submit:	University Clearance Certificate *(Supervisor to complete and send directly to Faculty)*	Y
	Supervisor's Report *(Supervisor to complete and send directly to Faculty)*	Y
Faculty to check on:	Approved title and supervisor(s)	
	Approved examiners	
	Registration status *(students must be registered during the examination period)*	

Please send your research submission to the correct email:

- #Fac-MBAsubmissions@wits.ac.za – for MBA (ARP) research submissions
- Veli.Mongwe@wits.ac.za – for PhD and Full Research Masters students belonging to WBS
- #Fac-MMsubmissions@wits.ac.za – for MM research submissions belonging to WBS and WSG
- Nasreen.Abdulla@wits.ac.za – for PhD and Full Research Masters students belonging to WSG
- Tshepo.Mohlakoane@wits.ac.za – for all research types belonging to Commerce and Law (SEF, SBS, SOA and SOL)

Please Note:

- *Incomplete submissions will NOT be prioritised.*
- *Outstanding fees must be cleared to enable Awaiting Examiner's registration (upon submission).*
- *WBS submissions may undergo internal academic quality checks before the exam process may begin.*
- *There may be a delay in the examination process – for more information, click:* Exam Process
- *For more information on the graduation, click:* Graduation info. and Graduations Office

ANNEXURE H: OVERALL SUPERVISOR EVALUATION

MBA candidates only

Overall Supervisor Evaluation

Name of Supervisor: Dr Zanele Ndaba

Name of Student: Samuel Kukame

Student Number: 579610

Topic of Research / Project Report: Challenges for Succession Planning of Senior Managers in SOEs

The aim of this questionnaire is to evaluate the overall supervision you received. It would be appreciated if your comments could reflect your honest opinion as improvements can only be undertaken as a result of the questionnaire. **Please note that this form will be treated confidentially and no details will be given to the Supervisor.**

1. Was your Supervisor readily available to help you at any time? YES
2. Approximately how many times during the course of the year did you meet with your Supervisor? 5
3. Approximately how many times did you contact your Supervisor during the year? 4
4. Approximately how many times did your Supervisor contact you during the year? 4
5. Did your Supervisor keep you informed of how to contact him/her at all times? YES
6. Did you keep your Supervisor up to date with your contact details? YES
7. Do you feel that the supervision you received was adequate for your needs? YES
8. Would you recommend your Supervisor to other students in next year's class of students? DEFINITELY

This form is to be handed in to the Faculty Office on completion of your Research / Project Report.

Signed: ______________ Dated: 30 June 2025

Handed to:

ANNEXURE I: 2025 REGISTRATION DECLARATION

2025 REGISTRATION DECLARATION

(PLEASE READ BEFORE SIGNING)

1. I must
   a. Perform such work as may be assigned to me by members of the staff.
   b. Conform to the University's rules, regulations, policies, procedures and standing orders ("the Rules") as approved and amended from time to time by the Council of the University.
   c. In accordance with the Rules notify the Faculty Registrar, in writing through the Faculty Office and before the specified deadlines, of my intention to cancel my registration or any part of my registration with the University, failing which I admit liability for all fees or any part thereof which have or may become due in terms of the Rules.

2. I hereby acknowledge that:
   a. I understand the provisions of the limitation of liability in the application form and that I am bound by all provisions in the application form.
   b. the information furnished by me on this form is accurate and complete;
   c. no change in my curriculum may be made without the consent of the Senate;
   d. in accordance with the Rules I must immediately notify the Faculty Registrar through the Faculty Office of any change whatsoever of my contact details including my address/es. My term residential address/es serve as my *domicillium citandi et executandi*;
   e. I have received or been referred to the University's website as well as the office of the Faculty Registrar where the Rules including the General Rules for Student Conduct are available and acknowledge further that I must acquaint myself with them and am bound by the contents thereof.
   The Rules are also available at the following link:
   https://www.wits.ac.za/students/academic-matters/rules-and-syllabuses/

3. I further acknowledge that:
   a. I am aware that the University follows a particular procedure for determining whether a student is qualified to present himself/herself for an examination/assessment.
   b. I undertake to acquaint myself with the procedure and acknowledge that I am bound thereby.

	COURSE CODE	BLOCK	SLOT
COURSE CODE/S REGISTERING FOR	BUSA7422A Business in Africa	1-2025	GEN
	BUSA7442A The Global Study Tour	2-2025	A
	BUSA7429A Industry Foresight and Business Future Strategy	1-2025	GEN
	BUSA7445A Corporate Entrepreneurship	1-2025	GEN
SCHOOL APPROVAL: NAME & SIGNATURE			
STUDENT'S NAME	**SAMUEL KUKAME**		
STUDENT'S NUMBER	579610		
STUDENT'S SIGNATURE			
DATE:	30 June 2025		
FACULTY OFFICER: NAME &SIGNATURE			
DATE:			

Registration is approved subject to compliance with the Rules and Regulations of the University.