The Impact of Talent Leadership on Attracting and Retaining High Value Professors at Historically Disadvantaged Higher Education Institutions in South Africa

Fumani Mabasa¹*
Dorren²
Rivalani Harriet Maluka³

¹²³ University of Venda, South Africa

ARTICLE INFO

ISSN: 2723-1097

Research Aims: This study aimed to investigate the impact of talent leadership on attracting and retaining high-value professors at HDHEIs in South Africa.

Design/methodology/approach: A qualitative approach was used, with 20 face-to-face interviews and document analysis with academic leaders from five HDHEIs. Thematic analysis used to analyse the collected data.

Research Findings: The findings revealed five themes regarding the impact of talent leadership at HDHEIs: empowerment, motivation, engagement, commitment, and competence among professoriate staff at the university.

Theoretical Contribution/Originality: This study demonstrates the significance of talent leadership in providing a sense of belonging, respect, personal growth, and development to the professoriate, all of which are necessary for attracting and retaining high-value professors. Recommendations stemming from the study encompass targeted leadership training programs, the establishment of mentorship initiatives, and the implementation of inclusive and supportive policies. These recommendations are intended to guide HDHEIs in South Africa toward fostering an environment that not only attracts but also retains high-value professors, ultimately contributing to the sustained growth and development of these South African institutions.

Keywords: Talent; Leadership, Higher education, South Africa, Talent leadership, Professors.

Introduction

The extraordinary challenge of strategy execution in organisations emphasises that talent matters for all organisations and globally. In contrast, the nuts and bolts of talent management are deeply established, and a deficit of an extra spark of authentic talent leadership remains the foremost concern for organisations’ ability to deliver on their strategic objectives (Collings et al., 2017; McDonnell et al., 2017; Morukhu & Mapanga, 2022). It has been consistently argued that only those organisations with the capacity to acquire and retain premium talent and skills, will have long-lasting competitive advantages to survive in the globalised economy (Isson & Harriott, 2016; Deters, 2017; Kueng, 2020). In their quest to attain and retain world-class status,
higher education institutions are without exception globally (Song, 2018; Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2019). South Africa’s war for academic talent lingers unabated (Erasmus, Grobler & Van Niekerk, 2015; Ramohai, 2019; Abiwu, 2021). Thus, genuine talent leadership is a prerequisite for acquiring and retaining excellent talent.

It is too common for higher education institutions in South Africa to poach the few skilled and experienced academics, especially at the professorial level, from one another (Maistry & Eidsvik, 2017). This presents some serious challenges for the Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDHEIs) as they cannot out-compete the more established, predominantly former white institutions. Overall, talent management processes and policies exist at the HDHEIS, and there seems to be a vague appreciation of the strategic impact of talent leadership as the HDHEIs in South Africa find it difficult to attract, acquire and retain high-value professors. This failure manifests in the stagnant research output growth and meagre throughput rates of postgraduate students, thus undermining HDHEIs’ ability to build their revenue base from the Department of Higher Education grants and subsidies (Mlachila & Moeletsi, 2019).

The overall rating of HDHEIs lags behind all the former predominantly white universities, which is also symptomatic of a lack of critical talent shortages at the professorial level. Furthermore, as the professoriate academics resign or retire, the challenges for HDHEIs are significant because of the huge financial investment in developing academics through the ranks to become professors. It also serves no purpose for HDHEIs to invest on talent and fail to implement effective retention strategies to retain the developed talent (Trigunait & Taruna, 2020). This demonstrates a desperate need for effective talent leadership capable of attracting, developing, and retaining high-value professorial-level academics in HDHEIs. This study was carried out to understand the impact of talent leadership in developing high-potential academics at professorial levels at HDHEIs in South Africa by answering the research question, “How does developing an effective talent leadership architecture engender strategic value for the HDHEIs in South Africa?”

