



**Exploring perceptions of talent management in the Finance Department at the
University of KwaZulu-Natal**

by

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DECLARATION

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my late grandparents, who were advocates of education in our family. Even though they themselves did not reach greater heights with their formal education, I am forever grateful for the encouragement and support they provided to ensure that we were afforded the best opportunities to learn and grow. They gave us the gift of dreams and the determination to realise them, and their spirit will continue to live in us. I also dedicate this work to my beloved son, daughter and my entire family. May this serve as a reminder and an example that we should never cease to grow, to learn, and to seek knowledge for as long as we live.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CIPD: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development

HE: Higher Education

HEIs: Higher Education Institutions

HRM: Human Resources Management

IDP: Integrated Development Plans

ITM: Institute of Talent Management

STM: Strategic Talent Management

SUMS: Southern Universities Management Services

SWP: Strategic Workforce Planning

TM: Talent Management

TMI: Talent Management Institute

TRM: Talent Relationship Management

UKZN: University of KwaZulu-Natal

ABSTRACT

The global Higher Education (HE) sector faces intense competition, rapid transformation, and escalating financial pressures, which make the strategic management of human capital essential for institutional sustainability. Although scholars widely recognise Talent Management (TM) as a key driver of organisational performance, existing research has largely focused on academic staff. This emphasis creates a significant gap in understanding the perceptions and experiences of professional and administrative support staff, particularly within the complex environment of South African higher education institutions. This study addresses this gap by examining the perceptions of professional staff in the Finance Department at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) regarding institutional TM practices. Guided by Inclusive Theory, the study critically evaluates the equity, accessibility, and transformative capacity of these practices. The research adopted a qualitative, exploratory design and draws on semi-structured interviews conducted with a sample of ten senior line management professional staff in the UKZN Finance Department, due to their managerial roles and experience in overseeing staff within the department. Thematic analysis enables an in-depth interpretation of participants' lived experiences and identifies areas of alignment and misalignment between institutional TM policies and their practical implementation. The findings reveal a dual perception of TM. Participants recognise its benefits, particularly in enhancing departmental productivity through the effective use of institutional knowledge and contextual competence, which they regard as more valuable than external recruitment. Effective TM also strengthens employee retention and commitment by supporting career progression and reinforcing the psychological contract. However, participants highlight systemic challenges, including fragmented digital systems, described as functioning as a "digital filing cabinet", and rigid career pathways that restrict cross-functional mobility and data-informed decision-making. The study concludes that while UKZN's TM framework holds strategic value, systemic inflexibility and limited data integration undermine its effectiveness and equitable reach. By foregrounding the perspectives of non-academic staff, the study contributes context-specific insights to TM scholarship and offers practical recommendations to inform more inclusive, flexible, and data-driven TM strategies in South African HE.

Keywords: *Talent Management, Higher Education Institutions, Incentive Theory and Organisational Performance*

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Chapter 1

Introduction to the Study

1.1 Introduction

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) worldwide operate in an environment of rapid transformation, technological advancement, and intensified competition. To remain resilient and sustainable, universities must ensure that their workforce is equipped with the necessary skills, motivation, and support to deliver on institutional goals. This has positioned Talent Management (TM) as a key strategic function within the higher education sector, as institutions recognise that the effectiveness of their human capital fundamentally drives their success.

In South Africa, the higher education landscape is shaped by additional complexities, including financial constraints, workforce mobility, and the ongoing imperative for transformation and equity. These dynamics underscore the need for robust TM practices that promote employee retention, career growth, and organisational commitment. While academics have traditionally been the primary focus of TM initiatives in higher education contexts, the essential role of professional and administrative staff has gained increasing recognition. These employees provide operational continuity and strategic support, directly influencing institutional performance and stakeholder satisfaction.

At the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), professional staff within the Finance Department play a particularly critical role in ensuring financial accountability, compliance, and long-term sustainability. Their contributions underpin the university's ability to deliver its teaching, learning, and research mandate. However, limited research has examined how professional support staff, especially those operating at the departmental level, perceive the TM practices employed by their institutions. This study, therefore, investigates the perceptions of professional staff in the Finance Department at UKZN regarding the university's TM strategies. By exploring their lived experiences and views, the study aims to identify whether existing TM practices effectively support staff development, engagement, and retention. The insights generated are intended to inform improved TM approaches that enhance professional staff satisfaction while contributing to the institution's strategic resilience and overall performance.

The contemporary landscape of HE is characterised by an intricate web of challenges, ranging from evolving student demographics and expectations to the imperative of demonstrating societal impact and value for money. Universities are no longer insulated ivory towers but are increasingly viewed as dynamic enterprises operating within a global marketplace. This shift necessitates a proactive, strategic approach to human resource management, with TM emerging as a cornerstone

of institutional resilience and competitive advantage. The ability to attract, develop, and retain high-calibre staff, both academic and professional, directly correlates with an institution's capacity to innovate, deliver quality education, and conduct impactful research. Without a robust talent pipeline, HEIs risk stagnation, diminished reputation, and an inability to adapt to the rapid pace of change in the 21st century.

The concept of talent itself has broadened beyond traditional academic excellence to encompass a diverse array of skills and competencies crucial for the multifaceted operations of a modern university. This includes leadership capabilities, digital literacy, interdisciplinary collaboration, and a commitment to diversity and inclusion. Effective TM frameworks must therefore be comprehensive, agile, and tailored to the unique demands of the HE environment, ensuring that all staff members feel valued, supported, and empowered to contribute to the institution's overarching mission. The strategic importance of this function cannot be overstated, as it underpins the very foundation of institutional success and sustainability in an increasingly complex global arena.

1.2 Background to the Study

The global HE sector faces intense competition and continuous transformation, necessitating institutions to maintain a competitive edge and ensure long-term sustainability. Institutional success fundamentally depends on the quality, engagement, and retention of human capital (Bej, 2025). Consequently, TM has emerged as a critical strategic imperative for HEIs seeking to attract, develop, and retain high-performing individuals (Leontes, 2024). TM refers to the systematic process of identifying, nurturing, and retaining talented individuals who directly contribute to achieving strategic objectives (Musakuro, 2022). Effective TM ensures that institutions possess the necessary skills and competencies to fulfil their core mandates, while inadequate practices may result in workforce inefficiencies and performance gaps (Musakuro, 2022). Conversely, robust TM enhances job satisfaction and reduces employee turnover (Bej, 2025). HEIs depend heavily on contributions from both academic and professional services staff (Veles, 2023), a reality particularly evident at UKZN, one of South Africa's leading universities.

Although TM literature predominantly focuses on academic staff, the contributions of professional and administrative staff are increasingly recognised as integral to institutional performance (Gandy, Harrison & Gold, 2018). Professional staff, often positioned in the 'third space' between academic and administrative domains, play a vital role in supporting core functions and implementing strategic priorities (Vere, 2024). Their roles have evolved from purely administrative support to strategic partnership, with some now regarded as "hidden architects" of university strategy (Southern Universities Management Services, 2025). Among these critical

support functions, the Finance Department occupies a central role in ensuring institutional operational and strategic success. Responsible for financial planning, budgeting, accounting, and regulatory compliance (Nguyen, 2024), the department's effectiveness depends on the competence and engagement of its staff. Given the financial pressures faced by HEIs, decisions regarding administrative staffing in finance are crucial for sustaining long-term institutional viability (RPK Group, 2025). Therefore, professional staff within the Finance Department act as strategic enablers, and effective TM is essential to nurturing, motivating, and retaining this talent.

The South African HE landscapes present a distinctive and complex context for TM strategies, shaped by diverse institutional types, historical inequalities, and transformation imperatives. Developing an integrated and contextually responsive TM strategy is therefore particularly relevant (Mukwawaya, Proches, & Green, 2022). South African universities continue to grapple with challenges such as the "brain drain", where skilled professionals emigrate in search of improved economic prospects, leaving critical skills gaps. Furthermore, concerns persist regarding the fairness, transparency, and consistency of TM practices across institutions, with some studies identifying gaps in the implementation of key TM components (Musakuro & De Klerk, 2021). These challenges, compounded by ongoing financial constraints (Mukwawaya et al., 2022), underscore the urgency of developing effective TM frameworks to optimise human resource utilisation and foster staff retention. Consequently, there is a growing need for context-specific research examining how TM is perceived and experienced within the South African HE environment.

UKZN, which is situated within this challenging national landscape, depends heavily on its professional staff to realise its strategic mission and vision. The Finance Department, as the custodian of the institution's financial health, represents a critical operational unit where talent development and retention are imperative. Despite increasing recognition of the importance of professional staff and the strategic role of finance, little research has examined non-academic staff's perceptions of TM practices within South African HEIs, particularly at the departmental level.

Accordingly, this study aims to explore the perceptions of professional staff in the Finance Department at UKZN regarding the institution's TM practices. The department's staff play a central role in realising the university's strategic goals, particularly in ensuring financial sustainability, accountability, and compliance. Understanding their perceptions of TM is vital to identifying potential gaps between institutional policies and lived experiences. The findings will contribute to the development of contextually informed TM strategies that enhance employee engagement, job satisfaction, and institutional performance. Ultimately, this research seeks to

provide valuable insights to UKZN's Human Resources and executive management, enabling the refinement of TM interventions to meet the specific needs of professional staff, thereby strengthening organisational effectiveness and strategic resilience.

