

Talent Development: Conceptualisation, Implementation, and Perceptions in Higher Education Institutions

Olesya Smagina, ICN Business School, PhD Student

Abstract

This research project explores conceptualisation, implementation, and perceptions of talent development for academic staff as a case study of an international university. We have adopted an exploratory qualitative case study design and conducted 27 semi-structured interviews with senior management, HR managers, heads of departments, and academics to see the multi-level perspectives and elaborate on the planning, policies and procedures, practices, challenges, and perceptions. Additionally, we collected documents such as policies and procedures related to staff development.

Talent development is viewed as an unorganised practice with the challenge of a workload model that combines teaching and research underpinned by the developmental nature of the job. We found a lack of execution of the staff development policy, although it existed on paper and was approved by the university's executive team. The emerging challenges of talent development fragmentation led to the observation of non-inclusivity and favouritism in the practices of research support and talent development-related activities that required funding and implementation by the university. The research results illustrate the contradictory nature of an institution serving as infrastructure for development from one side, as there is a value in skills enhancement via teaching and research work. However, with experience, the learning value from a job is perceived as repetitive and lacking dynamism. There is a need for a university-installed talent development policy, implementation, and framework to address fragmented talent development practices.

Track 1: Human Resource Management

Track 2: Knowledge and Learning

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Introduction

Human resource management practices have effectively ensured and enhanced the current and future supply of talent aligned with organisational strategies (Garavan et al., 2012; Phuong & Chai, 2018). In light of increased managerialism in higher education institutions, corporate management approaches such as talent management are employed to achieve a competitive advantage in a higher education institution (Xia et al., 2023). Talent management is the complex and systematic process of resourcing, developing, deploying, and retaining organisational talent (Scullion et al., 2010). In this process, talent development plays a significant role, and it can be considered independently “without reference to the broader construct of talent management practice”(Nijs et al., 2024, p. 120). Garavan (2012, p. 6) defined talent development as focusing on:

“planning, selection and implementation of development strategies for the entire talent pool to ensure that the organisation has both the current and future supply of talent to meet strategic objectives and that development activities are aligned with organisational talent management processes”.

The scope and operational boundaries of talent development can be categorised into two distinct types: inclusive and exclusive (Garavan et al., 2012; Rezaei & Beyerlein, 2018). The inclusive approach involves developing each staff member and considering all employees talented. At the same time, the exclusive one focuses on individuals identified as high potential or higher performers who demonstrate specific traits, such as the ability to learn and utilise new skills quickly and consistently deliver exceptional results (Kaliannan et al., 2023; Rezaei & Beyerlein, 2018). A mixture of approaches is practised in organisations suggested by empirical evidence (Garavan et al., 2012; Phuong & Chai, 2018).

Talent development is fundamental for fostering organisational effectiveness and achieving long-term success by looking into staff development practices and programs in a knowledge-based community of practice. Academic staff development significantly improves performance, research capabilities, and instructional methods. Considering its importance, research on talent development within the higher education sector is urgently needed (Nijs et al., 2024). It is crucial to examine talent development experiences because these initiatives frequently do not align with their intended outcomes, resulting in unforeseen consequences (McDonnell et al., 2023). However, one of the substantial limitations of the existing research on talent is that it has been conducted mainly in the United States and is dominated by Anglo-American frameworks (D’Armagnac et al., 2020). For

academics working in emerging markets, talent development is even more critical because of the higher education reforms, national and institutional strategy revisions, and comparatively less focus on research in the context of talent development in higher education (Phuong & Chai, 2018).

