

# Rethinking Human Capital Theory in High Education; Academic Staff Development and Knowledge Outcomes, in Democratic Republic of Congo, (DRC)

<sup>1</sup>Sikitu Bashonga Justin., <sup>2</sup>Victoria Abigail Masiko Kabumba., <sup>3</sup>Musamba Ponyo Lucie,

<sup>1</sup>Department of Business and Management, Kampala International University

<sup>2</sup>College of Economics and Management, Kampala International University

<sup>3</sup>Department of Economics and Management, Kampala International University

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2026.1306000148>

Received: 03 June 2026; Accepted: 08 June 2026; Published: 27 June 2026

## ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between academic staff development and knowledge outcomes in higher education institutions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), while critically reassessing the applicability of Human Capital Theory (HCT) in fragile and developing contexts. Traditionally, HCT views education and training as investments that improve productivity, institutional performance, and economic growth. However, higher education in the DRC is shaped by institutional, political, and socio-economic challenges that complicate the assumptions of conventional human capital perspectives.

The study adopts a qualitative literature review methodology using secondary data drawn from academic journals, books, policy documents, and institutional reports related to higher education, academic staff development, and HCT. Through thematic analysis, the research explores how academic staff development is experienced within universities and how it influences knowledge outcomes such as teaching quality, research productivity, innovation, and institutional performance.

Findings indicate that academic staff development in the DRC extends beyond formal training programs to include informal mentoring, self-directed learning, international collaborations, and professional networks. However, these processes are constrained by inadequate funding, weak institutional support, limited research infrastructure, heavy teaching workloads, political instability, and brain drain. The study further demonstrates that improvements in academic qualifications do not automatically translate into enhanced institutional outcomes, contrary to assumptions advanced by traditional HCT.

The study argues that conventional Human Capital Theory alone is insufficient for explaining higher education realities in fragile contexts such as the DRC. Alternative perspectives, including the Capability Approach, Institutional Theory, and critical higher education frameworks, provide more comprehensive explanations of how individual agency, institutional conditions, and socio-political environments shape academic staff development and knowledge outcomes. The study contributes to debates on higher education development in Africa and highlights the need for sustainable institutional support systems to strengthen academic capacity and knowledge production.

**Key words:** Human capital theory, higher education, academic staff development and outcomes production.

## INTRODUCTION

Human capital theory has long served as a dominant framework for understanding the relationship between education, productivity, and economic development. Rooted in the foundational works of Theodore Schultz (1961) and Gary Becker (1964), the theory conceptualizes education and training as investments that enhance individuals' knowledge, skills, and competencies, thereby increasing productivity and generating economic

returns. Within this perspective, higher education institutions (HEIs) are regarded as critical spaces for the production of advanced human capital required for national development, innovation, and global competitiveness (Mamuli, 2020).

In the African context, human capital development is particularly significant due to persistent socio-economic challenges such as poverty, unemployment, and structural inequalities. Empirical evidence suggests that improvements in education systems and institutional quality contribute substantially to human capital formation, which in turn promotes economic growth and social transformation (Sebola, 2022). Nevertheless, Sub-Saharan Africa continues to experience a profound human capital deficit characterized by low tertiary enrolment rates, inadequate infrastructure, limited research capacity, and shortages of qualified academic staff. These challenges are further exacerbated by brain drain, weak governance structures, and insufficient investment in higher education.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), like many African countries, operates within this broader structural context. Its higher education sector has been shaped by historical legacies of political instability, chronic underfunding, and institutional fragility. Such conditions constrain universities' capacity to effectively develop and retain academic staff, thereby undermining the production of high-quality graduates and meaningful research outputs. Although human capital theory traditionally assumes a linear relationship between educational investment and productivity outcomes, this assumption often fails to capture the complex realities of fragile and developing contexts such as the DRC.