The South African HE sectors, in particular, operate within a unique socio-political and economic context that significantly influences their TM imperatives. The legacy of apartheid continues to shape institutional structures, funding models, and demographic profiles, necessitating ongoing efforts towards transformation, redress, and equity. This historical backdrop, coupled with contemporary challenges such as high unemployment rates, skills shortages, and socio-economic disparities, places immense pressure on universities to not only provide quality education but also to act as catalysts for social mobility and national development. In this environment, the 'brain drain' phenomenon, where highly skilled professionals emigrate, exacerbates existing talent gaps, making the retention of competent staff a critical strategic priority for HEIs across the nation. The ability of South African universities to fulfil their mandate is thus intrinsically linked to their capacity to attract, develop, and retain a diverse and highly skilled workforce that is representative of the country's demographics.

Within this intricate landscape, the Finance Department of any university assumes a pivotal role, extending beyond mere transactional accounting. It is the nerve centre responsible for prudent financial stewardship, resource allocation, risk management, and ensuring compliance with a complex array of regulatory frameworks. The financial health of a university directly impacts its ability to invest in infrastructure, research, and human capital, thereby underpinning its academic mission. Professional staff within these departments are not just administrators; they are strategic partners whose expertise in financial planning, budgeting, and analysis directly informs institutional decision-making and long-term sustainability. Their work ensures transparency, accountability, and the efficient utilisation of public and private funds, which is particularly crucial in a context of constrained public finances and increased scrutiny. Therefore, the effective TM of finance professionals is not merely an HR function but a strategic imperative that safeguards the institution's operational viability and its capacity to achieve its broader educational and societal objectives.

1.3 Research Problem Statement

In recent years, the global HE sector has undergone a rapid transformation driven by increased competition, internationalisation, digital innovation, and shifting funding models (Samuels, 2024; Mabothe & Ngcamu, 2025; Times Higher Education, 2025).

These developments have placed unprecedented pressure on universities to attract, develop, and retain highly skilled staff across all functions. However, while the concept of TM - the systematic process of recruiting, developing, and retaining individuals with high potential - has been widely explored within the corporate sector, its application within HE remains limited and unevenly implemented. As a result, universities, especially in developing contexts such as South Africa, continue to struggle with issues of staff retention, motivation, and succession planning.

The scholarly discourse on TM is anchored by foundational works that have progressively refined its conceptual boundaries and strategic importance. Seminal reviews, such as those by Lewis and Heckman (2006) and Collings and Mellahi (2009), were instrumental in distinguishing strategic TM from broader human resource functions, establishing a focus on identifying and developing pivotal roles that underpin an organisation's competitive advantage. This theoretical groundwork is substantiated by empirical studies demonstrating a direct correlation between TM practices and organisational performance. For instance, research in various sectors has confirmed that robust TM significantly enhances outcomes, explaining as much as 62% of the variation in organisational performance in one study (Adeyemi, 2024), with specific practices like talent attraction and development directly linking to employee satisfaction and business success (Siripipatthanakul et al., 2022). However, when applied to HE, literature reveals distinct challenges. Recent analyses, including a comprehensive 2024 book edited by Thunnissen and Boselie, highlight a "talent crisis" in academia, characterised by difficulties in recruitment, high levels of faculty disengagement (Gallup, 2016), and the need for more innovative, context-specific talent strategies that go beyond traditional administrative approaches. Collectively, these studies illustrate a clear trajectory from broad theory to specific application, establishing TM as a critical driver of performance while underscoring the unique complexities of its implementation within the academic sphere.

Heuer (2003) argued that TM remained largely unexplored in the HE sectors, while Clunies (2007) observed that universities have historically been slow to adopt strategic human resource management practices common in the corporate world. Similarly, Lynch (2007) highlighted that few formal programmes within higher education explicitly focus on TM processes, such as leadership development, staff capacity building, or succession planning. According to Butterfield (2008), this lack of strategic attention has led to universities lagging behind industry in implementing effective TM systems. Riccio (2010) similarly concluded that HE institutions often struggle to match the agility and efficiency of private-sector organisations in developing and retaining talent.

Within the South African context, these concerns are even more pressing. Higher Education Statistics Agency (2014) identified persistent challenges in TM, including high turnover rates,

skills shortages, limited succession planning, and inadequate career development pathways. The Global Competitiveness Index (2016) further noted that South Africa performs poorly in areas related to human capital development and labour market efficiency. This shortfall has serious implications for institutional sustainability, given that the quality of a nation's higher education workforce is closely tied to its overall competitiveness and capacity for innovation. Musakuro (2018) emphasised that without high-calibre academic and professional staff, universities risk losing both their academic credibility and financial viability.

Despite growing recognition of the importance of TM, Musakuro (2022) noted that the subject remains under-researched, particularly within the South African higher education sector. More recent conceptual frameworks, such as the one proposed by Motsaathebe and Musakuro (2025), continue to highlight the critical need for context-specific strategies to attract and retain talent within the South African academic landscape. Most studies tend to focus predominantly on academic staff, leaving professional services employees underexplored. Yet, professional and administrative staff are integral to institutional efficiency, financial governance, and the realisation of strategic objectives. Mitchell (2023) identified a "grey area" in existing literature regarding professional services employees, suggesting that this category of staff is often overlooked in discussions on TM. Likewise, Matlakala and Bezuidenhout (2024) observed that while many universities have implemented TM systems targeting academics, little research has examined how these systems address the training, development, and career progression needs of professional services staff.

The lack of research attention on professional staff is problematic. Aparna and Sehney (2024) argued that professional services staff often feel overworked, undervalued, and excluded from key developmental initiatives within universities. This is further corroborated by Kaldas (2025), who identified significant gaps in capacity development programs specifically designed for administrative and professional staff, which often lag behind those available to academic personnel. This marginalisation limits their engagement and performance, ultimately undermining institutional productivity. Supporting this view, Allbeson (2025) pointed out that the public sector, including HE institutions, adopts a unique but often bureaucratic approach to human resource management, which tends to neglect the individual career trajectories of professional employees.

UKZN, as one of South Africa's leading research-intensive institutions, is no exception to these challenges. Its Finance Department plays a crucial role in ensuring institutional sustainability, compliance, and financial accountability. However, like many other professional units within HEIs, the Finance Department may face issues related to the identification, development, and retention of talented staff (Musakuro & De Klerk, 2021; Ngcamu & Teferra, 2022). The absence

of targeted TM strategies for non-academic employees can lead to decreased morale, limited career growth opportunities, and high turnover rates, which in turn negatively impact institutional performance (Maphosa & Mupfumira, 2023; Meyer & Kirsten, 2024).

Given this context, the present study seeks to explore perceptions of TM within the Finance Department at UKZN. By focusing on professional services employees, this research aims to address a critical gap in the existing literature and contribute to the broader discourse on inclusive TM practices in higher education. Understanding how staff perceive TM policies and practices will help identify areas of improvement, ensuring that both academic and non-academic personnel are adequately supported, developed, and retained. Therefore, this study is timely and significant, as it will not only shed light on the lived experiences of professional staff within a key administrative department but will also provide evidence-based insights to guide strategic human resource practices at UKZN and similar institutions in South Africa.

The distinct organisational culture and operational modalities of HEIs often present unique impediments to the effective implementation of TM strategies. Unlike corporate entities driven primarily by profit motives, universities are complex, multi-stakeholder organisations balancing academic freedom, research excellence, student welfare, and public service. This often leads to a decentralised governance structure, where decision-making can be diffused, and the adoption of sector-wide strategic initiatives, such as comprehensive TM frameworks, can be slow and fragmented. The traditional academic model, which historically prioritised individual scholarly achievement over collective organisational development, has also contributed to a perception that human resource functions are largely administrative rather than strategic. This historical inertia, coupled with often constrained budgets and bureaucratic processes, means that HEIs frequently lag behind their corporate counterparts in developing agile and responsive talent ecosystems.

Furthermore, the concept of 'talent' itself can be interpreted differently within an academic context. While the corporate sector often defines talent as high-potential individuals destined for leadership roles, universities must also consider the unique contributions of specialist academics, researchers, and professional staff whose career trajectories may not always align with conventional hierarchical progression. This necessitates a more nuanced approach to talent identification, development, and retention that acknowledges diverse career paths and contributions. The challenge is compounded by the global competition for academic talent, where institutions vie for leading scholars and researchers, often overlooking the equally critical need to nurture and retain professional and administrative staff who provide the essential operational backbone. The lack of integrated talent strategies that encompass both academic and professional staff creates a

significant gap, potentially leading to disengagement, high turnover, and a diminished capacity to achieve institutional objectives.

The implications of inadequate TM in HEIs are far-reaching, affecting not only individual staff members but also institutional performance and reputation. A lack of clear career pathways, insufficient professional development opportunities, and perceived inequities in reward and recognition systems can lead to decreased job satisfaction, reduced motivation, and, ultimately, higher staff turnover. This is particularly detrimental in specialised areas such as finance, where the loss of experienced professionals can result in significant operational disruptions, increased recruitment costs, and a potential compromise of financial integrity and compliance. The institutional memory and expertise accumulated over the years are lost, creating a continuous cycle of knowledge gaps and inefficiencies. Moreover, a disengaged workforce is less likely to embrace change or contribute to strategic initiatives, thereby hindering the university's ability to adapt to external pressures and achieve its long-term goals.

In relation to professional staff, the challenges are often exacerbated by their position within the organisational hierarchy and the prevailing focus on academic talent. They may experience limited visibility, fewer advancement opportunities than their academic counterparts, and a perception that their contributions are less valued. This 'second-class citizen' syndrome can lead to feelings of marginalisation and a reduced sense of belonging, further impacting their engagement and commitment. The absence of tailored TM strategies that specifically address the unique needs and career aspirations of professional staff represents a critical oversight, as these individuals are indispensable to the smooth functioning and strategic success of any modern university. Therefore, understanding their existing TM practices is not merely an academic exercise but a pragmatic necessity for fostering a supportive, equitable, and high-performing institutional environment.

