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Talent Management for Academics Within the South African Higher Education Landscape- A Conceptual Framework

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Abstract:

Talent management in higher education involves attracting, nurturing, and retaining academic talent given the changing nature of higher education. Academic talent management has evolved beyond conventional hiring and promotion procedures to include a comprehensive framework that harmonises individual academic development, performance, and engagement with institutional objectives. In light of the particular difficulties and dynamics of academic careers such as tenure, research output, teaching quality, and institutional citizenship this conceptual paper offers a paradigm for talent management in higher education. The framework incorporates essential elements that are specific to the academic setting, such as professional development, succession planning, performance management, onboarding, talent acquisition, and retention tactics. This study provides a conceptual model to help academic leaders, administrators, and policymakers create inclusive and sustainable academic talent pipelines by combining literature from higher education studies, organisational behaviour, and human resource management. Long-term academic excellence, innovation, and institutional competitiveness are the goals of the suggested framework.

Keywords:

Talent Management, Academics, South Africa, Higher Education, Conceptual Framework

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Introduction

As universities seek to hire, retain, develop, and use outstanding academic staff, talent management (TM) has become important in higher education (Abiwu & Martins, 2024; Mukwawaya, 2025; Musakuro, 2021; Musakuro & Klerk, 2021). To increase organisational sustainability and competitiveness, TM is envisioned as a methodical process that includes hiring, identifying, training, engaging, retaining, and deploying employees. These practices support the attainment of the University's mission, global ranking, and research quality in the context of higher education. In higher education, talents are increasingly recognised as intrinsically important resources that foster creativity, academic success, and institutional sustainability.TM in the context of higher education helps universities to integrate their human capital strategy with more general goals, including as teaching excellence, research output, community engagement and international reputation. Research on TM in higher education is still in its early stages. Literature shows that the definition of "talent" remains ambiguous (Abiwu & Martins, 2024; Musakuro, 2021).

According to Musakuro (2022), Seven essential pillars are needed for TM in South African public universities: workforce planning, recruiting and selection, training and development, performance management, compensation and rewards, talent retention, and faculty succession planning. These elements are complemented by career management techniques including coaching, mentoring, and planned development pathways that are particularly important for academic careers. The higher education landscape is changing, and institutions are facing difficulties in luring, nurturing, and keeping top intellectual talent (Mukwawaya, 2025). Academics are the foundation of innovative research, high-quality education, and an institution's prestige. However, fragmented and uneven approaches to talent management are a common problem for higher education institutions, making it difficult for them to maintain and leverage academic excellence (Barkhuizen et al, 2020; Abiwu & Martins, 2024).

Abiwu and Martins (2024) further maintained that effectively managing academic talent is crucial, but many universities lack a thorough and customised conceptual framework that takes into account the particular requirements and dynamics of the academic workforce (Kissoonduth, 2017). The complexity and intrinsic incentives of academics, such as intellectual freedom, research autonomy, and the interaction between teaching, research, and service, are not sufficiently catered by the talent management models that are now in use. These models were primarily created for the business or industrial sectors. High turnover rates, the growing need for multidisciplinary competence, generational shifts in workforce expectations, the lack of talent in specialised sectors, and difficulties promoting diversity and inclusion among professors are some of the main problems. Talent management initiatives are further complicated by the need for new competencies and leadership skills brought about by the quick digital revolution and globalisation of higher education (Thamage & Motshegwa, 2021).

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Mukwawaya (2025) maintained that academics' ability to make strategic decisions about hiring, professional development, performance reviews, and succession planning is hampered by the lack of an integrated, context-specific conceptual framework. As a result, universities run the risk of seeing a drop in student results, research output, and academic quality, which will eventually hurt their ability to compete and have an impact on society. As a result, it is imperative to create a thorough conceptual framework for talent management that is especially suited to the academic setting of higher education. In order to promote long-term academic excellence and institutional resilience, such a framework should take into account the complex structure of academic jobs, address institutional and human variables influencing talent dynamics, and offer strategic guidance. Given the foregoing, the primary goal of this review's research was to create a conceptual framework for talent management for academics within the South African higher education sector.

