

A qualitative research to explore practices that are utilised for managing talent development in the higher education environment

A case study in six Australian universities

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate generated themes associated with talent development in the Australian higher education sector. This is because there are pragmatic advantages for universities that are focused on developing talents. For example, talent is a primary source of competitive advantage for educational institutions.

Design/methodology/approach – This study depends on the individual interview method as the main tool for data collection. The sample consisted of six participants who are talented. High-level individual interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed using NVivo 11.

Findings – Individual interviews have identified four key themes of talent development: performance management, coaching talent, leadership development and talent acquisition.

Research limitations – This study only targeted one country (Australia), and one sector (higher education). Hence, the generalisability of these results is limited to the Australian university sector in Queensland.

Practical implications – This study collects rich and original qualitative data regarding talent development in the higher education domain. Therefore, for instance, the research findings validate what was already found but are significant because practical data rather than theoretical were gathered through a discussion with experts in talent management. This study has a high quality because of strengthening the effect of an in-depth case study.

Originality/value – The study offers a value added to talent management theory through investigating themes of talent development for the higher education sector. This would assist researchers in this field to provide a deeper understanding and develop a theoretical foundation for their further studies. This implication is unique to the advancement of talent management theory.

Keywords Individual interviews, Performance management, Coaching talent, Leadership development, Talent acquisition, Higher education

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In recent years, talent management research studies have been used to assist organisations meet demands associated with increased competitiveness (Mohammed, 2018; Mohammed, Hafeez-Baig and Gururajan, 2018). This has been by capitalising on their human assets to develop their talent capabilities (Daraei *et al.*, 2014; Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2015; Mohammed *et al.*, 2017;

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Osigwelem, 2017; Urbancová and Vnoučková, 2015). This is because of the pragmatic advantages for organisations that focus on talents (Hazelkorn, 2017; Jones, 2008; Lynch, 2015; Norhafizah, 2016; Shabane, 2017; Urbancová and Vnoučková, 2015). For example, talent development assists in increasing the rankings and profits of higher education organisations (Diezmann, 2018; Hazelkorn, 2017; Lynch, 2015). The period of the talent economy is dependent upon knowledge, networks and information (Gateau and Simon, 2016; Mohammed *et al.*, 2017). Many scholars have paid empirical attention to development of talent (Andersen, 2013; Awan and Farhan, 2016; Ford, 2017; Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen, 2016; Ortlieb and Sieben, 2012; Tarique and Schuler, 2010; Thomas, 2015). This is because talent development is of strategic importance in today's unpredictable knowledge economy, as it aids an organisation to accomplish strategic business objectives, achieves fundamental business requirements and it forms the basis for the implementation of a business strategy (Ford, 2017; Hejase *et al.*, 2016; Kim *et al.*, 2014; Rothwell, 2011; Rothwell *et al.*, 2014; Tatoglu *et al.*, 2016; Waheed *et al.*, 2013). Thus, talent development is the essential to growth and success of higher education organisations as an industry over long period of time by employing an organisation's strategy with highly qualified individuals (Bradley, 2016; Kamal, 2017; Mohammed, Baig and Gururajan *et al.*, 2018; Rudhumbu and Maphosa, 2015; Wu *et al.*, 2016).

Nonetheless, new research in the strategic human resources area is urgently needed and rapidly expanding, as organisations have encountered significant challenges associated with talent management (Kamal, 2017; Mohammed *et al.*, 2017; Scaringella and Malaeb, 2014). These key challenges are faced by Australian higher education organisations as an industry sector, which needs high-quality assurance in terms of their technical expertise and activities (Chiou, 2014; Choon Boey Lim, 2009; Lim, 2010; Lynch, 2013; Shah and Jarzabkowski, 2013) and an ability to be leading exporters of international education (Carnegie and Tuck, 2010; Chiou, 2014; Harmon, 2015; Lynch, 2013). Bradley (2016) suggested that a key solution to meet these challenges in Australian higher education could be the application of talent development programs.