1.4 Motivation of the Study

Erasmus, Naidoo, and Joubert (2017) posit that UKZN faces challenges in attracting and retaining the best employees, much like other institutions within the Republic and beyond. Similarly, Diedericks (2017) suggests that UKZN is not exempt from the widespread transformation occurring across South African HEIs, which, like many universities globally, are striving to deliver improved education. To align with emerging trends in the tertiary education sector concerning staff recruitment and retention, the highest levels of university management must demonstrate a firm commitment to TM. Secondly, the research provides a diagnostic tool for strategic human resource management (HRM). Perceptions are a powerful driver of employee engagement and retention. Exploring how finance staff perceive talent processes, the study identifies specific areas where

policy implementation may be failing. This is particularly vital given that TM challenges in the sector are often linked to funding and a lack of a holistic perspective (Musakuro & De Klerk, 2021). The findings will provide actionable insights to mitigate the risk of critical knowledge loss and ensure the department can attract and keep the specialised financial expertise required. Finally, the study offers contextual relevance to the broader South African higher education sector. Public universities operate under unique pressures, and this research provides empirical data on how TM is experienced within a key administrative unit. This contributes to the body of knowledge by highlighting the need for customised talent strategies in non-academic departments, ultimately supporting UKZN's core mission by ensuring the institution's financial engine remains robust and high performing.

The motivation for this study extends beyond merely identifying gaps in TM practices; it delves into the strategic imperative of understanding employee perceptions as a cornerstone of effective human resource management. In an era where organisational culture and employee experience are increasingly recognised as critical drivers of success, staff members' subjective views provide invaluable insights that quantitative metrics alone cannot capture. Perceptions shape attitudes, influence behaviour, and ultimately determine the efficacy of any policy or intervention. If staff perceive TM initiatives as unfair, inconsistent, or irrelevant to their career aspirations, even the most well-intentioned programmes are likely to fail. Therefore, by exploring the lived experiences and perspectives of professional staff within the Finance Department at UKZN, this research aims to provide a granular understanding of how institutional policies translate into day-to-day realities.

Furthermore, the study is motivated by the broader implications of effective TM for institutional sustainability and societal impact. Universities, particularly in developing nations, bear a significant responsibility for contributing to national development through education, research, and community engagement. This mission can only be achieved with a highly competent, motivated, and stable workforce. By optimising TM practices, HEIs can not only enhance internal efficiency and performance but also strengthen their capacity to address pressing societal challenges, foster innovation, and produce graduates well-equipped to contribute to the economy. The insights generated from this research will thus serve as a vital feedback mechanism, enabling UKZN and similar institutions to refine their talent strategies, foster a more inclusive and supportive work environment, and ultimately reinforce their role as pillars of national progress and global knowledge creation.

1.5 Research Aims

The study aims to understand how TM is being perceived within the UKZN Finance Department.

1.5.1 Research objectives

- To determine the importance of talent management for the Finance Department at the University of KwaZulu-Natal
- To identify the benefits of talent management for the Finance Department at the University of KwaZulu-Natal
- To identify the challenges of talent management for the Finance Department at the University of KwaZulu-Natal

1.5.2 Research Questions

The research will address the following questions:

- How important is talent management for the Finance Department at the University of KwaZulu-Natal?
- What are the benefits of talent management for the Finance Department at the University of KwaZulu-Natal?
- What are the challenges of talent management for the Finance Department at the University of KwaZulu-Natal?

1.6 Significance of the Study

This research project has substantial theoretical and practical significance. It provides the Finance Department management at UKZN with a critical, evidence-based evaluation of its current TM approach, an essential undertaking given the growing financial complexity and pressures on public sector institutions, where departmental efficiency is crucial to the university's overall sustainability and mission fulfilment (Thunnissen & Buttiens, 2017).

The present study is designed to function as a critical diagnostic tool, systematically examining the perceived impact and efficacy of the existing TM strategy within a particularly vital administrative unit: the Directorate of Strategic Projects (DSP) within the Ministry of Economic Planning in Nairobi, Kenya. This specific context, characterised by high-stakes national development goals and intense competition for skilled professionals, makes the DSP an ideal, yet challenging, environment for evaluating human capital policies. The diagnostic process is structured around identifying key strengths and weaknesses across the three fundamental pillars of TM: talent attraction, which assesses the unit's ability to recruit high-potential individuals in a competitive market; talent development, which scrutinises the effectiveness of training, mentorship, and career progression frameworks; and talent retention, which evaluates the factors influencing employee

commitment and turnover rates. By isolating these specific areas, the study moved beyond a superficial review to provide a granular, evidence-based assessment of the current strategy's operational reality. The resulting data has empowered the DSP's senior management to make informed, strategic adjustments to human capital policies, ensuring they are not only compliant with broader governmental mandates but are also acutely tailored to the unique demands and challenges of the Directorate. Crucially, the findings will yield actionable recommendations to optimise the entire TM strategy and enhance core employee outcomes.

This practical focus is deeply rooted in established academic literature, which consistently recognises enhanced employee motivation, job satisfaction, and competency as direct, measurable drivers of superior organisational performance. For instance, the recent work by Shah et al. (2024) provides contemporary empirical evidence linking strategic TM practices directly to improved firm-level performance metrics, underscoring the economic imperative of this study. Furthermore, the insights from Barkhuizen (2021) on talent retention in emerging economies directly inform the study's focus on creating a sustainable, committed workforce, while Kehinde (2012) emphasises the foundational role of employee motivation and job satisfaction as precursors to competency and performance. Thus, the study's practical recommendations are not merely administrative suggestions but are theoretically validated interventions designed to transform the DSP's human capital into a genuine source of competitive advantage, thereby ensuring the successful execution of national strategic projects.

Focusing on the practical application of TM, the study will help UKZN's Finance Department to address existing skills gaps and ensure that the institution employs personnel with the requisite capabilities to meet its evolving financial and strategic objectives. Beyond its institutional relevance, the research contributes to the broader body of knowledge on TM within South African higher education, providing a contextual framework that other HEIs can use to evaluate and refine their own TM practices, particularly within non-academic, high-stakes administrative divisions (Deloitte Insights, 2023; Tambellini Group, 2019).

This focus underscores the critical role of strategic TM in maintaining the financial health and operational efficiency of HEIs, thereby supporting their academic missions and societal contributions (Bradley, 2016). Theoretically, the study enriches understanding of TM at the intersection of the public sector and specialised functional areas by empirically examining the relationship between specific TM practices and organisational outcomes such as efficiency and employee performance (Riccio, 2010; Thunnissen & Buttiens, 2017). Ultimately, it advances the

literature by providing nuanced insights into how global TM theories are interpreted, adapted, and experienced within a localised public-sector university context, contributing to the development of robust, context-sensitive TM frameworks (Thunnissen & Buttiens, 2017).

1.7 Research Design and Methodology

This study adopted an exploratory qualitative research design to gain an in-depth understanding of perceptions and experiences of TM within the Finance Department at UKZN. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative research is appropriate when a phenomenon or issue requires exploration to uncover participants' meanings, interpretations, and insights. This design offers flexibility, enabling the researcher to engage directly with participants and interpret the data in their real-world context.

1.7.1 Research Sampling

Research sampling is the process of selecting participants who represent the population of interest (Hossan et al., 2023; Bullard, 2024; African Journal of Empirical Research, 2024; African Quarterly Social Science Review, 2025). In this research, purposive sampling was employed, as it enabled the researcher to select participants relevant to the study intentionally

The research was conducted at UKZN with a specific focus on the Finance Department. The sample comprised ten-line managers directly involved in implementing and experiencing TM practices. This approach ensures comprehensive representation of managerial perspectives across the department.

1.7.2 Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured virtual interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams. This method aligns with the qualitative research approach, enabling open-ended discussions while maintaining a focus on the core research objectives. Data saturation was the point at which no new information or themes emerged and was considered the indicator that sufficient data had been collected. Participants were contacted telephonically to request their voluntary participation in the study. No secondary data sources were used.

1.7.3 Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analysed using NVivo (version 11) and guided by the principles of content analysis. Content analysis involves systematically categorising, examining, and reporting recurring patterns and themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This analytical

approach is particularly suitable for this study, as it facilitates an understanding of participants' experiences, views, and perceptions regarding TM practices. The analysis involved coding, theme development, and interpretation to draw meaningful insights that address the research objectives.

1.8 Ethical Considerations

The study followed the university's ethical principles and policies regarding the use of human subjects. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee of the university before commencement of the study. The collected data was stored securely for 5 years. An informed consent form was made available to all participants to ensure their consent was obtained before any interviews were conducted. It also highlighted the study's aims and objectives to help participants understand its purpose.

1.9 Limitations of the Study

Despite careful planning, the study was influenced by limitations that may have affected the depth, scope, and overall execution of the research. One significant limitation was the difficulty in contacting participants. Some potential participants were unavailable or reluctant to participate due to time constraints, work commitments, or personal reservations about discussing institutional matters. This challenge slowed the data collection process and limited the diversity of perspectives captured.

Additionally, the researcher's position as a member of the team under study introduced the possibility of bias and discomfort for participants. Some participants may have been hesitant to speak openly due to concerns about misinterpretation or potential workplace repercussions. To mitigate this, the researcher practised ongoing reflexivity; however, the risk of subjective interpretation could not be eliminated. While these limitations did not invalidate the study, they influenced how the data were collected, analysed, and presented. Acknowledging them enhances transparency and strengthens the research's overall credibility.