Literature Review

The literature below concentrated on talent management in the higher education sector in selected countries.

Talent Management in Selected Universities in Australia

The higher education system in Australia is currently one of the key foundations supporting the country's economy. The primary determinant of Australia's degree of innovation is the ability of its university graduates and the scholars who produce them. Due to the retirement of long-serving personnel and the rise in labour migration abroad in pursuit of better opportunities, Australia has a greater need for academics than it has staff available (Mohammed, Baig & Gururajan, 2020; Njanjobea, 2016).

When compared to their peers throughout the world, Australian academics' compensation packages are competitive; nonetheless, they fall short of those from private sector. It is important to remember that academics at public higher education institutions report significantly low levels of job satisfaction compared to their counterparts in the private sector and those employed abroad. In addition to the academic workload, academics in Australia have a high workforce turnover rate, either leaving the country or quitting the sector entirely (Mohammed, Baig & Gururajan, 2020; Njanjobea, 2016).

Talent Management in Selected Universities in Germany

Due to its knowledge-based economy and position as a leading innovator, Germany has made a concerted effort to raise awareness of talent management. According to Chandrachud and Athavale (2015), there are two primary programs in place to encourage personnel management best practices. The University of Cologne (UoC) employs a number of employment strategies to draw in the top academic performance. The German government funds top researchers at the University of Cologne

through the Institutional Strategy of the German Research Council. Chandrachud and Athavale (2015) assert that this research funding pushes highly accomplished scholars to new heights and encourages them to engage in transdisciplinary research.

Prominent female researchers are also given preferential treatment and benefits, including scholarships in specific fields, family-friendly allowances from the University of Cologne that include stipends for married spouses and children under the age of 18, and opportunities to host research conferences to expand research internationally (Nakonechna, 2025). The University of Applied Sciences in Cologne is renowned for its research-intensive program and interdisciplinary research. In addition to cultivating a strong research philosophy, the institution has a strategy in place to attract, nurture, and retain outstanding researchers (Chandrachud & Athavale, 2015). Enhancing working circumstances for top researchers, fostering academic career development, and fostering a strong research culture among academics are often the main goals of human resource of institutions of higher learning in Germany (Chandrachud & Athavale, 2015).

With the aim of fostering effective human resources development at the Cologne University of Applied Sciences conducts long-term, methodical human resource projects (Chandrachud & Athavale, 2015). It focusses on two main areas: training young researchers and creating favourable research working environments. Training upcoming researchers, providing health promotion programs (like flexible work schedules, childcare and family support services, and professors reporting for duty at least four days a week to give them enough time to work on their research and projects), and making individual research funding available are some of the main initiatives related to talent management (Chandrachud & Athavale, 2015).

Talent Management in Selected United State of America

In the USA, efforts to increase awareness of talent management programs have made great progress. Among the universities that offer training programs for teaching and administrative personnel are Emoury, Dayton State College, the University of Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Minnesota. Talent management advisory panels are established to help create opportunity policies and find future leaders who can take on more responsibility (Tiwari, 2025). The four main components of talent management for academics at American institutions are recruiting and recruitment, employee engagement, affirmative action and diversity, and general rewards culture. In an effort to draw and keep outstanding staff, the University of Debwares, Ken State, and the University of Florida have made their recognition and award programs publicly available (Evans & Chun, 2012).

Pittsburgh and the University of California, New York both have excellent wellness and health programs. To attract and keep elite academic talent, Ohio State University offers benefits like reimbursement and

sabbatical leave. The University of Pennsylvania offers its staff members a range of opportunities for professional growth, such as leadership training, coaching, and mentorship. Leadership is fostered by the University of Pennsylvania's "Leadership@Penn" initiative, which selects high-potential employees from among academic and administrative staff. The main goal of the program is to develop staff leadership by helping them to solve real-world problems and experiment with new approaches, among other things (Chandrachud & Athavale, 2015).