Literature Review

The concept of talent within academia is multi-dimensional and varies according to context or discipline (Thunnissen & Van Arensbergen, 2015). Prior studies have discussed several perspectives on talent, including viewing it as an object (i.e., characteristics of individuals) or a subject (i.e., individuals themselves), inclusive, exclusive, and hybrid approach (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013; Phuong & Chai, 2018). Different interpretations of talent can be reconciled within a single organisation as diverse abilities, skills, and attitudes are needed to perform (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013). Talent is often determined by research quality, publication count, citation frequency, and metrics challenged in academic debates (Taamneh et al., 2022). However, it is also contended that crucial indicators of talent (i.e. innovative teaching, self-efficacy in student engagement and classroom management) are undervalued (Taamneh et al., 2022).

The talent development process helps to ensure that an organisation maintains proficient employees to meet current and future needs (Cooke et al., 2022). Organisations should focus on developing the skills and competencies of their current employees rather than relying solely on external talent acquisition (Garavan et al., 2012). Despite its significance, knowledge about talent development remains fragmented (Kaliannan et al., 2023). Although talent development encompasses multiple paradigms and perspectives, the dominant theoretical approaches involve psychological, sociological, and ethical theories and models. There is a notable lack of learning theories representation within talent development research despite adult learning being central to the field's essence (Naňáková & Dopita, 2024). The systems theory approach can assist organisations in integrating talent development and designing specific programs while recognising the risks associated with excluding talent development from staff development initiatives (Naňáková & Dopita, 2024). The Differentiating Model of Giftedness and Talent proposed by Gagné (2011) advocates that environmental stimulation is crucial for nurturing talent (Saddozai et al., 2017; Thunnissen & Van Arensbergen, 2015). It can be achieved through a comprehensive approach to training and learning, which entails a well-structured program of activities designed to attain specific goals of excellence over time. The program should incorporate selective access criteria, enriched training tailored to the advanced learning abilities of

talented employees, regular practice sessions, clear and challenging objectives for achieving excellence, and objective assessments to monitor progress (Thunnissen & Van Arensbergen, 2015).

Talents are nurtured via staff development practices, such as providing full or partial scholarships for staff members' personal growth to retain employees at academic institutions (Bartrop-Sackey et al., 2022). Furthermore, the programs are crafted based on skills gaps and the developmental needs of faculty members (Eghbal et al., 2017). The significance of internal development practices and programs, as well as a focus on internal talent, is underlined to achieve benefits such as cost advantages, productivity, and higher retention of academic staff (Oppong & Oduro-Asabere, 2018). The sustainability of universities can potentially be reinforced through talent development methods such as inductions, training and development, mentoring, career development opportunities, succession planning, networking, etc. Employees actively contributing to different developmental programs can enhance their competencies via formal or informal learning activities (Mohan et al., 2015). Job tasks such as instructing students, writing, and researching provide numerous learning opportunities. Academics considered the highest-ranked learning experiences result from "simply executing teaching duties" (Van der Klink et al., 2014). However, for those who have spent considerable time in their positions, it becomes plausible that their roles may no longer offer extensive learning incentives. Consequently, a job's educational value might decline as time progresses (Van der Klink et al., 2014). It means that it is dubious to rely only on the educational value of the job, but there is a need to offer talent development programs to the staff.

Distinct factors related to employees, employment, and organisational contexts might influence formal and informal academic engagement. For instance, access to formal training is closely connected to human resource development policies and supervisors' determinations. Studies revealed that perceived time availability and supportive team climates are crucial drivers for both forms of learning (Van der Klink et al., 2014). Employees actively participating in different developmental programs can enhance their competencies via formal or informal learning activities (Mohan et al., 2015). Career growth and eligibility for promotion are related to acquiring managerial and teaching expertise through formal training offered by administration-sponsored seminars, refresher sessions, and workshops targeting ability enhancement (Saddozai et al., 2017). Without formal management training, experiential learning and mentoring are the primary instruments that academics use to enhance managerial and leadership skills (Bradley, 2016).