1.10 Structure of the dissertation

• *Chapter One: Introduction*

This chapter introduces the study and provides the contextual foundation for the research. It outlines the study's background and context, clearly articulates the problem statement, and presents the research questions that guide the inquiry. The chapter further outlines the study's objectives and explains its significance by highlighting the research's academic and practical importance. It

also acknowledges the study's limitations and concludes with a brief overview of the methodology employed.

• ***Chapter Two: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework***

This chapter situates the study within existing scholarly work and establishes its theoretical grounding. It reviews key concepts, including TM, employee retention, and performance, and discusses the theoretical frameworks guiding the study, particularly the Incentive Theory. Through a critical evaluation of previous studies, the chapter identifies gaps in the current body of research, thereby justifying the need for the present study.

• ***Chapter Three: Research Methodology***

This chapter explains the methodological approach adopted to address the research questions. It outlines the research design and justifies the choice of qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods. The chapter describes the study population and sampling procedures, explains the data-collection methods employed, and details the data-analysis procedures. Ethical considerations are discussed, and the chapter concludes by acknowledging the methodological.

• ***Chapter Four: Results and Discussion.***

This chapter presents the results of the study in a structured and systematic manner. The findings are organised according to the research objectives or emerging themes and are supported by tables, figures, and participant quotations where appropriate. Key patterns, trends, and observations arising from the data are clearly presented without interpretation.

• ***Chapter Five: Conclusions and Recommendations***

This chapter interprets and contextualises the study's findings. It explains the meaning of the results and compares them with existing literature and theoretical expectations. The chapter highlights the practical implications of the findings for organisations and discusses any unexpected results or contradictions, offering possible explanations.

1.11 Conclusion

This chapter lays the foundation for the study by highlighting the critical role of TM in enhancing organisational performance and sustainability, particularly within the higher education and public

sector contexts. The chapter outlined the research problem, identified gaps in current TM practices, and justified the need for the study. Key research objectives and questions were presented to guide the investigation, while the significance and limitations of the study were described. By framing the study within the context of Inclusive Theory and contemporary challenges in talent retention, development, and engagement, this chapter sets the stage for a systematic exploration of how TM strategies can be effectively implemented to support organisational goals and employee development. The next chapter will critically examine existing literature to provide a theoretical and empirical foundation for the research.

Chapter 2

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Introduction

In today's global economy, the strategic management of human capital has emerged as a critical determinant of organisational success (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Abiwu & Martins, 2024; Ekhsan et al., 2024). TM has consequently become a top managerial priority for organisations worldwide and a compelling area of research (Schieman, 2014; Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2025). Universities, like other organisations, operate in dynamic, complex, and highly competitive environments that necessitate a strategic approach to attracting, developing, retaining, and deploying key talent (Liversage, 2015; Matlakala, 2024; Nazarpouri et al., 2025; Mukwawaya, 2025). This indicates that higher education institutions (HEIs) are not unique in their need for effective TM; rather, they share the same imperatives for strategic human capital management as corporate entities.

Effective TM within HEIs requires alignment with institutional strategy, policies, and procedures to support and retain talented employees (Liversage, 2015; Knowledge Resources, 2015; Leontes, 2024). By implementing well-defined TM strategies, universities can achieve their primary goals and maintain a competitive advantage. While much of the literature on TM in higher education focuses on academic staff, administrative and professional support personnel, particularly in critical functions such as finance, play a pivotal role in institutional sustainability and operational effectiveness (Riccio, 2010; Matlakala & Bezuidenhout, 2024; Yassim, Adamu & Uleanya, 2025; de Jong, 2025).

This chapter seeks to conceptualise TM within the context of higher education, both locally and internationally. It will explore relevant TM models, processes, and benefits, while distinguishing TM from general human resource management. The chapter will also present the theoretical frameworks underpinning TM and conclude with a discussion of TM practices in South Africa and other selected countries, establishing a robust foundation for understanding employee perceptions within UKZN's Finance Department.

2.2 Definition of Key Concepts

2.2.1 Talent Management

TM refers to an organisation's systematic process of identifying, attracting, developing, and retaining individuals with high potential who can contribute to achieving strategic objectives (Stahl

et al., 2012; Armstrong, 2020; Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2025). According to Collings and Mellahi (2009), TM involves activities and processes that ensure an organisation has the right people in the right roles at the right time. It encompasses recruitment, training and development, performance management, and succession planning. Thunnissen and Buttiens (2017) note that TM extends beyond basic human resource management by aligning workforce planning with strategic goals, fostering employee engagement, and enhancing organisational competitiveness (Menenez et al., 2025). In higher education, TM has gained significance amid limited resources and increasing global competition, as the need for administrative and academic excellence grows (Bradley, 2016). Therefore, TM is not merely a human resource function, but a strategic framework aimed at cultivating organisational capability and institutional resilience, especially in knowledge-based sectors such as universities.

In the Finance Department at UKZN, TM is central to maintaining operational efficiency and ensuring financial sustainability. As the department faces increasing demands for accountability and strategic resource allocation, effectively managing staff talent becomes essential. Exploring how line managers perceive TM allows the institution to identify gaps in employee motivation, skills development, and retention strategies. In this context, TM supports UKZN's broader mission of academic excellence by ensuring that finance personnel possess the expertise and commitment required to sustain institutional growth.

2.2.2 Perceptions

Perceptions refer to the processes by which individuals interpret and make sense of their experiences and environments (Luthans, 2011; Daft, 2016; Robbins & Judge, 2017; Keenan, 2024; Reed, 2025). According to Robbins and Judge (2019), perception is a cognitive process influenced by one's values, experiences, expectations, and situational context. It affects how people view organisational policies, leadership behaviours, and work-related practices. In social research, perception is often used to explore how participants understand and evaluate phenomena, thereby offering insight into subjective experiences and attitudes. Sekaran and Bougie (2019) argue that understanding employee perceptions is critical to assessing the success of organisational initiatives such as TM, as employees' interpretations of fairness, transparency, and recognition directly influence engagement and performance (Al-Ghazali & Taha, 2024; Qandeel & Kuráth, 2025). Thus, perception acts as both a lens and a determinant of workplace effectiveness.

In this study, perceptions are explored to understand how finance managers at UKZN view the university's TM approach. Their insights reveal how TM strategies are interpreted and experienced in practice. Since perceptions influence attitudes and behaviours, understanding managers'

viewpoints helps identify whether current TM policies foster motivation, equity, and professional growth. These findings are crucial for refining UKZN's TM framework to better align with staff expectations and institutional goals.

2.2.3 Finance Department

A finance department is a specialised administrative unit responsible for managing an organisation's financial planning, budgeting, accounting, and reporting processes (Brigham & Ehrhardt, 2017; Atrill & McLaney, 2019; Weygandt et al., 2020). According to Atrill and McLaney (2020), its functions ensure that financial resources are efficiently allocated and that the institution complies with relevant regulations and financial standards. Within universities, the finance department supports academic and operational activities through accurate budgeting, auditing, and resource distribution (Moodley, 2018). It serves as the backbone of institutional accountability, influencing how effectively the university sustains its financial health. Moreover, effective financial management relies heavily on skilled and motivated personnel capable of making sound decisions and managing complex systems (Sulastri, 2024). Consequently, the performance of a finance department is directly linked to the quality of its human capital and management practices.

At UKZN, the Finance Department plays a pivotal role in ensuring financial transparency, accountability, and sustainability. By examining TM within this department, the study highlights how human resource practices influence institutional effectiveness. Understanding how finance staff perceive TM provides insight into whether professional growth opportunities, recognition, and retention initiatives are adequately aligned with departmental demands and the university's broader goals.

2.2.4 University of KwaZulu-Natal

UKZN is a public higher education institution in South Africa, established in 2004 through the merger of the University of Natal and the University of Durban-Westville. As outlined by UKZN (2023), the university's mission is to achieve academic excellence and innovation in teaching, research, and community engagement. UKZN operates across multiple campuses and serves a diverse student population. As a public institution, it faces pressures common in South African HE, including financial constraints, transformation imperatives, and global competitiveness (CHE, 2021). Managing talent within both academic and administrative divisions is crucial to sustaining quality service delivery and institutional credibility. Effective TM ensures that the university attracts and retains skilled professionals who can support its mission and uphold governance standards.

Within this study, UKZN represents the broader context in which TM is operationalised in a public HE institution. Focusing on the Finance Department allows for an examination of how TM is applied in non-academic settings that are nonetheless integral to the university's performance. Exploring perceptions at UKZN contributes to understanding the challenges and opportunities South African universities face in implementing strategic human capital initiatives.

2.2.5 Higher Education

HE refers to the stage of learning provided by universities and colleges that offer degree-level qualifications (Altbach et al., 2009; Tight, 2012; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 2021). According to Marginson (2016), it serves multiple societal roles, including knowledge production, skills development, and social transformation. Deloitte Insights (2023) and Matlakala (2024) observed that the higher education sector operates in an increasingly competitive global environment that demands efficiency, innovation, and accountability. In South Africa, universities also play a pivotal role in redressing past inequalities and advancing economic development (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020). However, they face challenges such as financial instability, staff turnover, and limited resources, underscoring the need for effective TM. As highlighted by Deloitte Insights (2023), higher education institutions must strategically manage both academic and administrative talent to maintain excellence and sustainability.

In this study, HE provides the contextual backdrop for examining TM within UKZN's Finance Department. The research situates TM within the broader organisational dynamics of universities, where attracting and retaining skilled personnel is vital for institutional success. Understanding how TM functions in administrative contexts enriches the discourse on leadership and human capital management in South African HE.