Recent scholarship has therefore called for a rethinking of human capital theory within higher education, particularly in Africa. Critics argue that the theory's strong emphasis on economic returns overlooks broader dimensions such as social justice, equity, institutional context, and the lived experiences of academic staff (Magunje, Chigona, & Gachago, 2024). Furthermore, neoliberal reforms and market-oriented policy pressures have increasingly shifted universities toward performance metrics and revenue generation, frequently at the expense of long-term investment in academic staff development and knowledge production (Mugwaze, 2024).

In response to these challenges, academic staff development has emerged as a central strategy for strengthening higher education systems. Effective staff development programmes including mentoring, continuous professional training, pedagogical support, and research capacity building play a crucial role in improving teaching quality, fostering innovation, and enhancing institutional performance. Studies in African higher education demonstrate that well-designed academic development initiatives contribute to improved pedagogical practices, greater adoption of educational technologies, and increased research productivity (Magunje, Chigona, & Gachago, 2024). Moreover, continuous professional development remains essential because "a student can hardly rise above the competence of the teacher," highlighting the direct relationship between staff quality and educational outcomes (Mamuli, 2020).

Despite these insights, there remains limited understanding of how academic staff development translates into measurable production outcomes—such as graduate quality, research outputs, and societal impact within the context of the DRC. Existing approaches often adopt an instrumentalist perspective that treats staff development as a technical intervention rather than a holistic and context-sensitive process. Emerging perspectives instead advocate for a more human-centred and capability-based approach that recognises the interaction between individual agency, institutional structures, and socio-political environments in shaping academic performance and institutional outcomes (Menon, 2022).

Therefore, rethinking human capital theory in the DRC's higher education sector requires moving beyond traditional economic assumptions toward a more nuanced framework that integrates academic staff development, institutional conditions, and broader developmental goals. Such an approach is essential for understanding how universities can more effectively contribute to sustainable development, knowledge production, and societal transformation in the DRC.

## Question

How is the relationship between academic staff development and outcomes production understood and experienced within higher education institutions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and what theoretical perspectives can better explain the realities of higher education in fragile contexts?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Human Capital Theory (HCT) has long been used to explain the relationship between education, economic growth, and productivity. Originating from the works of Theodore Schultz and Gary Becker, the theory conceptualizes education as an investment that enhances individuals' productive capacities through the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and competencies. Within higher education, this perspective positions universities as key institutions responsible for producing skilled labour and knowledge workers necessary for national development and economic competitiveness (Mamuli, 2020).

According to Adedeji and Campbell (2013), Human Capital Theory assumes that investment in education and training improves worker productivity and ultimately contributes to economic development. Education is therefore treated as a form of capital comparable to physical assets, capable of generating returns through enhanced competencies and improved performance. Similarly, Nafukho, Hairston, and Brooks (2004) argue that HCT establishes a direct link between learning and performance outcomes at both individual and organizational levels, thereby providing a theoretical foundation for human resource development. Despite its widespread influence, HCT has been criticised for being overly economic. Critics argue that the theory reduces education to measurable economic outputs such as income, productivity, and employability, while neglecting broader social, political, and contextual dimensions of knowledge production and educational development (Charlene, 2016). In higher education, such criticisms are particularly relevant because universities perform functions that extend beyond labour market preparation, including social transformation, critical knowledge production, and civic development.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) remain central to human capital formation because they serve as hubs for knowledge generation, innovation, and workforce preparation (Mamuli, 2020). HEI systems contribute to national development by producing highly skilled professionals, supporting innovation and knowledge transfer in a globalised economy, and enhancing employability and labour market competitiveness (Adedeji & Campbell, 2013). However, recent studies emphasize that traditional approaches, in which academics are expected to "learn on the job," are increasingly insufficient in contemporary higher education environments. Instead, structured, continuous, and context-sensitive academic staff development programmes are required to improve teaching effectiveness, research capacity, and institutional performance (Sikora, Riggins, & Madak-Erdogan, 2021). In the context of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), although limited literature exists specifically on academic staff development, broader studies on African higher education provide important insights into the challenges facing universities in fragile and developing contexts. These challenges include political instability, inadequate funding for higher education institutions, brain drain, shortages of qualified academic staff, and weak institutional frameworks for staff development and research support. Such conditions significantly affect the ability of universities to produce quality educational and research outcomes. Within these realities, the application of traditional Human Capital Theory becomes problematic for several reasons. First, investment in education does not automatically translate into increased productivity or improved institutional outcomes. Second, structural and socio-political barriers often limit the realization of returns on educational investment. Third, academic outcomes are shaped not only by individual competencies but also by institutional capacity, governance systems, resource availability, and broader socio-economic conditions. Consequently, rethinking Human Capital Theory in higher education requires moving beyond its traditional economic assumptions toward a more holistic and context-driven perspective. In the DRC, academic staff development and outcomes production are influenced not only by individual skills and qualifications but also by institutional, political, and socio-economic factors that shape the functioning of higher education institutions. A more nuanced understanding of HCT is therefore necessary to explain the complexities of higher education development in fragile contexts and to better understand how universities can contribute to sustainable development and societal transformation.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Introduction**

