An Introductory Exploration of Talent Management in the Context of Romanian Higher Education

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Abstract

The concept of Talent Management (TM) has gained significant attention in the academic environment in recent years, however, remains largely unexplored. Developing TM practises within educational systems could help to produce future-ready scholars and graduates. This research project utilized the bibliometric method and focus group technique to explore TM in the context of higher education in Romania. The study was carried out in two phases, the first to determine global and Romanian interest in the topic and the second to gain insight into the challenges and opportunities faced by universities in Romania, as perceived by faculty members and HR professionals. The aim of this research is to provide a starting point for the development and further exploration of TM practises in the academic context, and to contribute to a better understanding of the concept.

Keywords: talent management, Romania, higher education, focus groups, bibliometric analysis, human resources management

INTRODUCTION

Talent Management (TM) plays a critical role in achieving sustainable outcomes. Talent, an intrinsic essence of exceptional abilities and attitudes, drives people to excel in their performance domains (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013). Effective TM practises can support economic sustainability by ensuring that people are motivated and productive and contribute to the organisation's success. The importance of learning and development practises extends beyond the scale of the organization (Aina & Atan, 2020). This idea can be extended to academic institutions from the perspective of staff and students.

Recognising the true value of human capital with the right skills for existing roles was always a challenge for organisations around the world, as well as for educational systems. The concept of talent as innate or acquired influences TM strategies, and organisations should adapt their approach based on specific needs, experiences, and market conditions, instead of following a one-size-fits-all solution (Meyers et al., 2013). During the past decade, the importance of TM has grown, highlighting the need to nurture human potential. The scarcity of talent has become a widespread concern, with globalisation and evolving business environments pressing higher education systems to rapidly adapt to future demands.

TM strives to establish an organisational framework that fosters development, optimises talent identification, and tailors initiatives to accommodate different roles and levels (Meyers et al., 2013). Our first assumption was that the TM concept is not enough explored in the academic area. According to recent reviews in the literature, academic interest in TM has shown significant growth since 2010 and has been considered one of the fastest growing academic areas in the management field in recent decades. However, despite this growth, there is still a lack of operationalisation and theoretical foundations of TM. (Gallardo-Gallardo, 2020).

The qualitative study conducted in 2012 on Dutch academic careers gave us an interesting view, starting from the premises that The Netherlands has one of the best higher education systems. Based on semi-structured interviews with 42 researchers, the investigation revealed that there is no systematic relationship between career success and academic performance of highly talented scholars if we are considering the number of citations or publications. The most productive researchers did not always have to be in the academic field (Van Balen et al., 2012).

The absence of bibliometric analysis related to TM in higher education prompted us to advance our original research ideas. Identifying TM practises for higher education could support both scholars and students to stay ahead of the game and achieve better performance.

OBJECTIVES OF RESEARCH

Following our experience in the TM area and discussions with HR practitioners, as well as university staff members, we have based the current research on two fundamental questions:

- Is the concept of TM for higher education explored enough by scholars in the last post-pandemic years?
- What do we know about TM in the context of Romanian higher education, from literature and from practise?

We have established three major objectives for our analysis:

1. Determine the level of global interest in TM within the higher education system during the post-pandemic period.
2. Perform a review of the existing literature review on TM within the Romanian higher education system.
3. Identify the challenges and opportunities related to TM that currently exist in academic settings, from the perspective of university and HR practitioners.

THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To have a better view of the research topic, we used two methods for our exploratory research. First, we conducted a bibliometric analysis of published academic papers. This is a well-known quantitative method that has been used to study the structure and development of the topic and publications throughout the years. Bibliometrics consists of descriptive statistics for several categories of data, such as authors, documents, abstracts, publication years, and citations, just to name a few of them. The primary purpose is to recognise the interest, patterns, and research directions (Geok & Bin Bilal Ali, 2021). After we finalised the quantitative analysis, in the second step, we opted to use the focus group technique to gain a deeper understanding of the topic of TM in the Romanian academic system. Focus groups are defined by clear topics and interactive discussions, usually between 4-12 participants, and have a moderator or facilitator who will capture all points of view. (Saunders et al., 2012). They are highly productive discussions that can lead to conclusions or ideas that can be used for further examination.