The literature reveals a prevalent dissatisfaction among employees with management due to biased and inconsistent talent development programs for academic staff (Mohamed Jais & Ghani, 2021; Saddozai et al., 2017). It has been observed that the appointed managers often lack managerial skills (Erasmus, 2020), leading to poor employee communication of training opportunities and departmental objectives, stemming from a lack of transparency and improper or unofficial talent identification and development systems. Therefore, employees received inadequate on-the-job training, poor communication about available training opportunities, and departmental goals were not met (Erasmus, 2020). The roles and responsibilities of managers in nurturing talent need clarity (Thunnissen, 2016) and better management of appropriate training and development (Bradley, 2016) to cultivate skills and ensure growth (Abdullahi et al., 2022). There is a lack of policies and resources, talented leaders, and challenges with succession planning in higher education institutions (Azman et al., 2023), insufficient program funding, and inefficient and ineffective training and development (Musakuro & De Klerk, 2021). The shortage of consistent and adequate processes and infrastructure to support the implementation of talent development creates a gap between the organisations' intended, implemented, and perceived practices. Intended HRM practices may not align with those implemented across an organisation (Trullen et al., 2020), and these may differ from those perceived by various actors involved in the experienced HRM practices (Makhecha et al., 2018; Piening et al., 2014).

The study contributes to the underexplored area of talent development research (Kaliannan et al., 2023), the need for research in talent development (Nijs et al., 2024), and fragmented talent development programs in higher education (Thunnissen & Van Arensbergen, 2015). Scholars identified a lack of consistency between the planned and implemented processes that stems from the intricate nature of procedures spanning institutional and individual contexts. In light of these discrepancies, it is essential to examine the effectiveness of planned, implemented, and perceived value of the talent development practice using a multi-perspective approach and consider the interests and talent philosophies of various actors involved in talent management (Thunnissen & Van Arensbergen, 2015). This research project explores conceptualisation, implementation, and perceptions of talent development to construct a model for talent development for academic staff in a higher education institution.

Research Method

We have adopted a qualitative approach to explore a case study, and the research question is formulated to inquire about the “how” nature of the study (Yin, 2009). The research questions examine:

- *How is talent development conceptualised, implemented, and perceived in higher education institutions from multiple perspectives of management and academics?*

We follow the canons of the grounded theory to emerge the model of conceptualisation, implementation, and perception of talent development intricates in higher education institutions (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Gioia et al., 2013). There is a call for empirical research in the practices of talent management (McDonnell et al., 2017). Individual case studies remain valuable for deepening understanding and incorporating a range of stakeholders and multi-level design (McDonnell et al., 2017). We chose one of the international universities in Central Asia to make a multi-level analysis and contribute to the research output on higher education institutions in emerging economies. The selected university is a unique case, serving as one of the long-lasting international universities in Central Asian countries, and it has more than 5000 students and 130 academic staff members. We used purposive sampling and mapped our respondents across several levels, such as senior managers, HR and staff development department, line managers, and academics, to facilitate comparison among management and academic staff (Creswell, 2007). The subgroups included the following and are presented in Table 1:

- Senior managers (involved in the executive management team of the university) – 4 respondents;
- HRM and development-related departments – 3 respondents; 2 interviews – 2 HRM employees asked to be interviewed together;
- Head of departments indicated as line managers - 5 respondents;
- Academic staff – 16 respondents.

Participant ID	Gender	Age	Activity or level	Position	Years of experience
A01	F	35	Academic	Senior Lecturer	5
A02	F	32	Academic	Lecturer	7
H 03	F	43	Admin HR	HR Director	4