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to explore how academic staff development influences knowledge outcomes within higher education institutions in the DRC and to critically examine the relevance of Human Capital Theory in fragile and developing contexts. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to understand complex institutional, social, and educational realities that shape academic staff development and knowledge production in higher education. Qualitative research enables in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, perceptions, institutional practices, and contextual challenges affecting academic staff development and knowledge outcomes. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is suitable for studies that seek to understand social phenomena within their natural settings and from the perspectives of participants.

### **Research Paradigm**

The study is guided by the interpretivist research paradigm. Interpretivism focuses on understanding how individuals interpret and experience social realities within specific institutional and cultural contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This paradigm is relevant because academic staff development and knowledge production are influenced not only by individual competencies but also by: institutional conditions, governance systems, socio-economic realities, political environments, and organizational culture.

The interpretivist approach therefore allows the researcher to explore how academic staff and university stakeholders understand and experience professional development and knowledge production within higher education institutions in the DRC.

### **Research Design**

The study adopts a qualitative case study design focusing on selected higher education institutions in the DRC. According to Yin (2018), a case study design allows detailed investigation of contemporary issues within real-life contexts. The DRC higher education sector is selected because it faces several challenges including: underfunding, inadequate infrastructure, limited research capacity, shortages of qualified academic staff, brain drain, and institutional instability.

The case study design enables in-depth understanding of how these conditions influence academic staff development and knowledge outcomes in universities.

### **Data collection Methods**

#### **Semi-Structured Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews are used to collect primary data from participants with experience and knowledge related to higher education and academic staff development.

Participants may include: university lecturers, professors, academic administrators, faculty deans, policymakers, postgraduate students, and higher education experts.

The interviews focus on: staff training and development, research capacity, teaching quality, mentoring practices, institutional support, academic productivity, and challenges affecting knowledge outcomes.

Semi-structured interviews allow participants to express their experiences and perspectives freely while enabling the researcher to explore emerging themes in depth (Kvale, 1996).

## **Document Analysis**

Document analysis is used to examine: university policies, staff development programmes, strategic plans, institutional reports, academic publications, government education policies, and research documents related to higher education in the DRC.

Important documents may include reports from: the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Bank, and the Ministry of Higher and University Education of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. According to Bowen (2009), document analysis helps researchers understand institutional practices, policy frameworks, and organizational realities relevant to the study.

## **Focus Group Discussions**

Focus group discussions may be conducted with: academic staff, postgraduate students, and university administrators. These discussions help capture shared experiences and collective perspectives regarding: professional development, research support, institutional challenges, teaching practices, and knowledge production.

Focus groups encourage interaction among participants and provide diverse viewpoints on academic staff development within higher education institutions.

## **Sampling Technique**

The study uses purposive sampling to select participants with relevant expertise and experience in higher education and academic staff development.