Talent Management in African Universities

The availability of academic talent in the context of higher education is being negatively impacted by the political and socioeconomic strategies that governments throughout the world implement to promote economic growth. According to Takawira, Coetzee, and Schreuder (2014), the main markers of effectiveness and efficiency in modern businesses are pressure, globalisation, and the makeup of the labour market. Makondo (2014) pointed out that academic recruitment and retention in the higher education sector still faces major challenges, but African institutions in particular need to take immediate action to address this issue.

According to a recent study, administrators at African universities have personally witnessed the dire consequences of their labour shortages. Literature shows that African institutions will not be able to produce enough graduates to strengthen their respective nations' economies if the academic shortfall is not addressed (Rudhumbu & Maphosa, 2015; Makondo 2014; Njanjobea, 2016).

Talent Management in Kenyan Universities

According to Ng'ethe, Namusonge, and Iravo (2012), Kenyan universities compete fiercely for faculty members from both domestic and foreign institutions. The situation is made worse inadequate compensation, which adds to their already overwhelming workload of academics (Karim, Oktarina, & Antoni, 2025; Ng'ethe et al., 2012) Ng'ethe et al., (2012) further claim that Kenya is also suffering from a significant "brain drain," as government-sponsored students who are sent overseas on scholarships never return after their studies are over. Research indicates that academics in Kenya leave their jobs to take offers from nations with better working conditions and greater wages (Karim, Oktarina, & Antoni, 2025; Ng'ethe et al. 2012; Samuel & Chipunza, 2013).

Talent Management in Nigerian Universities

Literature shows that Nigerian universities are losing their best faculty members as they leave the country in quest of better work opportunities. Literature further alludes that some of the primary reasons academics leave for other institutions overseas include poor hiring practices, an unprofessional management style, a lack of training and development opportunities, a lack of timely promotions, low pay, and poor job security (Onah & Anikwe, 2016).

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According to Onah and Anikwe (2016), "brain drain" is a significant issue in Nigerian higher education. According to reports, Nigeria's economy and human capital development have suffered as a result of the exodus of many skilled Nigerians (Ojokheta, & Onimisi, 2025; Onah & Anikwe, 2016).

The gender gap is the second significant issue that Nigerian universities are dealing with. According to Onah and Anikwe (2016), there is a gender imbalance in decision-making since Nigeria's hiring and selection process is extremely bureaucratic and has little to no representation of women. The literature makes it abundantly evident that the atmosphere at Nigerian universities encourages masculinist establishments that result in a patriarchal social structure and hinder the advancement of female scholars as equal members of the university community (Ogbogu & Bisiriyu, 2012; Ojokheta, & Onimisi, 2025; Onah & Anikwe, 2016). The patriarchal culture of Nigerian institutions prevents women from reaching their full potential and from entering the academic profession due to the glass ceiling of implicit norms and misdirected expectations. In addition to having a long-term impact on deciding women's feeling of self-worth, professional aspirations, and academic community involvement, this will negatively impact their career prospects (Ojokheta, & Onimisi, 2025).

Talent Management in Botswana Universities

Despite its importance in giving Botswana's universities a tried and tested method of acquiring a competitive edge, talent management is still a relatively new and accessible option. A number of innovations that define talent management in Botswana's institutions were documented by Rudhumbu and Maphosa (2015). Since 48% of Botswana's institutions use organised performance management systems to assess their staff, the first development is that incentive and performance programs are not connected to provide strong and effective talent management. Of these 48%, about 20% have received prizes and recognition related to departmental and individual performance goals (Rudhumbu & Maphosa, 2015).