H 03.1	F	46	Admin HR	Senior Officer on Learning and Development	5
H04	M	30	Admin HR staff development-related unit	Director	1
T05	M	43	Senior Management	Director	3
T06	M	40	Senior Management	Dean	14
T07	M	58	Senior Management	Deputy Rector Academic	3
L08	M	39	Line Management	Deputy Dean	5
A09	M	45	Academic	Lecturer	5
A10	M	32	Academic	Lecturer	9
A11	M	40	Academic	Senior Lecturer	6
A12	F	41	Academic	Senior Lecturer	13
A13	M	44	Academic	Senior Lecturer	14
A14	M	42	Academic	Senior Lecturer	17
L15	M	44	Line Manager	Head	3
A16	M	35	Academic	Senior Lecturer	6
A17	F	30	Academic	Lecturer	8
A18	F	28	Academic	Lecturer	5
L19	M	35	Line Manager	Head	3
L20	M	43	Line Manager	Head	10
A21	F	39	Academic	Senior Lecturer	6
A22	M	38	Academic	Senior Lecturer	2
L23	M	45	Line Manager	Head	9
A24	F	33	Academic	Lecturer	7
T25	M	48	Senior Management	Dean	6
A26	F	36	Academic	Senior Lecturer	11
A27	M	31	Academic	Associate Lecturer	8

Table 1: International University 01. Table of respondents' demographics.

The average interview duration was 45 minutes, and the respondents were briefed on the interview protocol in advance. The case study university is anonymised, and all the interview participants were

informed that participation was voluntary and that non-participation did not incur any adverse effects or consequences. Respondents were notified that their interviews would be recorded with their permission using a voice recorder. The participants were provided with informed consent forms before the interviews. They could withdraw from the interview and have the recordings destroyed. The participants could see the interview transcripts to ensure the information was captured correctly, and if they felt uncomfortable sharing some items, they could be removed from the study. Due to time constraints, the respondents could withdraw up to one month after the interview.

The interviews were conducted on the university premises in private spaces to help participants freely express their experiences and views on the questions. This approach reduced social desirability bias and addressed potential ethical concerns that could arise from interviews with senior managers, heads, HR departments, and academics. Data saturation was reached at the 25th interview, and two additional interviews were conducted (26th and 27th) to ensure no new emerging information in the data collection.

We also collected various organisational documents related to talent development, such as staff development policy and procedure, performance appraisal policy and form, emails on staff development events, and attended and observed talent development activities. The multiple sources of information and evidence helped to ensure triangulation. Measures are needed to ensure the validity of the study. Three tactics suggested by (Yin, 2009) were employed: various sources of evidence, establishing a chain of evidence, and a case study report reviewed by the key respondents. It is also crucial to consider the reliability of the case study (Yin, 2009). We constructed a case study protocol and developed a case study database.

Data Analysis and Findings

We have analysed over 300 pages of interview transcripts guided by the principles of qualitative data coding and analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The interviews were analysed and grouped by category of the respondents (see Table 1, p. 7). In the initial phase, we imported data into the qualitative analysis software NVivo to identify information relating to talent development practices for systematic analysis. Open coding logic (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) was employed to develop codes based on verbatim participants' accounts. We came up with 252 codes across categories of respondents. We are now moving back and forth between data and related literature for reflexivity.

The emerging themes for the university's senior managers discussed the *business model of an international university and strategy* linked to talent development. The *performance-based vision* of

senior managers is demonstrated using annual performance development appraisals and individual development plans. Senior managers highlighted the business acumen of top management to run the international university business model and safeguard the efficiency of the processes, including academic staff development. These results align with performance-centred rather than development-centred conceptualisation, where the enhancement of competitive talent is rewarded but not communal (Nijs et al., 2024). Higher educational establishments encounter a combination of managerial and professional pressures that can lead to tensions influencing HRM policy and practice (Thunnissen, 2016). Still, the senior managers accentuated experiential academic growth and personal willingness, which matter in individual development.