Literature review

In a perfect business world, because of strong competition, organisations should develop their talented employees to enable them to become productive more rapidly (Malmgren McGee and Hedström, 2016). Hence, the talent development process needs to be embedded within staffing progress, and be regarded as a successful measure for organisations to improve the skills of their highly qualified individual staff members (Chuai, 2008; Moayed and Vaseghi, 2016; Mohan *et al.*, 2015; Wu *et al.*, 2016). Talent development is considered a critical resource of differentiation and sustainable competitive advantage (Beardwell and Thompson, 2014; Mohan *et al.*, 2015). It is strategically important for an organisation's success (Bhatia, 2015; Mohan *et al.*, 2015; Mwangi *et al.*, 2014). For instance, the development of talent working within higher education organisations also assists in retaining talented employees (Mohan *et al.*, 2015), which in turn assists in increasing university rankings and profits (Hazelkorn, 2017; Lynch, 2015). University rankings are aligned with the talent of high-performing employees, and these talented individuals contribute significantly to a university's performance by recruiting new students, conducting professional teaching, conducting high-level research and securing research funding (Bradley, 2016; Hazelkorn, 2017; Horseman, 2018; Lynch, 2015; Refozar *et al.*, 2017).

The development process of talent involves three elements: performance management; coaching talent; and leadership development:

- (1) Performance management – as one of the key processes of talent development, this assists in filling the gap between the current and planned performance of highly qualified employees (Al Ariss *et al.*, 2014; Jyoti *et al.*, 2015; Mohan *et al.*, 2015). It evaluates

the current performance of talents to assist them in identifying their competency level, and then developing their capabilities (AlKerdawy, 2016; Lyria, 2014). Through this process, training needs can be identified to develop talent (Al Ariss *et al.*, 2014; Vnoučková *et al.*, 2016). Organisations should offer their experienced staff appropriate development strategies to improve their strong points and hence improve their total performance, including particular competencies, strengthening their motivation and boosting their career development (Lockwood, 2006; Nyaribo, 2016; Wu *et al.*, 2016).

- (2) Coaching talent – this is the second sub-variable of talent development. The existing literature on coaching talent is extensive and focuses on learning and development of talent (Joo *et al.*, 2012; Prinsloo, 2017). Even though coaching talent can be a significant tool for achieving high talent development through learning skills and creating knowledge, the difficulty in transforming these skills from outside an organisation has been a disadvantage (Meyers *et al.*, 2013; Moayedi and Vaseghi, 2016). Coaching talent through internal job rotation can develop individual knowledge and experience from different departments and divisions within an organisation (Cooke *et al.*, 2014; Rothwell, 2005; Tatoglu *et al.*, 2016). Training and mentoring programs are valuable tools for developing talent (Prinsloo, 2017; Tafti *et al.*, 2017; Walker, 2017). These programs can be offered online (AlKerdawy, 2016), and can also include face-to-face learning and teaching courses for academic staff (Al Saifi, 2014) to gain required knowledge and skills (Al Saifi, 2014; AlKerdawy, 2016). In addition, leading organisations provide their talented employees with career development opportunities (Brunila and Baedecke Yliner, 2013; Chami-Malaeb and Garavan, 2013; Joo *et al.*, 2012; Yap, 2016).
- (3) Leadership development – this is a key process of talent development (Mohan *et al.*, 2015). It assists organisations in achieving overall organisational sustainability (Chami-Malaeb and Garavan, 2013; Dalakoura, 2010; Prinsloo, 2017). Effective and developed leadership is a key element of organisational sustainability (Terblanche *et al.*, 2017). Organisational sustainability through leadership assists organisations to strategically generate intrinsic values and well-being for all stakeholders (Terblanche *et al.*, 2017). The leadership development process includes “coaching, multi-source feedback, stretch assignments, mentoring, international job assignments and formal development programmes” (Chami-Malaeb and Garavan, 2013, p. 4047), as well as succession planning (Hejase *et al.*, 2016; Mathew, 2015; Rothwell, 2005). In academic organisations, high-level leadership provides talented individuals with sufficient opportunities in regard to functional planning programs (Bradley, 2016; Mohan *et al.*, 2015). Conversely, a lack of formalised organisational leadership training could negatively affect employees from achieving their advancement potential (Walker, 2017). Therefore, the leadership development process enables leaders to obtain the skills and competencies necessary to be effective through role-assignment leadership programs (Chami-Malaeb and Garavan, 2013; Dalakoura, 2010).