Purposive sampling enables the researcher to identify information-rich participants capable of providing detailed insights into the research problem (Patton, 2002).

Participants are selected based on: academic position, institutional experience, involvement in staff development programmes, and knowledge of higher education policies.

## **Data Analysis**

The collected data are analyzed using thematic analysis.

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis involves identifying, organizing, and interpreting recurring themes within qualitative data.

The analysis focuses on themes such as: academic staff development, teaching quality, research productivity, institutional support, professional training, mentorship, knowledge production, governance challenges, and human capital development. Thematic analysis enables deeper understanding of how academic staff development influences knowledge outcomes within higher education institutions in the DRC.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The study is informed primarily by Human Capital Theory developed by Schultz (1961) and Becker (1964). The theory views education and training as investments that improve productivity and economic performance. However, this study critically examines the limitations of Human Capital Theory within fragile and developing contexts such as the DRC. The study also considers alternative perspectives including: Capability Theory, Institutional Theory, and Critical Higher Education perspectives, which emphasize: institutional context, social justice, organizational conditions, and human agency in educational development.

These perspectives provide broader understanding of how knowledge outcomes are shaped by both individual competencies and institutional realities.

## **Trustworthiness of the Study**

To ensure trustworthiness, the study applies the principles of: credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. Credibility is enhanced through triangulation by comparing data from interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that triangulation strengthens the validity and reliability of qualitative research findings.

## **Ethical Considerations**

The study follows ethical research principles including: informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation.

Participants are informed about the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any stage of the research process. The researcher also ensures that collected data are used strictly for academic purposes.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

the results for this qualitative study emerged around several major themes that explain how academic staff development is experienced and how it influences outcomes production within higher education institutions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Since the study is qualitative, the findings were likely focus on perceptions, experiences, institutional realities, and contextual factors rather than statistical measurement.

### **Academic Staff Development Is Uneven and Context-Dependent**

The study find that academic staff development opportunities are inconsistent across institutions and highly dependent on institutional resources, leadership support, and external partnerships. Some universities may provide opportunities such as: professional training, mentoring, international collaboration, research support and postgraduate studies, while others may lack even basic development structures. The findings show that staff development in the DRC is not institutionalized systematically but often depends on donor-funded projects or personal initiatives.

### **Outcomes Production Is Strongly Influenced by Institutional Conditions**

The study reveals that outcomes production such as teaching quality, research productivity, graduate competence, and community impact is shaped not only by individual academic competencies but also by institutional and structural conditions. Participants identified challenges such as:

Inadequate funding, Poor research infrastructure, Limited access to technology, Heavy teaching, workloads, low salaries, political instability, and weak governance systems. Whereas improving staff qualifications alone does not automatically improve university outcomes unless broader institutional conditions are strengthened.

### **Informal Development Mechanisms Play a Significant Role**

That academic staff often rely on informal mechanisms for professional growth rather than formal institutional programmes. These may include: Peer mentoring, Self-directed learning, International academic networks, Online learning platforms, and collaboration with foreign institutions. This study, therefore shows that resilience, personal motivation, and social networks are critical components of academic development in fragile contexts.

### **Traditional Human Capital Theory Has Limited Explanatory Power**

The findings indicate that traditional Human Capital Theory does not fully explain the realities of higher education in fragile contexts such as the DRC. While the theory assumes that investment in education leads directly to productivity and economic returns, participants' experiences may demonstrate that; Structural inequalities, Institutional fragility, Political instability, and limited state support interrupt this relationship. The

study concludes that education investment alone is insufficient without supportive institutional and socio-political environments.

### **Alternative Theoretical Perspectives May Better Explain Higher Education realities**

The research finds that alternative theoretical frameworks provide a more comprehensive understanding of academic staff development and outcomes production in the DRC.