2.2.6 Human Resource Practices

HR practices refer to the systematic policies and procedures used to manage people within an organisation (Boxall & Purcell, 2016; Armstrong, 2020; Dessler, 2020; Noe et al., 2020; Hogarth & McCartney, 2024). According to Armstrong and Taylor (2020), these include recruitment, performance appraisal, training and development, compensation, and employee relations. Effective HR practices are instrumental in shaping organisational culture and ensuring workforce alignment with strategic objectives (Ekhsan et al., 2024; Menezes et al., 2025). Guest (2017) argues that when HR practices are coherent and well-integrated, they enhance employee commitment, productivity, and retention. In the context of TM, HR practices form the operational foundation for identifying, nurturing, and retaining talent. They bridge institutional strategy and

individual performance by ensuring that policies are equitable, transparent, and development-focussed.

Within the UKZN Finance Department, human resource practices underpin the successful implementation of TM strategies. Exploring how these practices are perceived helps determine whether recruitment, training, and performance management processes effectively meet staff expectations. Insights gained will assist in aligning HR policies with the university's strategic goals, enhancing staff satisfaction and organisational efficiency.

2.3 Defining Talent and Talent Management

The concept of "talent" itself is subject to considerable debate in literature. Broadly speaking, two main perspectives exist: the inclusive and the exclusive approaches (Lewis & Heckman, 2006; Graham et al., 2024; Shahid, 2025). The inclusive approach posits that all employees possess some form of talent and should be included in TM initiatives. Conversely, the exclusive approach focuses resources on a select group of high-potential or high-performing individuals who are deemed critical to the organisation's competitive advantage (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; van der Merwe et al., 2024; Akbar et al., 2025). For a university finance department, the exclusive approach might target key roles such as financial analysts, internal auditors, or senior accountants, while the inclusive approach would ensure development opportunities for all staff, from procurement officers to administrative assistants. The perception of which definition is operationalised significantly impacts employee morale and engagement (Gelens et al., 2014; Fatoki, 2024; Nthei et al., 2025).

TM has emerged as a critical concept in contemporary human resource management; however, its interpretation and application remain diverse across various contexts. The notion of "talent" itself has historical roots, tracing back to ancient Greek and biblical times, when it was initially used as a measure of weight, later as a unit of currency, and eventually to denote a person's value or innate abilities (Barkhuizen, 2015; Looti, 2025). In modern organisational contexts, talent generally refers to employees who can make meaningful contributions to organisational performance and demonstrate high-level capabilities over the long term (McCartney & Woman, 2013; Bhatnagar, 2007, as cited in Shweta et al., 2017; Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2025). Armstrong (2014) further elaborates that talent encompasses the set of skills employees need to perform their roles effectively, with the dual expectation that their immediate efforts positively influence organisational outcomes while their capabilities ensure sustainable future contributions. This implies that talent is not merely a workforce component but a strategic resource essential for achieving organisational success and long-term sustainability. TM, therefore, refers to the

deliberate processes organisations employ to attract, retain, develop, and deploy this critical human capital to meet both current and future organisational needs (Hanna & Fitzgibbons, 2025). Despite being widely used, TM lacks a universally agreed-upon definition, with its conceptualisation varying across global contexts (Schieman, 2014; Ladislav & Robert, 2014).

Nevertheless, as the HR field evolves, more precise definitions have emerged, reflecting a growing recognition of talent as a strategic organisational asset (Ariss, Cascio, & Paauwe, 2014). Heidke (2006), as cited in Tyagi et al. (2017), conceptualises TM as a dynamic, ongoing process of systematically identifying, assessing, and developing employees for critical future roles to ensure continuity and optimal performance. Similarly, Sharmila and Gopalakrishnan (2013) highlight TM as the organisation's capability to attract highly skilled employees, integrate new staff, and develop and retain existing personnel to achieve both short- and long-term business objectives. Barkhuizen and Mogwara (2014) emphasise the strategic nature of TM, describing it as the implementation of integrated human resource practices aimed at attracting, nurturing, retaining, and optimally utilising employees with specific skills to meet current and future organisational requirements. Armstrong (2014) consolidates these perspectives, defining TM as a comprehensive, integrated set of activities designed to build a sustainable talent pool, while recognising that talent is a critical organisational resource. Complementing this understanding, the TM strategy constitutes the structured, systematic approach through which organisations translate TM principles into actionable outcomes. Wu et al. (2016) describe TM strategy as the identification of key positions and contributions to enhance organisational competitiveness, develop employees' highest potential, and secure their commitment. Armstrong and Taylor (2014) argue that a TM strategy involves aligning various processes to create a talent pool, acquire and nurture talent wherever required, and integrate interdependent policies and practices to optimise outcomes.

Dana (2013) frames TM strategy as the deliberate configuration of action plans oriented towards organisational goals, emphasising the planning and coordination required to ensure effective talent utilisation. Barkhuizen (2015) further underscores that the formulation of a TM strategy begins with integrating human resource strategies with the overall business strategy, highlighting that organisational alignment is essential for successful TM. Collectively, these perspectives demonstrate that TM and its associated strategies are interdependent; TM cannot be effectively executed without deliberate processes, structured policies, and strategic alignment with organisational objectives. In essence, TM represents a critical mechanism through which organisations secure and leverage human capital, ensuring that the right individuals are positioned in roles where they can contribute optimally, now and in the future. This underscores the strategic

importance of TM in enhancing organisational performance, sustaining competitiveness, and fostering long-term growth in increasingly dynamic and complex operational environments.

TM is generally defined as the systematic process of identifying, developing, and retaining high-potential employees (Talent Management Institute, 2024). Collings and Mellahi (2009) provided a seminal definition of Strategic Talent Management (STM), emphasising that it must be a deliberate effort to anticipate and meet the future human capital needs of the organisation to achieve its strategic goals.

2.4 Core Components and Models of Talent Management

The literature identifies several interconnected components that constitute a holistic TM system (ClearCompany, 2023). These components are not merely isolated HR functions but are integrated to form a continuous talent lifecycle. These components include Talent Acquisition, which involves sourcing, recruiting, and selecting individuals with the necessary skills and potential to ensure a pipeline of high-quality candidates (TechTarget, 2024; SAP, 2025). Performance Management is essential for setting goals, providing feedback, and evaluating employee performance against organisational objectives, thereby aligning individual effort with institutional strategy (Aguinis, 2019; Armstrong & Taylor, 2023). Learning and Development (L&D) provides training, coaching, and career pathing to enhance employee competencies, with the strategic goal of building future capacity and retaining high-potential staff (Garavan, Carbery, & Rock, 2019; Noe et al., 2020). Furthermore, a holistic TM system includes Compensation and Rewards, which design competitive and equitable remuneration and recognition systems to motivate and reinforce desired behaviours and performance (Armstrong & Brown, 2019; Lawler, 2020). Succession Planning is the process of identifying and developing internal candidates to fill key leadership and critical roles, mitigating the risk associated with key employee turnover (Tsaousiotis et al., 2025). Finally, retention involves implementing strategies to keep high-performing and high-potential employees engaged and committed, which reduces turnover costs and preserves institutional knowledge (Ekhsan et al., 2023; Brahimaj et al., 2025). The perception of fairness and transparency across these components is paramount. For instance, if employees perceive the performance management system as biased or the succession planning process as opaque, their overall perception of the TM system will be negative, regardless of the system's technical design (Gelens et al., 2014; Al-Shifa et al., 2023).

2.5 Contextualising Talent Management in Higher Education and Finance

The perceptions of TM in the UKZN Finance Department are shaped by the unique characteristics of two distinct sectors: HE and finance.

2.5.1 Talent Management in the Higher Education Sector

Higher education institutions (HEIs) present a complex environment for TM due to their dual nature as academic enterprises and large, bureaucratic organisations (Deloitte Insights, 2023). The challenges are multifaceted, starting with the dual focus HEIs must maintain, managing talent for both academic (teaching and research) and administrative (support and operations) functions, often with different reward structures and career paths (Riccio, 2010). Administrative staff, including those in finance, may feel marginalised compared to academic staff, which can lead to lower perceptions of TM value (Education Advisory Board, n.d.). Furthermore, bureaucracy and governance within university structures, characterised by shared governance, slow decision-making, and rigid policies, can hinder the agility required for effective TM, particularly in areas such as rapid talent acquisition and performance-based rewards (Huron Consulting Group, n.d.).

In terms of attraction and retention, HEIs often struggle to compete with the private sector for specialised administrative talent, such as skilled financial professionals, due to lower salaries and a perceived lack of dynamism (Moin, 2021; Helios HR, 2024). Finally, budget constraints are a significant issue, as research indicates that a lack of dedicated budget is a challenge to implementing integrated TM strategies in universities (Mukwawaya, 2022), which directly impacts the provision of high-quality training and development, a key driver of positive TM perceptions.

2.5.2 Talent Management in the Finance Sector

The finance sector, while distinct from HE, provides a relevant lens for the UKZN Finance Department, as the core functions and required competencies are similar. The finance industry is characterised by a high demand for specialised skills, including expertise in financial reporting, risk management, compliance, and, increasingly, financial technology (FinTech) (ASB Resources, 2024). TM in this context is heavily focused on continuous upskilling and development to maintain regulatory compliance and technological relevance (Venugopal, 2024; McLennan, n.d.). Furthermore, there is a strong emphasis on performance and accountability, as finance roles are typically high-stakes with clear metrics. Perceptions of TM are often tied to the clarity and fairness of the performance management system and the link between performance and reward (Sulastri, 2024). Finally, the ethical and regulatory environment is stringent, necessitating a strong focus on ethical conduct and compliance training. TM programmes must integrate these elements, and employee perceptions of TM will be influenced by the perceived commitment of the organisation to ethical practice (Qazi, 2023). The UKZN Finance Department, therefore, must navigate the bureaucratic and resource-constrained environment of a HEI while meeting the high-skill, high-accountability demands of a modern finance function. This creates a unique pressure point where

perceptions of TM are likely to be highly sensitive to the perceived balance between institutional constraints and professional demands.