However, talent is conceptualised as inclusive practice, highlighting a blend of teaching and research capabilities developed through hard work and self-directed learning, visible in results and benefits to the organisation. Talent is viewed as *a mixture of subject and object* (Thunnissen & Van Arensbergen, 2015), highlighting a person who possesses intellectual abilities, innovativeness, and leadership skills. Academics perceive talent as passion in teaching and learning. Talent development is discussed as an *unorganised practice* with the challenge of a workload model that combines teaching and research underpinned by the developmental nature of the job. Respondents observed *a lack of implementation of staff development policy*, although it existed on the policy paper approved by the executive team. One of the university executive team members believed “*there is no need for the policy due to the size and scarce resources available.*” The available fragmented practices and procedures still guide and support the academics for talent development. However, there is a different stance from another executive team member:

“It was hard to approve the policy, but due to internal obstacles and different views in the management team, we could not implement it in practice, and, hmmm, now there is a department X responsible for staff development which develops a new policy. Why develop a new one if we did not try to implement the existing one?”

The management team approved the policy regarding the development of the university staff. Although the senior managers commented that it was not implemented, we found certain aspects of policy implementation, such as mandatory training and induction, were delivered as planned. The documents highlight the ongoing nature of the development process, fostering a supportive environment for the staff and defining the roles of human resource management, staff development-

related units, heads of the units, and academics. The policy guides the planning and implementation and illustrates the means and types of developmental activities.

There were also structural changes in the university. As a result of restructuring, several departments take care of the staff development at the university, creating coordination and communication challenges for management and academics. Respondents from the HR and staff development department believed in applying the ‘70-20-10’ principle in the development of employees. The learning model of ‘70-20-10’ was stated as a developmental approach where 70% of learning is from job-related experiences, 20% from interactions with others, like co-workers and managers, and 10% from formal learning events. Talent interventions such as training, mentorship, communities of practice, and stretch assignments can support that social dimension and multiple sources of learning opportunities (Erasmus et al., 2017).

There is a *need for talent development to be systematic and investment-conditioned* from the side of the university. The emerging challenges of talent development fragmentation led to the observation of *non-inclusivity and favouritism* in the employed practices of research support and talent development-related activities that required funding from the university. Some managers neglect their duties and prioritise their agendas, which can negatively impact employees (Erasmus, 2020). Academic staff and professors strive to form groups or unions to influence policies and decision-making, resulting in favouritism and using their connections to secure positions within universities (Saddozai et al., 2017). Respondents noted obstacles advocating for the systematic efforts of talent development due to management’s tendency to expect immediate results and inclination for evidence-based practices. In contrast, talent development is a long-term and continuous effort from management and academic perspectives. There is an urgent need for talent development implementation and recognition because there is tough competition for talented academics in the region, which can threaten retention and observed loss of experienced employees who possess institutional memory.

Line managers’ discussion on talent development emphasised a current set of development practices (induction, in-house teaching certifications, discounts on university courses, mentoring, knowledge sharing sessions, etc.) and research support schemes (publication fee coverage, conference travel support, internal and external research grants) and reliance on the performance appraisal system as a development tool for the employees. However, due to *coordination and communication issues*, the opportunity to get a discount on in-house teaching certification programs is not visible to the academic staff. There is a need for role clarity in development-related activities such as HR and line managers.

Line managers observe extra workload and staff shortage as the main barriers to formal and informal talent development. Nevertheless, they specify ***peer-to-peer support and collegiate informal talent development culture***. The supervisor is more likely to support the development of subordinates when there is a higher quality of leader-member relationships (Horne et al., 2016).

Academics accentuated a need for university-organised events and programs to enhance staff qualifications demanded by the time and context changes that would positively influence talent retention. Generally, academics are unaware of the development policy, although it exists on paper and is being updated by management. There is a need to involve academics in policy development and consider their expertise and practices in the policy and implementation as stated by academics. The lack of awareness and communication complicates getting support or funding, as accessing information and misinterpreting the policy and procedures is difficult. As an emerging theme, the ***supportive and development-oriented line manager*** is essential; however, without senior management support, it is impossible to get formal talent development opportunities rolled out. The following quote exemplifies:

“There are so many best practices out there to learn from. Why can’t we have our training courses approved or get support for conferences approved...the whole procedure should be in a simpler format, and there is so much bureaucracy to get approval...There is a lack of responsibility of administration towards academics.”