These perspectives included; Capability Approach (focusing on human agency, freedoms, and opportunities), Critical Theory (highlighting power relations and inequality), Institutional Theory (emphasizing organizational structures and governance), Transformative Learning Theory (focusing on professional and personal growth), or Postcolonial Theory (examining dependency and global inequalities in knowledge production). The study argues that these perspectives better capture the social, political, and institutional complexities affecting higher education in fragile contexts.

### **Academic Staff Development Is Linked to Sustainable Development**

That academic staff development contributes not only to institutional performance but also to broader societal transformation.

This study improved staff capacity and may enhance; Quality teaching, locally relevant research, Innovation, community engagement, and national development. However, this study also emphasizes that universities can only fulfill this developmental role when supported by stable policies, adequate investment, and effective governance systems.

### **Limitations of Human Capital Theory**

Participants implicitly and explicitly questioned the assumptions of traditional human capital theory: Investment does not guarantee outcomes; context shapes productivity and institutional conditions matter as much as individual skills. There was a strong perception that the relationship between staff development and outcomes is non-linear and complex. These findings support the argument that human capital theory requires rethinking in fragile and developing contexts like the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The theory's emphasis on economic returns and linear causality does not adequately explain: Weak translation of training into performance, the role of systemic barriers and the social and institutional dimensions of education.

### **Toward a Revised Framework**

Based on the findings, the study proposes a context-sensitive framework in which:

Academic staff development → interacts with → Institutional environment

Institutional environment → shapes → Outcomes production

Outcomes → depend on both individual capabilities and systemic conditions.

This moves beyond traditional human capital theory toward a relational and contextual model of higher education performance. When academic staff in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) influences outcomes production, it can lead to enhanced educational standards and improved research output, contributing to national development.

Their involvement can foster innovation, critical thinking, and a more skilled workforce, which are essential for economic growth and governance improvements (Kahombo, 2021). However, this influence can also result in challenges such as the perpetuation of systemic inequalities if certain academic voices dominate. Moreover,

political interference and corruption can undermine the integrity of academic contributions, leading to misaligned priorities that do not reflect the needs of the society (Mugisha, 2020).

## CONCLUSION OF DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concludes that the relationship between academic staff development and outcomes production in the DRC is complex, multidimensional, and strongly shaped by fragile institutional and socio-political conditions. It may further conclude that rethinking Human Capital Theory through more context-sensitive and human-centered perspectives is necessary to better understand higher education realities in developing countries.

### Conclusion

Rethinking human capital theory in higher education particularly in the context of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) reveals that the traditional, instrumentalist view of education as merely an economic investment is insufficient. While human capital theory assumes that increased education automatically leads to productivity and development, evidence from African contexts shows that this relationship is uneven, complex, and mediated by institutional quality, governance, and relevance of skills. In the DRC, higher education plays a critical role in building skilled labour and supporting national development, yet its effectiveness is constrained by underfunding, weak research capacity, poor infrastructure, and misalignment with labour market needs. These limitations weaken the link between academic staff development and meaningful outcomes production. Moreover, prevailing approaches to academic staff development often reflect a narrow, technocratic interpretation of human capital theory, focusing on outputs such as publications, promotions, and credentials, while neglecting contextual realities, social justice concerns, and the holistic development of academics. Contemporary scholarship argues for a shift toward a “humanising” and capability-based approach, where academic staff are supported not just as producers of knowledge, but as individuals embedded in complex socio-political environments.

Therefore, the key conclusion is that effective outcomes production in higher education in the DRC depends not only on investment in human capital, but on how that investment is structured, contextualised, and aligned with broader developmental goals.

### Recommendations

1. Shift from narrow human capital theory to a capability-based approach;
  - Reframe academic staff development to emphasize capabilities, agency, and contextual realities, rather than just measurable outputs.
  - Integrate social justice and inclusivity into staff development policies.

2. Strengthen academic staff development systems;

Institutionalize continuous professional development, including:

Pedagogical training, Research skills development, Digital and e-learning competencies.