2.6 Talent Management in South African Higher Education and University of KwaZulu-Natal Context

The South African HE landscape is marked by unique challenges, including the imperative of transformation, addressing historical inequalities, and managing a diverse workforce (Musakuro, 2021; Musakuro, 2022; Mukwawaya, 2022). TM strategies in SA HEIs must align with national imperatives for employment equity and redress, meaning that perceptions of TM are intertwined with issues of fairness, representativeness, and the provision of equitable development opportunities across demographic groups. Furthermore, studies on SA HEIs consistently highlight significant challenges in implementation. These include a lack of integrated strategy, where TM is often implemented as a series of disconnected HR activities rather than a cohesive, strategic framework (Mukwawaya, 2022), and resistance to change, as traditional, hierarchical university structures can resist the shift towards a performance- and talent-focused culture (Matlakala, 2024). A critical issue is the retention of scarce skills, as SA HEIs struggle to retain administrative staff with specialised skills, particularly in finance and IT, who are often poached by the private sector (SSBFNET, 2024). This is compounded by a general focus on administrative staff, confirming that development needs and talent practices are often poorly managed, leading to dissatisfaction and high turnover (Matlakala, 2024).

UKZN is one of South Africa's largest and most complex HEIs, formed from the merger of the University of Durban-Westville and the University of Natal. This history of merger and subsequent institutional restructuring adds a layer of complexity to its organisational culture and HR practices (UKZN, n.d.). The UKZN Finance Division is a substantial operation, led by a Chief Financial Officer and structured into specialised teams such as Procurement, College and Research Finance, and Student Services Finance (UKZN, n.d.). With an estimated 146 employees (UKZN, n.d.), the department's size necessitates a formal and robust TM system. The perceptions of TM within this department are likely to be influenced by several UKZN-specific factors. First, the Post-Merger Integration legacy may still influence organisational culture, potentially leading to varied perceptions of fairness and opportunity across different sub-units or campuses (Matlakala, 2024). Second, the balance between centralised HR policy and decentralised implementation, or Decentralisation vs. Centralisation, within the colleges and departments (like Finance) is a critical factor; if the Finance Department feels it lacks the autonomy to tailor TM practices to its unique needs, perceptions of the system's relevance will be low (Mukwawaya, 2022). Finally, the high-pressure environment of financial stewardship and scrutiny means that as the custodians of the

university's finances, the department operates under intense internal and external scrutiny. Consequently, TM practices related to stress management, work-life balance, and fair compensation are likely to be highly valued and closely scrutinised by employees (Sulastri, 2024).

2.7 The Role of Perceptions in Talent Management Success

The success of any TM system is not solely determined by its design, but by how it is perceived by the employees it is intended to serve (Gelens et al., 2014). Employee perceptions act as a filter through which TM practices are interpreted, ultimately determining behavioural outcomes such as engagement, commitment, and turnover intention (Guest, 2004).

2.8 Perceived Organisational Support (POS)

Perceived Organisational Support (POS) is a central construct in understanding employees' perceptions of TM practices and their overall relationship with the organisation (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; Kurtessis et al., 2017; Soomro et al., 2024; Zada et al., 2024). Rooted in Social Exchange Theory, POS reflects the extent to which employees believe that their organisation values their contributions, recognises their efforts, and genuinely cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986). When employees perceive strong organisational support, they are more likely to reciprocate with higher levels of commitment, motivation, and performance, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of TM strategies. Conversely, when employees perceive that the organisation merely uses TM initiatives as control mechanisms or as superficial public relations exercises, POS declines, resulting in disengagement, dissatisfaction, and increased turnover intentions (Gelens et al., 2014). In the context of TM, POS becomes particularly influential in shaping how employees interpret and internalise practices such as recruitment, development, and retention initiatives. For instance, when training and development programmes are perceived as genuine investments in employees' career growth, employees feel valued and supported, fostering a stronger sense of loyalty and organisational identification (Allen & Shanock, 2013). Similarly, transparent promotion and performance appraisal processes signal fairness and recognition, reinforcing employees' belief that their efforts are appreciated and that the organisation is committed to their professional advancement. However, if these systems are perceived as biased or inaccessible, employees may feel neglected, leading to a weakened psychological contract and reduced trust in management. Furthermore, POS is not solely dependent on formal HR or TM policies but also on daily interactions with supervisors and peers. Supportive leadership that acknowledges employee input, provides feedback, and demonstrates empathy enhances POS by making organisational support tangible and emotionally meaningful. This interpersonal aspect is vital, as managers often serve as representatives of the organisation;

their behaviours are interpreted as indicators of the organisation's broader values and attitudes toward employees (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

Finally, high levels of POS create a positive organisational climate where employees feel secure, respected, and motivated to contribute meaningfully. Within TM frameworks, fostering POS ensures that initiatives are not merely procedural but are perceived as authentic, human-centred investments in people. Thus, organisations that cultivate genuine POS are more likely to retain top talent, encourage discretionary effort, and achieve long-term sustainability through a motivated and engaged workforce.

2.9 Perceived Justice and Fairness

The concept of organisational justice is central to TM perceptions (Colquitt et al., 2001; Elayan, 2025). Three types of justice are particularly relevant. The first is Distributive Justice, which is the perceived fairness of the outcomes received, such as salary, promotion, and development opportunities (Mulgund, 2022). In the UKZN Finance Department, this relates to whether employees feel their compensation is commensurate with their market value and the complexity of their roles (Qazi, 2023). The second is Procedural Justice, which is the perceived fairness of the processes and procedures used to determine outcomes, including performance appraisal methods and selection criteria for development programmes. Employees must perceive the TM process as transparent, consistent, and free from bias (Gelens et al., 2014). The third is Interactional Justice, which is the perceived fairness of the interpersonal treatment received from managers during the implementation of TM practices, encompassing respect, honesty, and sensitivity. This is often the most immediate and impactful driver of employee perceptions (Bies & Moag, 1986; Qandeel & Kuráth, 2025). A lack of perceived justice in any of these areas can lead to cynicism, distrust, and the active undermining of TM initiatives, regardless of the quality of the underlying strategy (Guest, 2004).

Armstrong and Taylor (2014, p. 267) revealed four components that comprise a TM strategy as depicted in Figure 2.1 below:

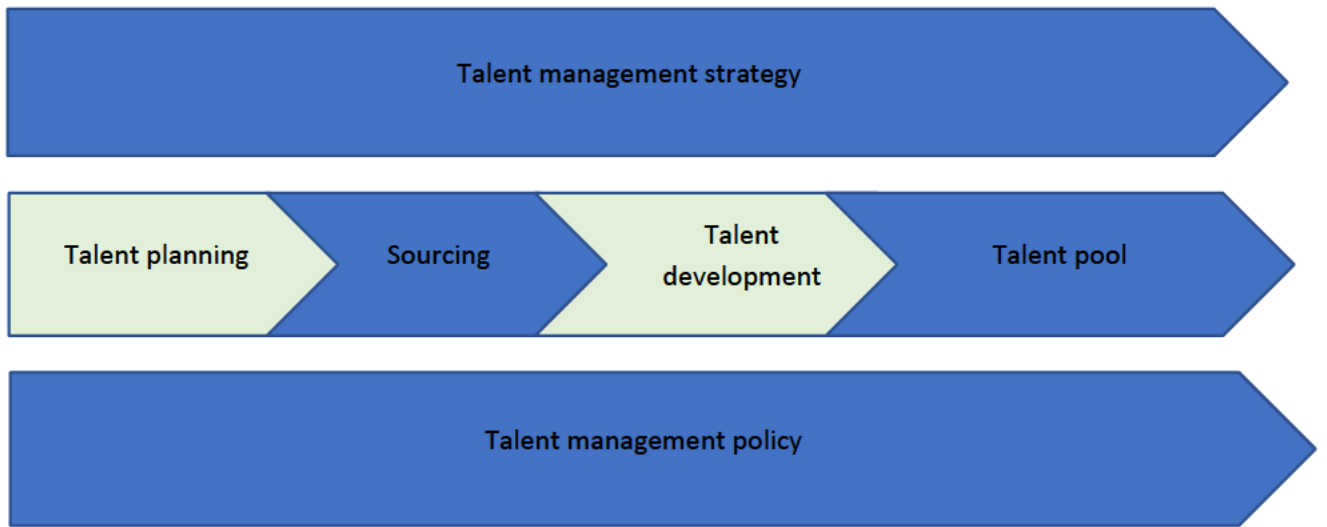


Figure 2-1: Components of a talent management strategy (Source: Armstrong and Taylor, 2014:267)

2.10 Talent Management strategy

Armstrong and Taylor (2014) posit that the TM strategy commences with a properly defined talent plan, talent sourcing, and proper talent development activities in order to create an adequate talent pool.