In brief, it has been shown in this review that talent development is a critical source of sustainable competitive priority in various sectors in general, and in the higher education sector specifically. It assists in retaining highly qualified employees and increasing university rankings and profits. Thus, talent development in academic institutions is a function of performance management, coaching talent and leadership development.

Method

Approach

Individual interviews as a qualitative method are considered one of the most widely employed and commonly known qualitative research approaches (Bryman, 2015; Cridland *et al.*, 2016;

Keeley *et al.*, 2016). A personal interview is a direct interview between a researcher and a research participant to discuss a specific topic (Bryman and Bell, 2007; Cooper and Schindler, 2011; Zikmund *et al.*, 2013). The individual interviews method has been employed in this research for the following reasons. Personal interviews are useful in potentially making generalisations for a larger population of concern and they are more inductive in their operation (Dworkin, 2012). In addition, individual interviews are helpful at the final phase of survey development, to guide participant comprehension of survey items and examine them for content validity (Brédart *et al.*, 2014; Creswell, 2014; Howard *et al.*, 2016; Veronese *et al.*, 2016). Finally, individual interviews do not involve particular skills; they involve interaction only with a specific individual, attempting to understand their ideas and experience as well as their opinions about a specific topic (Silverman, 2014).

Nevertheless, there are some difficulties with the individual interview technique such as the following:

- (1) The ambiguity of language – in some cases when questions are asked about the topic under study, one may not get significant answers due to ambiguity and lack of full understanding by interviewees. This may inhibit the objectives of the interview process (Gupta and Hilal, 2014; Johnsrud, 2016; Pelteret, 2014).
- (2) Interviews can go wrong – unintentional mistreatment or misunderstanding between the interviewer and the interviewee may occur, after which the interviewee may completely neglect the interview (Johnsrud, 2016; Pelteret, 2014).
- (3) Elite bias – The interviewer might meet only responsible participants, and if importance is only provided to their viewpoints, as opposed to other non-elite views, this may lead to bias and a narrower comprehension of the topic (Johnsrud, 2016; Jolly, 2017; Pelteret, 2014; Woods, 2011).

However, there are a number of solutions to decrease the disadvantages and overcome the difficulties of the individual interviews. To deal with ambiguity of language, the interview questions were focused on understandable language with a clear structure to reduce multiple interpretations and gain accurate answers (Brennen, 2017; Doody and Noonan, 2013; Ervo, 2016; Martínez-Gómez, 2014). In the case of controlling an interview gone wrong, the interviewer was “able to respond by moving away from the topic, rephrasing the question or, in some cases, pausing or ending the interview” (Doody and Noonan, 2013, p. 6). Similarly, the researcher ended an interview when the discussion got out of control. In terms of dealing with the elite bias in this specific research, individuals who are in the top and middle managerial levels needed to be interviewed (Durward and Blohm, 2017; Kupfer *et al.*, 2016; Sigvaldadóttir and Taylor, 2016) because those individuals have the responsibility of managing action plans related to talent development in their universities.

Actual data collection

The individual interviews were conducted by the researchers with six highly qualified individuals. The singular interviews began with a short introduction where the interviewer welcomed participants and introduced himself and his research topic. A quick summary explanation of the primary purpose of the individual interview was supplied to the interviewees before starting the actual interview. Individual interview protocol was conducted with six focused questions. Answering these questions was important to develop the preliminary research model, and obtain in-depth understanding of the themes and category items contributing to talent development. The interview ended when sufficient information was obtained. Subsequently, the researcher compiled a document including the interview notes and full transcription. In terms of recording, all individual interviews were audio recorded by either phone or face to face to save time and cost. After each interview,

the researcher evaluated the details and formulated a synopsis of events before undertaking the procedures for transcription. Each individual interview was audio recorded in MP3 format, then transcribed without eliminating the spontaneous character of the speeches.