Literature Review

Studies show that the institutional context of talent leadership can influence the attraction and retention of academics at the professorial level at most universities (Mohammed, Baig & Gururajan, 2020; Abell & Becker, 2021). HDHEIs lack holistic talent leadership, as they seem to think high-value academics can only be retained by money to exclude other talent leadership practices (Kissoonduth, 2017). Efficient talent leadership in recruitment processes (Hamilton & Davison, 2018), exceptional career management (Gama & Edoun, 2020), and effective employee engagement can cultivate a fascinating corporate brand that attracts academics at the professorial level to the Disadvantaged HEIs as an employer (Saurombe et al., 2017).

According to Per Ireland and Hitt (1999), talent leadership conjures an organisation’s ability to articulate a strategic vision, think strategically, and motivate others to make a viable future for the organisation. It discusses the executives’
experience, qualities, predilections, and cognitive styles when directing and
influencing organisational talent management decisions and practices (Vaiman &
Collings, 2014). To succeed in the 21st Century, organisations must implement
effective initiatives and actions to sustain strategic competitiveness and talent
leadership in ensuring that these initiatives are realised. Mukweyi (2016) states that
the fundamentals for progress and growth in higher education institutions (HEIs)
depend on talent leadership to nurture a talent management environment that can
impact the institutions' performance metrics. For this to happen, it is paramount that
HDHEIs enhance talent leadership and management programs. Scholars such as
Kissoonduth (2017) presented a compelling picture of the impact and relevance of
talent leadership on organisations.

Elizabeth and Adele (2011) sustain that talent leadership allows organisations to
retain their competitive relevance and growth to achieve their business objectives.
Specifically, scholars indicate that talent leadership and management ensure
organisations can successfully acquire and retain essential talents when effectively
performed and define the extent to which these employees remain engaged (Al Ariss,
Cascio & Paauwe, 2014; Collings, 2014; Sparrow & Makram, 2015). According to
Khatri et al. (2010, p. 42), “one of the primary impacts of talent management on any
organisation is that it directly influences and enhances its ability to achieve its
strategy, set goals, and objectives”. A strategic talent leader needs to focus on the
right strategy to develop and retain the employees; otherwise, employees would not
prefer to stay long at the workplace (Graybill, 2014). Talent leadership enhances the
employee’s abilities and career development and aligns the employees with the
organisation’s strategies.

Given the above, talent leadership thus becomes a realistic platform on which an
organisation can build value creation capability through attracting and retaining a
unique set of knowledge, abilities, contributions, commitment, skills, and
competencies possessed by its talent. Such talented employees become a strategic
asset for achieving competitive advantages (Sparrow & Makram, 2015). According to
Schiemann (2014), an effective organisational talent leadership architecture oversees
the active management of the whole talent life cycle, leading to talent optimisation-
an imperative that balances talent acquisition, development, performance, and
retention in organisations (Schiemann, Seibert, & Morgan, 2013; Soltani, Shahin &
Barzoki, 2020). This means that talent leadership has the potential to give the
organisation a focused, committed, and engaged employee cadre with the right
capabilities. In addition, initiating an effective talent leadership architecture in an
organisation provides a strong alignment of employees with the goals, customers,
and the brand (Schiemann, 2006), the outcomes of which are improved innovative
employees and higher employee retention (Schiemann, 2014; Ambrosius, 2018).
Method

The study employed a qualitative research design within the Social Constructivist paradigm, which relies on the interaction with the participants to collect qualitative data based on their subjective experiences, perceptions and interpretations of their world (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Adopting the Social Constructivist paradigm was deemed necessary to improve the exploration of the diverse views of the participants regarding the strategic value of talent leaders in South Africa's higher education sector. A study built under this paradigm focused on the participant’s subjective opinions on the problem under study through interviews. Twenty face-to-face interviews were conducted with academic leaders at five purposively sampled HDHEIs in South Africa. This was also complemented by some document analyses undertaken to give background to talent leadership. A free online content cloud generator for non-commercial use, https://classic.wordclouds.com/, was employed to generate the content clouds for this research.