To obtain the necessary data, we carried out our investigation through the databases of Web of Science (*Web of Science Core Collection*, 2023), Scopus (*Scopus*, 2023), and Dimensions (*Dimensions*, 2022). The first two are high-quality databases that are constantly being improved, but subject to subscription. Compared to Web of Science, Scopus seems to be more open to people, as it provides free access to authors and source information with the respective metrics (Pranckut, 2021). Dimensions is a relatively new database, launched in January 2018, and is a partly free scholarly database. In the same year, they showed that the extent and citation numbers are comparable to those found in Scopus. The website seems to have mainly peer-reviewed articles, different from Google Scholar or Microsoft Academic (Thelwall, 2018), according to our intention to use well-regarded databases for our investigation. We conducted the bibliometric study first on 10 February 2023, and then refreshed it on 29 March 2023. We chose to look for documents in English language published from 2020 onwards, so the relevant post-pandemic studies are revealed, the triggered fields being the topic, titles, abstracts, and keywords. Subsequently, we downloaded the results from the three databases to Microsoft Excel to clean the data, analysing it, removing the nonrelevant documents, and create illustrations of the outcomes. We have approached the bibliometric analysis in two steps:

- Step 1: search in all three databases the combination of "talent management" term with "higher education", "universities", "university", "academia", "academic" or "college".
- Step 2: search with the criteria from step 1 and add the selection for "Romania" or "Romanian".

In the second stage of our investigation, we have planned and facilitated six online focus groups via the Zoom platform. Each session was recorded and lasted approximately forty minutes. We divided them into two phases. The initial phase was held on 13 February 2023 with university staff from one of the leading institutions in Romania and two focus groups: the first one with seven and the second with four

participants, representing professors, project & entrepreneurship consultants, university trainers and career consultants, and PhD students. The second phase was held with HR practitioners (Directors, Consultants, HR Business Partners) from top multinational companies and medium-sized organisations, representatives from the West Region of Romania in the field of automotive, IT, telecommunication, and services, and four focus groups were organised in mid-February 2023, with four attendee each.

Participants in all groups received no financial incentive for their efforts and were not given guidelines in advance. They were chosen based on their expertise, interest in the topic, and willingness to contribute further to other investigations or activities.

We have guided the discussions with the university staff through three main questions: (1) What are the existing resources for students and university personnel to enhance their skills and pursue their interests; (2) What hands-on opportunities are currently accessible to students; (3) What programmes or activities would be beneficial for students to gain familiarity with different sectors?

For HR practitioners, the roundtable discussions also focused on three main questions: (1) What are the methods of talent identification and tracking; (2) How are companies attracting and retaining talent, especially from the academic area; (3) How is Return of Investment (ROI) for TM initiatives measured? (ROI is a financial metric that measures the gain or loss generated by an investment relative to its initial cost, expressed as a percentage).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results of the bibliometric analysis

In all three databases, we have found a total of 432 documents: Web of Science – 87, Scopus – 133, Dimensions – 212. We detected some of the documents in at least two of the databases. Picture 1 below also shows the overlays of the papers.
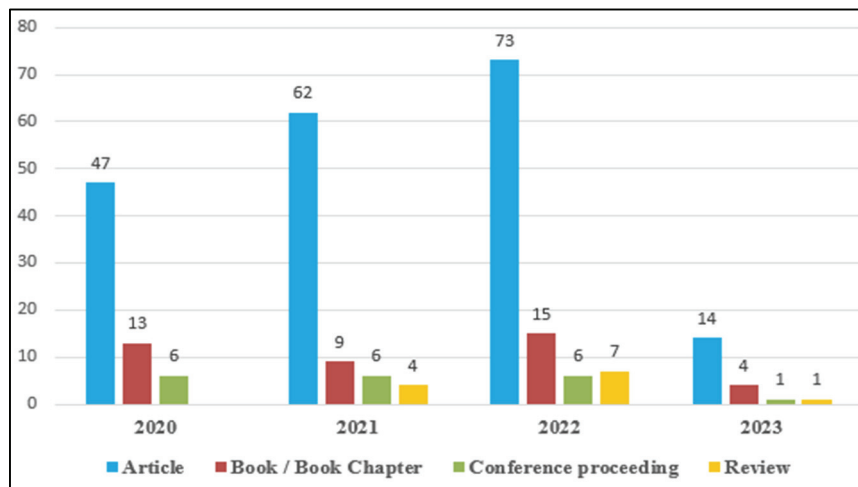
Picture 1: Overview of the discovered documents
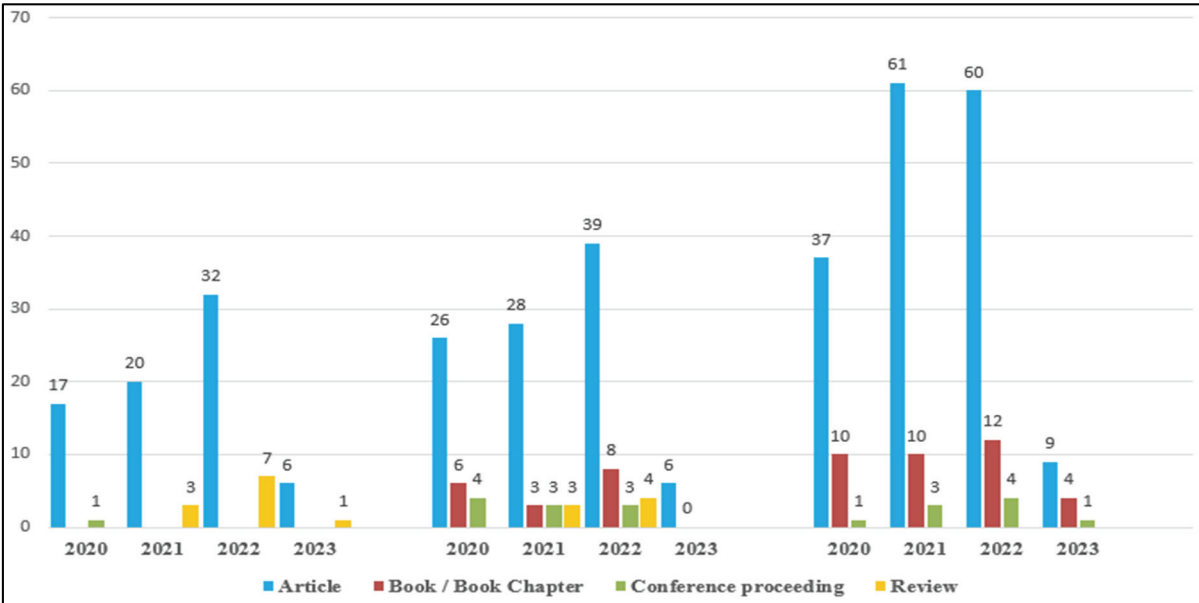
Author's own contribution