Since just 47% of Botswana's universities collaborate with line managers from different departments to support university talent management activities, the second trend in the country's higher education is the slow adoption of leadership development and succession planning (Rudhumbu & Maphosa, 2015). It is important to remember that even if university top management has effective personnel management strategies, there may be issues implementing them.

Talent Management in South African Universities

In many South African universities, talent management is seen as a unique strategic method for gaining a competitive edge. The majority of white males in the academic community continue to make the South African tertiary education system challenging (Dube & Ngulube, 2013). Racism and patriarchy are

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reported to have been widespread in South Africa during the colonial and apartheid eras (Badat, 2010; Barkhuizen, 2015; Dube & Ngulube, 2013; Mather & Bam, 2025).

The bulk of academic staff in South African tertiary education institutions are white men, and their numbers are increasing (HESA, 2011). According to a survey by Badat (2010), black employees at universities in South Africa only make up 17% of the academic staff at South African universities, although making up over 89% of the country's population. According to some reports, women make up only 31% of university lecturers in South Africa, despite making up approximately 50% of the population (Badat, 2010; HESA, 2011). The higher education sector is currently in danger of losing academics to other industries and other international tertiary education institutions that offer competitive remuneration (Mather & Bam, 2025; Takawira, Coetzee, & Schreuder, 2014).

Methods and Data

The study was descriptive in nature and is based on secondary data. Secondary data used in this study consists of books, journal article and human resources policy documents.

Results

The key attributes identified in the data extraction stage led to the production of a novel talent management framework for academics.

Talent management, which is generally defined as the strategic approach to attracting, developing, maintaining, and deploying persons with the appropriate skills and aptitudes, has become a major concern for businesses in all industries, including higher education (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). In higher education institutions (HEIs), talent management encompasses not only academic staff such as professors and researchers but also support and administrative personnel. The resluts of this study explores the unique challenges and evolving approaches of talent management in the context of higher education, taking into account current trends, strategic imperatives, and the impact of outside influences.

HEIs have to combine the responsibilities of teaching, research, and community involvement with academic independence and institutional culture (Abiwu & Martins, 2024). HEIs around the world usually face intense competition for the greatest academic talent, which is exacerbated by changing demographics, increasing diversity, and changing expectations of professors and students. Effective talent management is essential to HEIs' ability to maintain research output, educational quality, and institutional reputation. The demand for highly skilled staff who can collaborate across disciplines and innovate in the global information economy is becoming increasingly apparent to universities (Mukwawaya, 2025, Musakuro, 2021). Evidence from literaure indicates that talent engagement, talent

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development, talent deployment, performance management, talent acquisition, and talent retention are the main pillars that impact talent management in the context of higher education.

Establishing an employer brand ensures the attraction of external applicants and is considered one of the best human capital initiatives (Barkhuizen, 2020; Musakuro, 2022). Therefore, it's essential to identify the best personnel sourcing channels, including executive search firms, professional groups, recruitment agencies, and recommendations. The hiring process may start with succession planning, which includes defining the job criteria, including experience, qualifications, and any additional competencies, as well as taking into account late-career employees who are about to retire. The selection process will be informed by the evaluation and shortlisting of candidates after the post has been carefully considered and may be promoted internally or externally through a variety of media platforms.

Talent engagement is a positive, self-fulfilling state of mind related to one's work that is characterised by energy, absorption, and dedication. It is crucial to keep in mind that employees are more engaged when they operate in favourable settings. In this case, employees including those at the university need the full support of the management team in order to completely commit to the objectives of the organisation. This implies that management and the talent management team should fully support exceptional individuals in order to meet organisational goals.

Talent development is one of the most crucial components of talent management (Charan, 2008). The ability to fulfil obligations as a "talented academic" by exhibiting the required academic competence is commonly associated with academic growth and development in a university setting. It is important to keep in mind that universities are educating their staff to meet their specific demands while simultaneously providing a strong basis for effective teaching and learning (Charan, 2008).