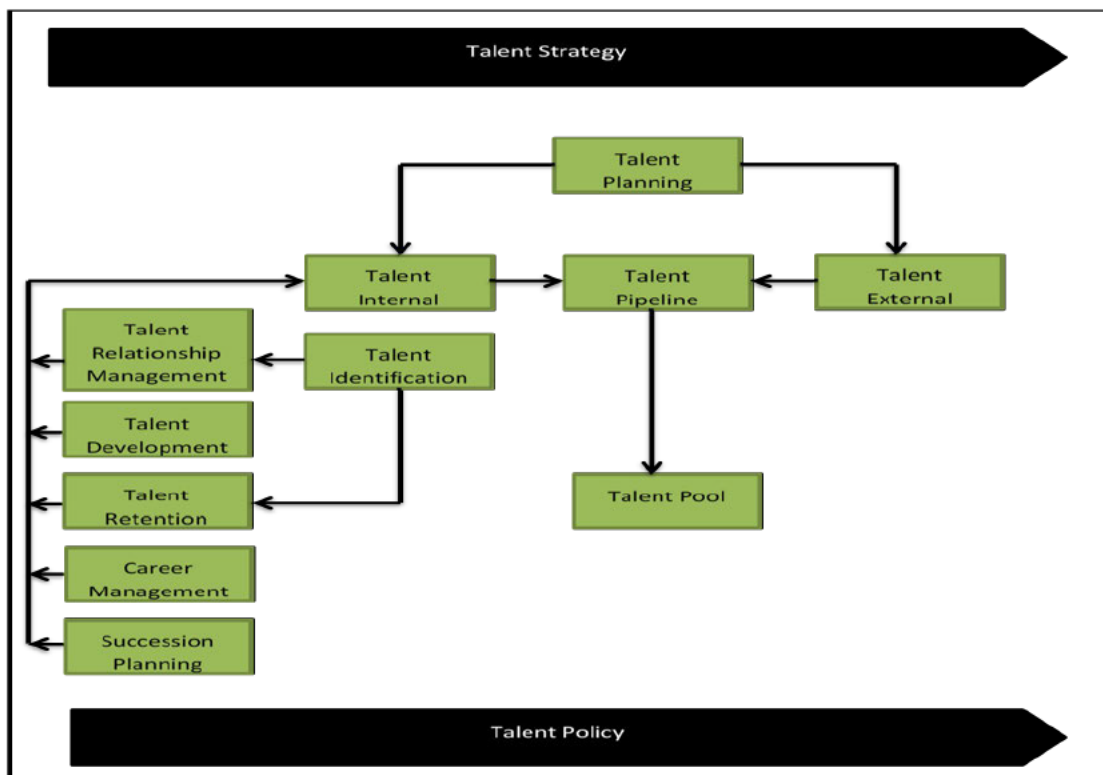


Figure 2-2: Talent strategy (Source: Armstrong and Taylor, 2014:100)

2.10.1 Talent Planning

According to Armstrong and Taylor (2014, p. 267), talent planning refers to the “establishment of the total number and the type of talented people that the organisation requires presently and, in the future, and it deploys the technique of workforce planning”. This definition underscores that talent planning is a deliberate, structured, and ongoing process through which an organisation ensures it possesses the right talent mix to achieve both its short-term and long-term objectives. In practice, it involves forecasting future workforce needs, identifying current and potential skill gaps, and developing appropriate strategies such as recruitment, development, and succession planning to close those gaps (Zielinski, 2025). In this way, talent planning serves as a bridge between human resource management and strategic business planning.

Chow (2014) further observes that the talent planning life cycle involves planning, selecting, developing, promoting, and replacing employees, making it a dynamic, continuous process. The essence of this process is to retain valuable employees by ensuring they are properly developed and aligned with the organisation’s strategic direction. When effectively implemented, talent planning minimises turnover, enhances employee satisfaction, and fosters long-term engagement. According to Gandhi, Durth, Bérubé, Kedia, and Lim (2025), strategic workforce planning (SWP) - a key component of talent planning enables organisations to anticipate skills and headcount needs three to five years ahead and manage talent with the same precision used in managing financial capital. This forward-looking approach ensures that organisations remain agile and adaptable in response to changing external conditions such as technological disruptions and global competition.

Talent planning is not merely a reactive human resource exercise; rather, it is a proactive strategy that positions the organisation for sustained competitiveness. In the digital era, characterised by automation and artificial intelligence (AI), the demand for new skills has intensified. Cantrell, Moss, Klosk, Tomke, Shaw, and Griffiths (2025) argue that workforce planning must now focus on developing agile capabilities that can respond to volatile business environments. This perspective highlights the importance of continuous learning and internal mobility as central elements of modern talent planning. As organisations adopt digital tools, remote working, and hybrid models, human resource managers must integrate data analytics and predictive modelling into their planning systems to accurately forecast workforce demands and skills shortages (Deloitte, 2025). Furthermore, talent planning plays an instrumental role in succession management. Through careful identification of high-potential employees and the creation of leadership pipelines, organisations secure the continuity of institutional knowledge and expertise. Zielinski (2025) notes that modern organisations increasingly use predictive analytics and AI-driven platforms to identify future leaders and align them with strategic roles. This not only reduces

dependence on external recruitment but also fosters a culture of growth and loyalty. In higher education contexts, for example, Abiwu and Martins (2024) found that organisations that emphasise internal development and career mobility through structured talent planning tend to achieve higher employee retention and organisational learning outcomes.

In South Africa, effective talent planning is especially vital in the public and higher education sectors, where skill shortages and employee turnover remain persistent challenges (Enwereji & Emmanuel, 2025). By aligning talent strategies with the country's broader transformation and development objectives, institutions can cultivate inclusive workforces that reflect diversity while strengthening innovation and service delivery. Thus, talent planning not only ensures operational continuity but also reinforces social and developmental priorities. Overall, talent planning serves as the foundation for effectively executing other TM components, such as resourcing, development, and retention.

2.10.2 Resourcing

Resourcing is defined as the process of “attraction and selection of the right people for the right roles at the right time and cost” (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development [CIPD], 2019). In effect, resourcing operationalises the strategic intent developed during the talent-planning phase by implementing programmes and processes to acquire and place talent, both internally and externally (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014). Thus, while talent planning addresses what human capital the organisation will need and when, resourcing addresses how that human capital is sourced, engaged, selected, and deployed.

Resourcing comprises multiple interconnected activities: workforce marketing (employer branding), candidate attraction, recruitment, selection, onboarding, and internal deployment (promotions or transfers). Modern resourcing practices emphasise not only filling vacancies but doing so in a way that aligns with strategic goals, cost-efficiency, diversity and inclusion, quality of hire, and speed to hire. For example, the CIPD's Resourcing and Talent Planning Report (2024) found that over one thousand HR professionals flagged recruitment difficulties and the need for more data-driven resourcing practices (Hogarth & McCartney, 2024). These difficulties include skills shortages, competition for talent, and shrinking talent pools.

Recruitment and selection are central pillars of resourcing. A recent South African study by Abiwu and Martins (2024) on higher education institutions (HEIs) found that effective recruitment and selection, job analysis, and employer branding are statistically significantly positively related to gaining a competitive advantage. They conclude that resourcing must be treated not simply as a transactional HR function, but as a strategic lever. Their research underlines that job analysis

(identifying key competencies and roles) is a necessary precursor to targeted resourcing (Abiwu & Martins, 2024).

Moreover, the digital transformation of resourcing is gaining momentum rapidly. Tuttle and Critchlow (2025) show that technological innovations such as AI-driven screening, automated candidate-matching, and predictive analytics are significantly reshaping resourcing. These innovations promise faster time-to-hire, improved quality of hire, and reduced bias, but they also raise ethical and governance questions. The integration of AI into resourcing means HR functions must now manage not only people, but also algorithmic decision-making (Tuttle & Critchlow, 2025).

As organisations compete in a volatile external labour market, resourcing strategies must be agile, data-driven, and inclusive. The 2024 Talent Trends report from the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) revealed that 75% of organisations struggled to fill full-time roles, citing significant technical and soft skills gaps among applicants (SHRM, 2025). This underlines the critical role of resourcing not just in sourcing candidates but in ensuring their readiness for the evolving work environment. Employer branding has become a core component of the resourcing process. A strong employer brand helps attract high-quality talent proactively, rather than reactively chasing applicants. For example, Nilo Health (2025) lists eleven innovative talent-attraction strategies, emphasising employer value proposition (EVP), flexible work arrangements, and ongoing candidate engagement (Nilo Health, 2025). These strategies feed directly into resourcing by expanding the talent pipeline, shortening lead times, and enhancing organisational reputation.

Internal resourcing promotions, transfers, internal job posting, and talent mobility are also vital. By leveraging existing human capital, organisations can reduce external costs, retain institutional knowledge, and improve engagement. Moreover, internal mobility signals to employees that there are career paths, which supports retention. In fact, HR-trend reports emphasise that “retention is the new recruitment” (365 Talents, 2024). In other words, an effective resourcing strategy not only attracts external talent but optimises the deployment and career movement of internal talent.

In the African, and specifically South African context, resourcing must align with transformation, employment equity, and skills development imperatives. For instance, metropolitan municipalities in South Africa have been critiqued for under-emphasising human-capital attraction and retention policies in their Integrated Development Plans, which have created persistent staffing and skills gaps (Urban Forum, 2025). Therefore, resourcing in these contexts must be sensitive to both operational and socio-development objectives.

Another critical dimension of resourcing is the adaptability and timing aspect. Organisations must secure talent at the right time to respond to business demands. Insights from KPMG (2025) show that AI agents are now being used in total workforce planning to analyse supply-demand scenarios and inform resourcing strategy (KPMG, 2025). In practical terms, this means resourcing teams must not simply fill today's gaps but also anticipate tomorrow's needs, ensuring that timely sourcing decisions are made before critical skills bottlenecks emerge.

Effective resourcing ultimately realises the ambitions set out in the talent-planning phase. If talent planning identifies future needs (headcount, skill types, role profiles), resourcing executes by attracting, selecting, hiring, or mobilising the right people into those roles. When done well, resourcing contributes to enhanced organisational agility, reduced time-to-productivity, improved retention, and competitive advantage. However, resourcing needs to be integrated with TM, development, and retention to achieve full strategic impact.