Furthermore, performance appraisal procedures and grade reviews stimulate academics for growth and self-directed talent development activities. Academics highlighted the need for measures to identify and develop talent and the importance of policy implementation and resource usage optimisation among academics and management. A discrepancy was seen in the attitude towards the performance appraisal procedure and its form and implementation. The quote from the academic member of staff demonstrates:

“I see performance appraisal as an obligation and one more control tool. There are unclear standards and too high expectations from management, but there is a lack of implemented activities to develop and how to cope with the expected increasing workload.”

Performance and development review was identified as ***‘a control tool’*** and as ***‘a tick tool’*** by academics who also observed ***a lack of transparency and too challenging standards*** imposed by management in the race for competitive advantage. However, line and senior managers believe that

performance review helps in career guidance and serves as a push for talent development. In turn, academics perceive administrative duties as an additional burden and sacrifice, which was also noted by senior managers who face difficulty finding a suitable line manager. The following quote illustrates:

“Sometimes, you know, people do not want to take the role of a department head because they do not want too much hassle.”

There is also a divergent view on the workload and availability of academics for ad-hoc talent development activities. Management and HR-related units believed the workload model was optimal and operated with calculations for teaching weeks and evaluations of working hours. Still, the academics noted ***a lack of proper job analysis*** before, during, and after the teaching and assessment weeks so that management can better understand the reality and overload issues. There were also admitted cases of favouritism and bypassing criteria in talent development-related support. The emerging theme among academic respondents was collegiate interactions help them stay afloat and develop in their research and subject fields. However, academics observed the cases and experienced deviant behaviours such as employee silence and destructive voice behaviour. Employees preferred to hold back in feedback and noted management’s resistance to listening and accepting feedback or comments on employee development support schemes. Talent development is perceived as self-initiated, self-funded, and self-directed learning. There is a challenge of implementation due to a long-term lack of actions, and academics are losing trust in the university’s management.

Limitations and Further Research

Firstly, the study results may not be generalisable elsewhere as the case study was conducted in an international university. Still, as per (McDonnell et al., 2017), case studies are essential for enhancing understanding by including multi-level design, which was endeavoured in our research. Secondly, interviews may include personal bias, which reflects a perception relevant to the study objective. Thirdly, while a larger sample of interviews and universities would strengthen the findings, access and interviewing can be challenging.

Further research can conduct multiple case studies and make cross-country comparisons to increase generalisability. It is also interesting to make a comparative analysis across time and see the changes regarding talent development planning and implementation in international universities. Future studies can also include quantitative methods and surveys using a validated scale to measure planned and implemented talent development practices.

Conclusions

The preliminary analysis concentrates on talent conceptualisation, planning and needs analysis, hardships of planning and implementation, and diverse perceptions of talent development. There is a need for a more iterative process and working on a talent development framework in higher education institutions. We are now working on consolidating the patterns and reinforcing the themes. There is a plan to conduct interviews in three more higher education institutions and proceed as an embedded case study. The research results demonstrate the perceptions of tensions and contradictions of implementation at an institution serving as infrastructure for development from one side, as there is excellent value in learning via teaching and research work. However, with experience, the learning value from a job becomes routinised, and overload becomes more intense, leading to fewer developmental opportunities for staff. There is a need for a university-installed talent development policy, processes, and framework to address a lack of implemented talent development practices.

Considering the staff shortages and competition, the research represents practical and theoretical importance for university management, HR managers, policymakers, and stakeholders who have crucial roles in strengthening talent development policies in higher education. There is a need for clarity and transparency in growth-oriented programs, career paths, and the sustainable development of staff. Promoting formal talent development can benefit the university employer brand and higher education image and increase awareness of the challenges and perceptions that impact staff retention.

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