Results

For tracking themes, all transcripts and written notes were analysed using a content analysis technique within NVivo software. Qualitative content analysis is an accepted technique of textual analysis, especially in the area of large-scale communications (Drisko and Maschi, 2015; Elo and Kyngäs, 2008; Hatcher, 2017; Mayer, 2015; Silverman, 2014; Zikmund *et al.*, 2013). This technique is systematically used for analysing the content of a body language (Sabariyan, 2015; Tharenou *et al.*, 2007; Zikmund *et al.*, 2013) and written, verbal or visual data (Ozuem *et al.*, 2016; Tharenou *et al.*, 2007). We used both manual and text analysis software (NVivo 11) to code, recode and generate themes (Ngulube, 2015; Paulus and Bennett, 2017). Manual data analysis is conducted through using a thematic method to inductively derive and identify phrases and words that were related to the research question (Mayer, 2015; Tong *et al.*, 2014). “Text query search” is a technique in NVivo software to create a word cloud and comprehend the context of the words used (Chalanuchpong *et al.*, 2017; Hatcher, 2017). In this data analysis, it was found that participants provided valuable ideas of the talent development practices, which are used in their universities for applying information. Table I summarises data analysis of the individual interviews for talent development. Four broad themes emerged from the analysis of talent development. Each of these themes is summarised and described. The results have been detailed below, using abbreviation to preserve participant anonymity. For example, IR1 means individual interview 1, participant 1.

Talent development is focused on achieving and maintaining an organisation’s human capital through learning that changes behaviour in the organisation and in its talented employees (Lyria, 2014). The key interview question that specifically addressed sub-themes around this concept was: “How are talented staff developed in your organisation?” Table I shows that there was a sense of talent development amongst interviewees. This presented four key sub-themes:

- (1) performance management which includes training needs identification, skill gaps analysis, succession planning and appropriate development strategies;
- (2) coaching talent which includes providing sufficient coaching time, training and mentoring through job rotations and opportunities for talent development;
- (3) leadership development such as leadership workshops to develop future leaders, and role-assignment programs; and
- (4) talent acquisition such as one interviewee put it:

Inter-disciplinary teams with capacity building professors that are engaged with external industries and research studies so that they can develop their skills in attracting research funding [...]. (IR5)

Many terms have been utilised to explain talent development, such as “develop”, “development” and “training”. For example, four out of six participants mentioned

Table I.
Talent development processes used in the Australian higher education

No.	Themes	Participants of individual interviews					
		1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Performance management	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Coaching talent		✓	✓	✓	✓	
3	Leadership development	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
4	Talent acquisition					✓	

“leadership” and “coaching”; all six interviewees mentioned “training” during the discussion. Given the evidence, text query searches in NVivo led to the following supporting data outlined in Figures 1–3.

Discussion

According to the outcomes of the qualitative phase of this research, the development process of talents involves four elements: performance management; coaching talent; leadership development; and talent acquisition. Similar results were described in Lyria’s (2014) research. She highlighted a number of themes related to talent development, two of which (leadership development and coaching) were the same as those found in this study.

The first theme of talent development stated by participants was performance management. It comprises some concepts as such appropriate development strategies, training need identification and skill gap analysis. These outcomes corroborate with AlKerdawy (2016), Horváthová and Durdová (2011), Kimathi (2015), Lyria (2014), Wu *et al.* (2016) and Xue (2014) who highlight that an institution should offer its employees appropriate development strategies to improve their strong points, and hence improve their total performance including particular competencies, strengthening their motivation and boosting their career development. In terms of skill gap analysis, the results of this theme clarify that Queensland universities create job description, learning content systems and competency models depending on the required training of its talented staff. These outcomes are consistent with Bersin (2013) who recommended that an institution should create a set of simple self-assessments which describe core skills needed, and experience required for each functional position in the institution.