The goal of talent development is to ensure that new personnel quickly get to know the institution through a socialisation process. This can be achieved by assigning a mentor who would then help the newly hired employees become more familiar with the insitution. The following steps can be taken to help newly hired employees: During the first or second month of employment, the newly hired employee must be boarded and orientated to the insitution. Employees can receive broad information about the institution, including its vision and purpose statement, and receive on-the-job training from seasoned staff members.

Employees should be able to understand the university's strategic goals because this is an essential component of performance areas. Both the employee and the line manager should be included in the performance management process; the line manager shouldn't make all the decisions. An impartial assessment of employee performance should be carried out, and communication and frequent feedback are crucial elements of performance management. Because excessive staff turnover poses a major

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obstacle to these institutions, university staff retention is a critical concern (Selesho & Naile, 2014). A high labour turnover rate among academic staff negatively affects university stakeholders, who struggle to obtain better services when positions are filled by less experienced incumbent.

In order to encourage staff retention in higher education institutions, the following factors should be taken into account for effective and efficient human resource management: articulating how each employee contributes to the university's corporate vision and mission; fostering a culture of trust; improving the skill level of managers supervising professional staff; offering management training that emphasises development; clarifying the understanding of employees' needs and reinforcing frequent communication; defining roles and responsibilities to accelerate contribution; investing and maintaining ongoing commitment by paying the best talent what they are worth considering their contribution to the university.

In light of the above, the proposed talent management framework for academics is as follows:

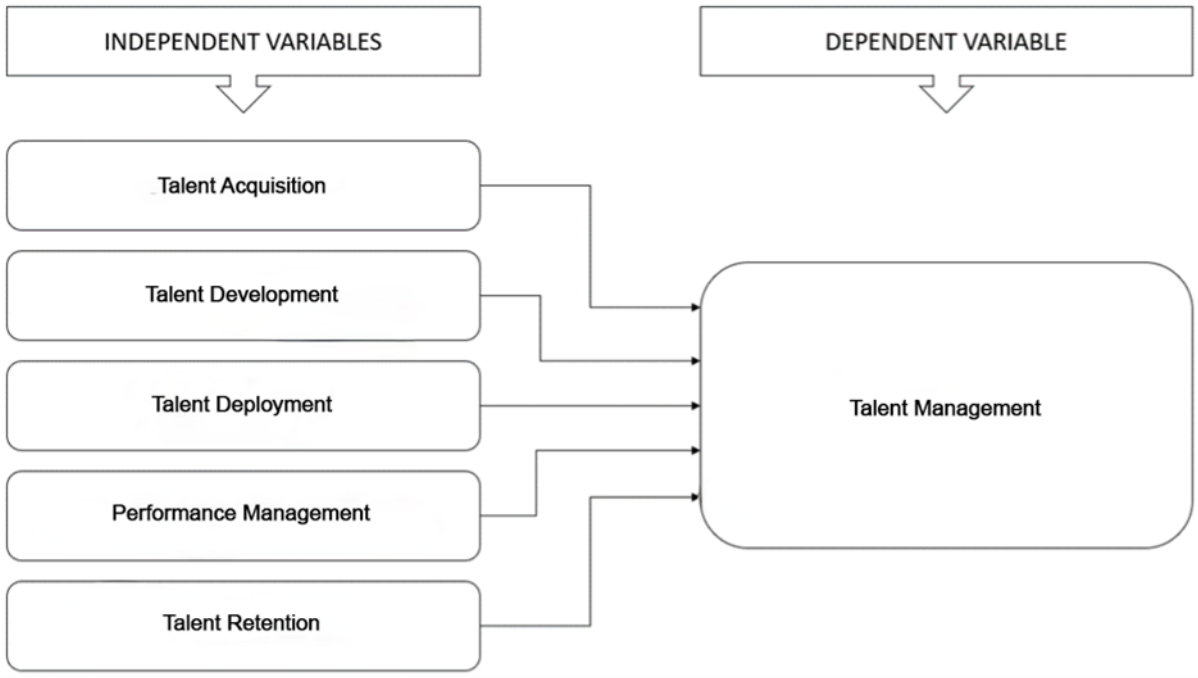


Figure 1: Talent management framework

Discussion

The concept of talent management is becoming more and more popular, but it still lacks a theoretical underpinning and a precise definition (Ariss, Cascio & Paauwe 2014; Festing & Schafer, 2014). In addition to offering a crucial integrated talent management strategy and a useful understanding of talent management in academia, the research was aimed at closing the knowledge gap. Literature shows that