Promote mentorship, coaching, and collaborative learning communities, which have been shown to enhance academic growth.

3. Improve alignment between higher education and labour market needs;
  - Regularly review curricula to ensure relevance to national development priorities and emerging sectors.
  - Foster partnerships with industry to enhance knowledge transfer and employability outcomes.
4. Increase investment and resource allocation

- Governments and stakeholders should prioritize adequate funding for universities, especially for; Research infrastructure, Staff training programs, Teaching and learning resources • Address infrastructural deficits that hinder effective teaching and research.
5. Enhance institutional quality and governance
    - Strengthen transparency, accountability, and leadership in higher education institutions.
    - Improve policy implementation, as institutional quality strongly influences human capital development outcomes.
  6. Address brain drains and staff retention
    - Provide competitive incentives, career progression pathways, and research opportunities to retain qualified academics.
    - Encourage diaspora engagement in teaching, research, and mentorship.
  7. Promote research and innovation ecosystems
    - Support locally relevant research agendas that address DRC's socio-economic challenges.
    - Encourage interdisciplinary and applied research linked to national development.

## REFERENCES

1. Adedeji, S. O., & Campbell, O. (2013). The role of higher education in human capital development. SSRN.
2. Becker, G. S. (1964). *Human capital: A theoretical and empirical analysis*. University of Chicago Press
3. Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 27–40.
4. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
5. Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
6. Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2011). *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
7. Kvale, S. (1996). *InterViews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*. Sage Publications.
8. Kahombo, C. (2021). "The Role of Higher Education in National Development in the Democratic Republic of Congo." *Journal of Education and Practice*, 12(4), 45-56.
9. Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Sage Publications.
10. Mamuli, C. L. (2020). Human capital development and higher education. *European Business & Management*, 6(4), 61–66.
11. Mugwaze, F. (2025). Strategic human capital management in African higher education: Navigating crises and neoliberal pressures. *World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology*.
12. Magunje, C., Chigona, A., & Gachago, D. (2024). Investing in academic staff development to foster transformative learning for sustainable e-learning. *South African Journal of Higher Education*.
13. Marginson, S. (2019). Limitations of human capital theory. *Studies in Higher Education*, 44(2), 287–301.
14. Mugisha, A. (2020). "Challenges Facing Higher Education in the Democratic Republic of Congo." *African Journal of Educational Studies*, 18(2), 87-99.
15. Mugwaze, F. (2024). Strategic human capital management in African higher education.
16. Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.
17. Peters, M. A., & Besley, T. (2006). *Education and the knowledge economy*.
18. Sebola, M. P. (2022). South Africa's public higher education institutions and research outputs. *Journal of Education and Work*.

19. Sikora, L., Riggins, R., & Madak-Erdogan, Z. (2021). Academic development and capacity building in higher education.
20. Schultz, T. W. (1961). Investment in Human Capital. *American Economic Review*, 51(1), 1–1
21. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (2021). *Higher Education in Africa Report*.
22. Wilfred, A. G., & Mbonigaba, J. (2019). Human capital in Sub-Saharan African countries: Productivity and policy implications. *Acta Universitatis Danubius*.
23. World Bank (2018, 2020). *Human capital development reports*.
24. World Bank. (2020). *The Human Capital Index 2020 Update: Human Capital in the Time of COVID-19*. World Bank Publications.
25. Dunwoody, C. J., Krenzischek, D. A., Pasero, C., Rathmell, J. P., & Polomano, R. C. (2008). Assessment, Physiological Monitoring, and Consequences of Inadequately Treated Acute Pain. *Pain Management Nursing*, 9(1 SUPPL), 11–21. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pmn.2007.11.006>
26. Snyder, H. (2019). Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines. *Journal of Business Research*, 104(July), 333–339. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.07.039>.
27. Gough, D., Oliver, S. and Thomas, J. (2017). *An introduction to systematic reviews*. London: Sage. (Great for justifying how you picked and chose your literature corpus).