After combining all the results from the data libraries, we have eliminated the overlays and recognised 268 distinct documents as presented in picture 2 below.

Picture 2: Distinct documents published since 2020

Author's own contribution

When analysing the extracted documents, we could not find many similarities or patterns, as rather random research was done, mainly at the theoretical level. There is a slight trend of increased interest in this topic, but a very poor representation in the conference proceedings, which has led to the belief that it is not a favoured subject for discussions and debates. We could find only thirteen documents on TM models or frameworks, and only seven papers of them offering a view of higher education systems. Other poor representation was about TM practises within the higher education system, as only 12 documents referenced this. In general, the documents are mainly dedicated to theoretical approaches or proposals and do not explore the practical side of actual implementation and success measurement.

When referring only to Romanian specifics, without any type of time frame restriction, we can find only one single conference paper: ''Towards a Romanian Entrepreneurial and Ecological University: Learning Talent Management from 'Big-Tech', published in both Scopus and Dimensions databases. After investigations, the proposal of the authors is to learn the key strategies from tech companies and then be adjusted for academic area (Văduva et al., 2022).

Consequently, there is insufficient evidence on a global scale, and specifically in the Romanian higher education system.

The outcomes of the focus groups discussions

The focus group discussions have provided valuable insights and perspectives on the subject under study. The information collected from the participants was analysed and synthesised to derive meaningful outcomes that can guide future research. The points of view of the participants converged in the same direction: there are many challenges in the higher education system that they all agreed on, but there are also many opportunities, as the Romanian business environment is open to collaboration and enablement of the real-world experience for students.

The university staff participants shed light on the most common difficulties they encountered and provided recommendations for possible solutions and actions. They all agreed that TM practises do not

exist at the university, however, there are self-awareness and evaluation mechanisms that are provided to students for discovering their skills and interests. Unfortunately, there is no further support or follow-up action within the academic area for the students, although they clearly noticed an interest in self-knowledge. The interest of faculty members to work with students towards talent development and career orientation is present, but they are constrained by a lack of resources and time to provide enrichment programmes. Academic staff highlighted that there are many projects available for students to develop and implement their ideas, however, there is no drive for many students to participate and allocate extra time for additional university assignments. Many of them feel uninspired to volunteer and seem to need extrinsic motivation to perform extracurricular activities.

All identified the need to have a TM system, inspired by the business environment, and personalised according to university needs. Initiatives such as practical experiences, collaborations with companies, and incentives for participation in personal growth programmes can help students develop their skills and passions.

The lack of consistent information sharing and the nonexistence of a strong database of people with their skills, interests, and experience was considered a challenge, and it was suggested to initiate it. Moreover, another recognised difficulty was the insufficient participation of students in various activities planned by the higher education staff. One solution is to assess the best practises that could work and to find great communication channels within the university.