The empirical qualitative results in this study clarified that coaching talent is a key process of talent development in Queensland universities. This subtheme covers some items: career development programs (e.g. job rotations), learning and teaching orientations, training and mentoring and other development opportunities. These results are in line with AlKerdawy (2016), Garavan *et al.* (2012), Kimathi (2015), Lyria (2014) and Meyers and van Woerkom (2014) who point out that coaching talent can be a significant tool for achieving high talent development through learning skills. This view is supported by Cooke *et al.* (2014) who point out that coaching talent through internal job rotation can develop individual knowledge and experiences from different departments and divisions with an institution. In the same vein Al Saifi (2014), AlKerdawy (2016), Prinsloo (2017) and Walker (2017) state that training and mentoring programs such as online, learning and teaching courses allow academic staff to gain required knowledge and skills, as valuable tools for developing talents.

The third theme of talent development is leadership development which should be highlighted by educational institutions to develop talented individuals. This subtheme includes

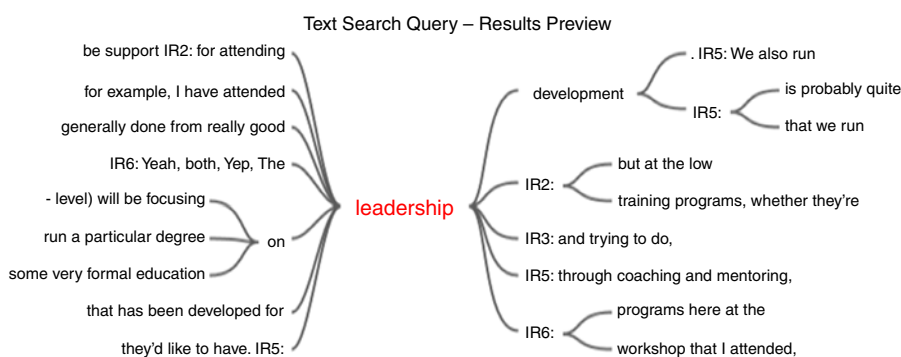


Figure 1.
Text search query
for the leadership
development theme

Source: Nvivo output

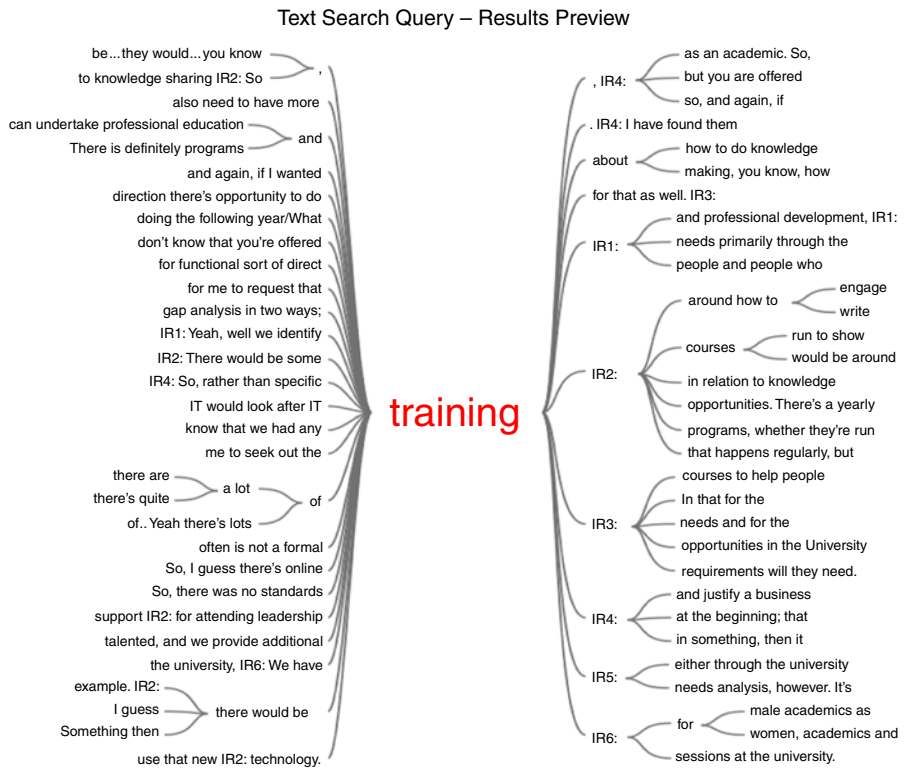


Figure 2. Text search query for the coaching talent theme (training)