Word clouds, also known as clouds, are a promising technology for qualitative data analysis (Cidell, 2010; Brooks et al., 2014; Sellars et al., 2018). Selars et al. (2018) state that word clouds are potent as dashboards. They deliver easy, quick, and meaningful qualitative data analysis, thus providing meaningful interpretations through text size and colour (DePaolo & Wilkinson, 2018). The interview responses were transcribed and thematically coded into words or short phrases. These words/short phrases were entered into a word cloud generator, freely available to researchers on the web. The outcome of this process was the images with the themes describing the strategic value of talent leadership in historically disadvantaged higher education institutions in South Africa. A word list was also extracted to indicate the number of times the academic leaders mentioned a particular theme. The subsequent section presents the results of the study.

Results and Discussion

Word clouds was used to visualise content in interview responses to process the research question of the strategic value of talent leadership in HDHEIs in South Africa. Figure 1 shows the results of the qualitative analysis using word clouds.
Figure 1 visualises the themes describing the strategic value of talent leadership in HDHEIs in South Africa. The participants revealed that alignment, talent-equity talent retention, value creation, talent commitment, talent engagement, talent acquisition, talent empowerment, competencies, and employee satisfaction were the strategic outcomes of effective leadership in HDHEIs in South Africa. A word list was then applied to determine the level of agreement among the participants on each outcome of talent leadership.

Table 1. Themes emerging from content cloud analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Weight</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alignment</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talent-equity</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talent-Retention</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value-Creation</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talent-commitment</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talent-engagement</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talent-acquisition</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talent-empowerment</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competencies</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee-satisfaction</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 1 reveals, in the process of conducting interviews at the HDHEIs in South Africa, a thread that weaves them even more tightly together was discovered. Eighty percent (80%) of the participants viewed alignment and talent equity as the most significant benefits of talent leadership. Sixty-five (65%) of the participants reported talent retention and value creation, with 60% invoking the strategic value of talent commitment, talent engagement, talent empowerment and talent acquisition to the organisation as a result of talent leadership. Fifty-five (55%) viewed talent leadership as contributing to competencies, while 45% indicated the issue of employee satisfaction.

The main objective of the present study was to empirically evaluate the strategic impact of talent leadership in HDHEIs in South Africa. The empirical investigation of the present study was performed in the five historically disadvantaged universities in South Africa. The results of the present study reinforce the strategic impact of talent leadership in HDHEIs in South Africa. In literature, the scholars report different arguments regarding the strategic implications of talent leadership, strongly associating it with the power to move the staff from functioning at an individual level to a collective group, thus creating value for themselves and the institution. Because talent leadership is naturally motivational, there is a real...
likelihood of employee engagement and a committed cadre of academics driving value-creation processes in historically disadvantaged higher education institutions. The ability of HDHEIs to achieve talent engagement is essential to making high-value academics connect with the institutional mission, culture, and daily tasks of their academic role, thereby adding to value creation.

In addition, the findings of this study suggest that talent leadership in HDHEIs translates into a proactive approach that can be used to drive positive change. The proactive approach can foster an avenue for bi-directional feedback necessary for bringing about behavioural improvement as well as continued growth and development among the professoriate level academics. This may allow for strategic alignment with the institutional goals and impact talent engagement. This further suggests that the institutions will be better positioned to capture the differential value from its professors since they will be focused on contributing to the current employing institution. In short, this attests that, indeed, talent leadership is an unavoidable strategic priority for the HDHEIs in South Africa. It establishes the foundation of talent management tools and processes that support the business strategy of the institution through an ongoing partnership between senior institutional leaders and the human resource (HR) professionals to support best the achievement of the institution’s long-term goals and purpose. This implies that talent leadership is key to the organisational stability of HDHEIs. Literature indicates that leaders who can spot, acknowledge, and develop internal talent create a more stable organisational hierarchy (Griffith, Baur, & Buckley, 2019; Harsch & Festing, 2020).

The results also suggest that talent leadership in HDHEIs can allow for proper long-term talent alignment by ensuring highly skilled academic employees are empowered to succeed and grow into the professorial ranks. Such academics will significantly impact the institution's performance when they become professors. Thus, talent alignment as an outcome of talent leadership can also help to improve collaboration within the institution. The literature emphasises the strategic impact of organisational members working collaboratively towards a common goal (Khatri et al., 2010). For HDHEIs, improved efficiency and consistency in research productivity and postgraduate throughputs are possible, thus giving the institution room to accrue revenue from the DHET grants and subsidies. Moreover, this organisational unity can help make the professorial ranks feel more connected, thus increasing their work satisfaction and making them less likely to leave for greener pastures.