It was highlighted that a long-term human resource development strategy focused on constant education is crucial. The importance of continuing collaboration between universities and the business sector was also discussed, as was the need for external trainers to collaborate with universities to fill in the gaps.

Although there are multiple well-developed initiatives, it is not clear what links them and how their success is measured. Somehow, success is mainly measured through the achievement of the indicators set for projects only, not for people development.

Focus group discussions with HR experts have revealed that there are great perspectives on TM practises. The participants provided detailed feedback on talent acquisition, development, and retention. Key themes that emerged from the discussions include the need for a TM strategy according to its organisational specifics, the importance of effective communication and collaboration between the HR and management teams, and the value of continuous learning and development opportunities for employees. Medium-size companies do not have any TM model or initiative in place, as people development is done according to the requirements of their roles.

All practitioners acknowledged the importance of measuring the success of TM initiatives and ultimately knowing the value of ROI; however, there is not much clarity in this direction. There are other metrics that are considered and could lead to ROI.

Regarding the practises for identifying and tracking talent, the participants stressed the importance of a structured process for assessment and development. On the topic of attracting and retaining talent, particularly from academic areas, the participants discussed the need for a strong employer brand and a value proposition that appeals to top talent. They highlighted the importance of creating a positive and supportive work environment that promotes participation, motivation, and development.

Most large multinational companies are partnering with universities and use this relationship as a channel to feed their future workforce. All companies that offer scholarships or internship programmes aim to keep graduates they know and who are great performers as their future employees. This is one way to track the ROI. Employee turnover rates, productivity metrics, and employee satisfaction surveys are also good tools for looking at ROI.

CONCLUSIONS

There are not enough empirical quantitative and qualitative studies on TM in the context of higher education, and it is not possible to have a comprehensive view on the topic from the literature. Consistent documentation of the practises in this area around the globe is missing. We can conclude that either it was not documented in the literature, or the TM system does not exist in most academic institutions, therefore, the interest for the topic seems very low. Furthermore, there is a lack of research on the value of graduate development programmes from a TM perspective within companies, with the current literature focussing primarily on existing employees and neglecting externally recruited young talent, including graduates. Few scholars identified the need for early preparation for students, while still in universities or colleges, to prepare them for the job market and future career (Clark-Ambrosini et al., 2022). As for the Romanian higher education system, the fact that only one document was revealed in the search shows that either this was not explored enough, or there is no interest to develop this subject. On the other hand, we have gained practical insight from the investigation conducted in focus groups with university staff and HR professionals about the challenges and opportunities associated with TM in Romania. Participants agreed on the challenges and opportunities and the need for a TM system tailored to universities. The lack of consistent information exchange and student engagement were admitted as a challenge, and long-term strategies for human resource development were underlined. The importance of a structured talent assessment, continuous learning with hands-on experiences, and development opportunities for students and university staff was also discussed and agreed upon. Finally, it was suggested that collaboration between universities and companies can be an effective way to identify and retain top talent.

The disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic produced a fast transformation of the learning and working models, nevertheless, it can also offer a good opportunity to reframe the topic of TM and leverage the companies' best practise to develop TM for higher education. The acceleration of automation and digitalisation opens doors for many options to be explored, from development programmes to communication and engagement. Developing and maintaining a strong TM concept within any educational institution can multiply the potential to embrace the uncertainties of the future.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There are few limitations of this analysis that deserve to be mentioned. The bibliometric research was done in 3 databases only, although some of the strongest and accurate ones. The focus group discussions with academic staff were conducted at only one university in Romania, which typically makes the results not generalisable. However, the main conclusion is that there is no TM system in place, but there is a need for it within the higher education system, which could be extended further to the entire Romanian academic environment.

As future research, we can explore and compare different TM models and approaches from other universities in Europe, but also from other continents, with the purpose for finding best practises that

can work for Romanian universities. Couple of interesting models to further investigate could be: 1)GERRIC (Gifted Education Research, Resource and Information Centre) from the University of New South Wales Australia, focused on the education, training and development of talented students, being the pre-eminent centre of gifted education in the Southern Hemisphere (*Gifted Education | Education - UNSW Sydney*, n.d.); 2)The First National Science Academy in Korea for the gifted, focused on developing a specialized curriculum and research-centered learning for science-gifted students (*Korea Science Academy of KAIST*, n.d.). Additionally, the study could be extended to other Romanian universities to learn about other types of practises for the development of university staff and students. Taking it a step further, another area of focus is bridging the gap between the academic and business environments in the context of TM initiatives, by developing solutions inspired from business practises and tailored for use in academic settings.

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