Source: Nvivo output

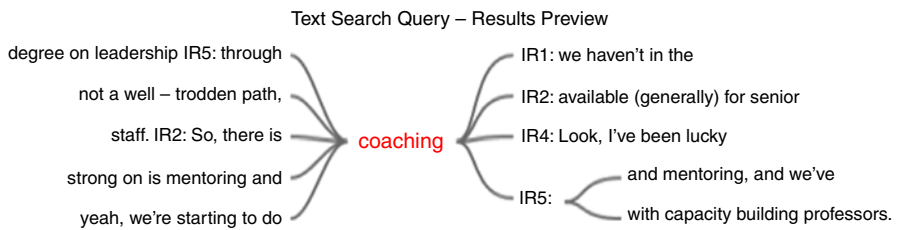


Figure 3. Text search query for the coaching talent theme (coaching)

Source: Nvivo output

some items such as role-assignment programs of leadership, education to leaders, career development programs and succession planning. These outcomes are similar to the study of Chami-Malaeb and Garavan (2013, p. 4047) who outline that the leadership development process typically includes “coaching, multi-source feedback, stretch assignments, mentoring, international job assignments and formal development programmes”. Similarly, Davis and Maldonado (2015), Dopson *et al.* (2016), Nica (2013) and Peet *et al.* (2010) agree that innovative institutions should focus on viable leadership development within higher education. In addition, the findings on succession planning of leaders corroborate with Kimathi (2015), Lyria (2014) and Xue (2014) who observed that the importance of the existence of succession planning contributed positively in developing talented individuals’ skills.

The fourth and final theme of talent development is talent acquisition. The empirical results in this case study demonstrate that acquiring skilled talented individuals is needed to meet the university's requirements. These results correspond to the work of Randhawa (2017) and Silzer and Dowell (2010) who notice that an institution should build its talented staff skills to meet institutional needs.

To conclude this section, the results of the four key themes of talent development above are in line with Bradley (2016), Kamal (2017), Rudhumbu and Maphosa (2015) and Wu *et al.* (2016) who point out that development of talent are essential for growth and success of higher education institutions over the long term. This view is supported by Ford (2017), Hejase *et al.* (2016), Kim *et al.* (2014), Rothwell (2011), Rothwell *et al.* (2014), Tatoglu *et al.* (2016) and Waheed *et al.* (2013) who emphasise talent development is strategically more important in today's volatile knowledge economy, because they help an institution to achieve strategic business aims, meet basic business requirements and form the foundation to implement business strategy. Similarly, Kataike (2013), Mwangi *et al.* (2014), Van den Broek *et al.* (2018) and Xue (2014) state that an institution that established its core competence in development of talent guarantees its own stability and success among other competitors in the industry.

Conclusions and limitations

The key conclusion of this study is that Queensland universities are significantly aware of four processes that are currently used in managing talent development in their divisions and faculties. These processes are performance management, coaching talent, leadership development and talent acquisition processes to be most common processes within educational institutions. Consequently, participants consider those practices as a strategic key to institutional success. This research has theoretical and practical contributions. The research offers a value added to talent management theory. It also provides an inclusive review of future studies in choosing the best practices related to talent development. This will assist researchers in the field of human resources management to provide a deeper understanding of talent development and develop a theoretical foundation for their further studies. In terms of the practical contributions, four key themes of talent development, performance management, coaching talent, leadership development and talent acquisition, were highlighted in the higher education domain. Therefore, explored themes should be emphasised by Australian universities to increase their ranking and profits.

There were a number of the limitations in this study. It only targeted one country (Australia), one state (Queensland) and one sector (higher education). In addition, there were only six universities. Moreover, the contribution of this study only focused on talent as a single aspect. In addition, findings of this study cannot be generalised to other institutional settings. Further academic work would be useful to extend the investigation to a wider sample of institutions within various industries and sectors. A broader target area can improve the generalisation.

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