there are ongoing discussions about whether talent management should focus on all employees or just the abilities of high-potential and performing employees, the literature further shows that there is no standard definition of the term "talent management" or its goals and scope (Ariss et al., 2014, Rudhumbu & Maphosa, 2015).

Literature shows that organisations ought to have extremely talented staff to thrive in the competition and progressively diverse economy and the university is no exception. Employing highly skilled, bright, and dedicated workers gives universities a competitive edge. Literature shows that attracting and keeping important university employees is a huge challenge for higher educational institutions. This suggests that because of their uncompetitive pay and working conditions, key university personnel are difficult to recruit and retain (Abiwu & Martins, 2024; Musakuro, 2018).

Uncompetitive pay and benefits packages, unfair promotion practices, inadequate state funding, and rising student enrolment that is adding to academics' workloads are some of the reasons given for the large exodus of university employees from their employers. Literature posit that excessive academic turnover is frequently linked to expenses associated with hiring new faculty, disruptions in lectures, problems with departmental and student planning, and the departure of seasoned mentors and advisors (Theron, Barkhuizen & du Plessis, 2014).

Although the study strived to eliminate potential limitations, the following were the main limitations observed in the study:

- The proposed conceptual framework may not be universally applicable across all South African universities.
- Talent management in academia is an emerging research area in South Africa, meaning theoretical underpinnings are still developing and may not fully capture the complexity of local realities.
- Many talent management theories originate from corporate settings. Their adaptation to academia where autonomy, collegiality, and non-monetary motivations are central may lead to conceptual mismatches.

Conclusion

The strategic management of academic talent has never been more important in the changing landscape of higher education. A strong conceptual framework for people management offers the essential basis for maintaining academic excellence, creativity, and institutional resilience as institutions deal with growing global competition, technological disruption, and changing societal expectations. This framework is comprehensive, covering every stage of the academic talent lifecycle, from recruiting and attraction to engagement, development, and retention. It balanced individual ambitions with institutional

objectives while taking into consideration the distinctive qualities of academic labour, such as autonomy, intellectual freedom, and scholarly influence. Additionally, it needs to be flexible enough to adjust to shifting external circumstances including internationalisation, legislative changes, and the increased focus on multidisciplinary and cooperative research.

Acknowledging the importance of varied opinions in fostering academic creativity, effective talent management in academia should also embrace diversity, equity, and inclusion. Clear career trajectories, mentorship programs, and leadership development are crucial elements that may strengthen academics at all career phases. In summary, a well-designed talent management framework for the higher education industry is a strategic priority rather than just an operational requirement. Institutions can better position themselves to draw and develop elite talent by creating a welcoming, vibrant, and purpose-driven academic atmosphere. This will help universities to achieve their larger goals of teaching and learning, research and community engagement. In light of the above, this study contributed to the dearth in literature by:

- It redefines “talent” in academia as multidimensional balancing scholarly excellence with transformation and social impact.
- It extends TM theory beyond corporate models to a public-sector, developmental context, offering a foundation for comparative research in South African universities.

In addition, the conceptual framework for Talent Management (TM) of academics within South Africa’s higher education (HE) sector carries several important practical implications for university leadership, Human resource practitioners, policymakers, and other stakeholders. These implications can guide implementation, decision-making, and policy development to enhance academic excellence, retention, and institutional competitiveness.

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