Another exciting thread from the study relays talent equity as one of the strategic impacts of talent leadership in HDHEIs. Talent equity looks at all factors, including value equity, brand equity, and retention equity. Through talent leadership, the institution moves beyond the transactional approach of talent management to a holistic approach that sees employees or talents as critical internal customers, and this provides HDHEIs with an early warning system that they can use to correct staff retention problems well before they cause the dreaded turnover of high-value academic talent. Achieving talent equity has been lauded for improving value equity, brand equity, and retention equity in employees’ minds, thus fostering
a culture of belonging and loyalty to the organisation (Malik & Singh, 2022; Tanushree, 2023). For HDHEIs, this finding implies their ability to nurture a genuine culture of growth and opportunity for every one of their employees, thus increasing the chance of their retention within the institution. Through talent equity, talent leadership also enlarges competency development in HDHEIs, allowing them to yield the differential value these talented employees will contribute. Because the institutions would be seen out to exercise strategies leading to talent equity, they are more likely to acquire high-value talent. This indeed is in line with the literature, which maintains that good talent leadership leads to the ability of organisations to hire and retain the right employees for critical job positions at the right time whenever they are needed, further enabling strategic alignment in organisations (Oladipo, 2014; Rout & Satpathy, 2020). This implies that HDHEIs, will achieve high professoriate retention rates through effective talent leadership, allowing them to operate at an advantage in meeting their strategic goals and recruiting new professorial hires. This ability to create a talent pool by acquiring the key competencies that take critical strategic positions within the institutions can generate value and competitiveness towards organisational success (Sparrow, Hird & Cooper, 2015; Taylor, 2018).

Finally, the study’s findings indicate that the true power of talent leadership resides in its ability to create change rather than manage it. According to Kane (2017), talent leadership allows a better image of the future, which is only possible through empowering people to unleash their talents in a meaningful, sincere, and dedicated way for the organisation. Should there be adequate talent leadership in HDHEIs, it would be possible to empower high-potential academics to become the champions they need to be to meet future demands. Employee empowerment can instil greater trust in leadership, encourage employee motivation, lead to greater creativity, and improve employee retention- all of which ultimately result in a better bottom line (Gichohi, 2014). For HDHEIs, this means that having an engaged professor will be committed and motivated to produce results, will not think of leaving, and, above all, will always become an ambassador of the institution and thus build the institutional brand necessary to attract other high-value professors and postgraduate students.

**Conclusion**

The research demonstrates the strategic impact of talent leadership in historically disadvantaged higher education in South Africa. The effect is evident in that talent leadership allows the institutions to achieve beneficial and strategically relevant impact on the institution’s overall performance through improving talent retention, equity, engagement, empowerment, commitment, acquisition, and alignment with the institutional objectives. Talent leadership gives historically disadvantaged higher education institutions the power to effectively harness and optimise their talent pool in line with the operational priorities and contribute to fulfilling institutional strategic goals. Historically disadvantaged higher education...
institutions in South Africa must design and implement talent leadership processes and practices to attract, develop, and retain an engaged, committed, competent cadre of professorial-level academics to improve institutional value creation and brand identity. The study recommends that institutions of higher learning should start targeted leadership training programs, establish mentorship initiatives, and implement inclusive and supportive policies.

Acknowledgment

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to all individuals who contributed to this research, particularly participants. Your assistance and commitment were fundamental to its accomplishment. We value your input and cooperative endeavours, which have greatly enriched our comprehension in this particular area. Your dedication and indispensable roles have been instrumental in facilitating the completion of this research. Furthermore, we would like to extend to the funding institutions (University of Venda & University of Limpopo), without your support, this study was not going to be possible.

References


Gichohi, P. M. (2014). The role of employee engagement in revitalising creativity and innovation at the workplace: A survey of selected libraries in Meru County-Kenya.