Resourcing is a technique, a process, and a set of practices that connect strategic talent-planning intent to operational action. Organisations that treat resourcing as a strategic function not simply as a cost-centre or administrative task, are better positioned to thrive in the modern, dynamic workforce environment.

2.10.3 Talent Identification

Talent identification is a cornerstone process in the overall talent-management framework as it determines which employees will form the organisation's talent pool and thereby benefit from strategic talent-management initiatives (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Silzer & Dowell, 2010; Tarique & Schuler, 2010; Wang et al., 2024; Schinnenburg, 2025). According to Armstrong and Taylor (2014), this process involves conducting talent audits to build a talent pool of individuals with abilities and potential. The fundamental goal of talent identification is to ensure that high-potential individuals are recognised, prepared, and earmarked for key roles within the organisation's future workforce, thereby aligning human capital with strategic priorities. Thus, rather than simply working reactively to fill vacancies, organisations engage in proactive talent scanning and profiling to anticipate future requirements.

The identification process begins when criteria are defined, which may encompass performance outcomes, leadership readiness, cross-functional capabilities, learning agility, and potential for advancement. Once criteria are established, organisations conduct talent audits, leveraging performance appraisals, competency assessments, 360-degree feedback, and career-aspiration inputs to evaluate which individuals meet the thresholds (Silzer & Dowell, 2010). Such audits produce a short list of talent-pool members who are considered pivotal to current and future

strategic goals. Importantly, recent research suggests that talent identification remains understudied, despite its critical importance; Wang et al. (2024) found that, despite increasing attention, it comprises only a limited share of the TM literature.

The strategic significance of talent identification lies in its alignment with workforce planning, succession management and organisational agility. By identifying talent early, organisations can deploy development programmes, succession pipelines and internal mobility mechanisms that build depth in leadership and specialist roles. Menezes et al. (2025) show that TM practices influence employee empowerment and retention through mechanisms linked to psychological empowerment, thereby supporting the need for robust identification processes that feed into empowerment and retention pathways. In the context of digital disruption and changing work roles, technological tools such as artificial intelligence and big data analytics are increasingly used to improve the accuracy of talent identification (Venugopal, 2024). AI-enabled assessment of behavioural traits and readiness allows organisations to move beyond subjective judgment, though it raises ethical questions about data privacy, bias and transparency.

In essence, talent identification must emphasise both current achievement and future potential, avoiding the pitfall of equating high performance today with readiness for strategic roles tomorrow. As van der Sluis (2023) argues, evolving conceptions of talent reflect the dynamic nature of work and organisational strategy, requiring that identification frameworks embrace flexibility, inclusivity, and future-orientation. Systematic reviews of machine learning applications in 2026 emphasise that data-driven models are now essential for identifying latent potential that subjective appraisals might overlook (Tang et al., 2026). Moreover, in contexts such as South Africa, where skills shortages and transformation imperatives are acute, identification must also integrate issues of equity and representation so that talent pools reflect broader workforce aspirations and inclusivity goals. Recent studies in the South African public sector suggest that broadening identification to lower-ranking employees can significantly maximise untapped potential and support transformation goals (Saurombe, 2025).

Practically speaking, effective talent-identification programmes enable organisations to allocate scarce development resources wisely, prepare successors for critical roles, and retain institutional knowledge by promoting internal rather than external sourcing. However, identification cannot be a one-time event; it must be embedded as an ongoing cycle, benchmarking talent-pool readiness, monitoring progress, refreshing criteria, and aligning with evolving business strategies. In this sense, identification links the preceding phases of talent planning and resourcing to the subsequent phases of development, deployment, and retention, forming a critical bridge in the talent-management lifecycle.

In sum, talent identification is the strategic act of recognising, assessing and selecting individuals who will become the organisation's future talent backbone. It is rooted in systematic audits, forward-looking criteria, data-driven decision-making and inclusive practices. When executed well, talent identification enables organisations to anticipate strategic skill-gaps, build leadership pipelines and enhance workforce agility; when neglected, it leads to misallocation of development efforts, disengagement of high-potential employees and weakened competitive positions (Ulrich & Smallwood, 2012). Therefore, for modern organisations facing digital disruption, demographic change and evolving work requirements, talent identification must be treated not as a perfunctory HR exercise but as a strategic imperative intertwined with the organisation's long-term viability.

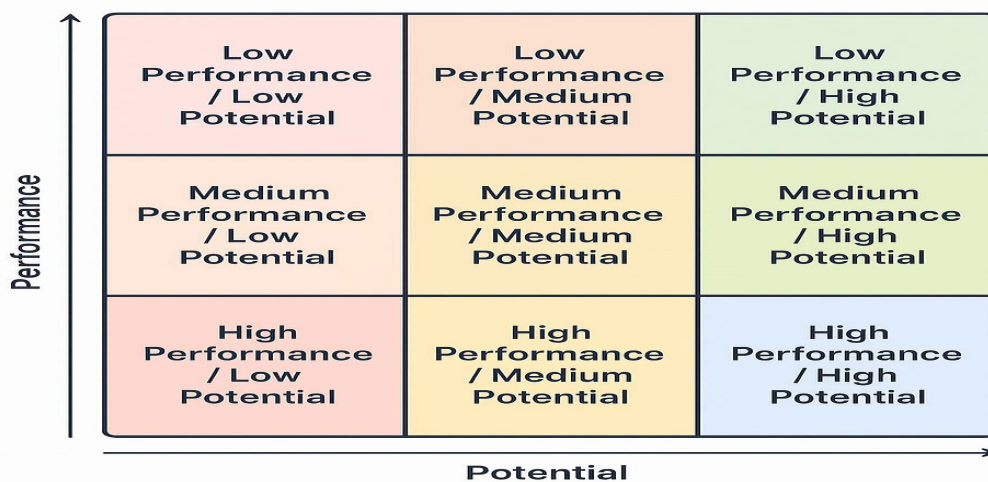


Figure 2-3: **The 9-Box Grid: A Dominant Identification Model** (Source: Ready, Conger, & Hill, 2010:78).

This model visually plots employees on a 3x3 matrix based on two primary dimensions: Performance (typically past or current results) and Potential (the capacity for future growth and success in more demanding roles). The nine resulting categories, ranging from "Low Performance/Low Potential" to "High Performance/High Potential" (often termed "Star" or "Top Talent"), allow organisations to segment their workforce and tailor investment strategies (Silzer & Church, 2009: 12). For instance, employees in the "Star" box are prioritised for accelerated development and succession planning, while those in the "High Performance/Medium Potential" box might be rewarded for their current contribution but not necessarily earmarked for rapid advancement.

The grid provides a common language for talent discussions and facilitates the differentiation of talent for resource allocation (Meyers, van Woerkom, & Dries, 2013). However, the simplicity of the 9-Box Grid is also its greatest weakness, leading to significant criticism from both academics and practitioners. A primary challenge lies in the subjective and often poorly defined nature of the Potential axis (Gallup, 2024). Unlike performance, which can be measured with objective metrics, potential is a prediction of future capability, making it highly susceptible to rater bias, including affinity bias and the halo effect (Mann, Fortin-Guichard, & Till, 2025). The lack of a standardised, evidence-based definition of potential across organisations means that assessments often rely on a manager's 'gut feeling' or a limited set of observable behaviours, which can perpetuate homogeneity and stifle the identification of diverse talent (Silzer & Church, 2009). Furthermore, the grid's focus on identifying a small elite group can lead to the neglect and demotivation of employees who are deemed "solid performers" but not "high potential," potentially eroding trust and engagement across the broader workforce (Gallup, 2024).

2.10.3.1 Challenges and Future Directions in Talent Identification

The core challenge in talent identification is mitigating unconscious bias (Mann et al., 2025). Research consistently shows that evaluators tend to favour individuals who are similar to themselves (affinity bias) or who fit a pre-conceived, often narrow, prototype of a successful leader (prototype bias) (Sampson, 2013). This is particularly problematic in global or diverse organisations where a single, Western-centric model of leadership potential may be inappropriately applied across different cultural contexts. To address this, organisations are moving towards more objective, behaviour-based assessments of potential, focusing on measurable traits such as learning agility, adaptability, and a results-driven focus (Silzer & Church, 2009).

Another critical challenge is the shift from a static to a dynamic view of talent. Traditional talent identification models often assume a fixed talent pool, but modern organisations require talent fluidity and the ability to identify potential in non-traditional roles or in employees who have not yet had the opportunity to demonstrate high performance (van der Sluis, 2023). The future of talent identification is increasingly reliant on technology, specifically AI and machine learning, to analyse vast amounts of data, including project assignments, internal network connections, and learning platform engagement, to provide a more holistic and less biased view of an employee's latent capabilities (Venugopal, 2024). However, the ethical implementation of these technologies, ensuring transparency and fairness in the algorithms, remains a significant area of concern and research (Wang et al., 2024).

2.10.4 Talent Relationship Management

Talent relationship management (TRM) is the process of sustaining and nurturing relationships with individuals within an organisation's talent pool to drive engagement, development, and retention (Cappelli, 2008; Silzer & Dowell, 2010; Collings, Mellahi, & Cascio, 2019). Armstrong and Taylor (2014, p. 267) describe TRM as the creation of relationships with employees in their respective roles by acknowledging contributions, providing growth opportunities, and ensuring fair treatment, thereby achieving talent engagement. In effect, TRM serves as the relational glue that connects talent-pool membership to meaningful career experiences, organisational alignment, and long-term commitment.

The rationale for TRM is anchored in the notion of psychological contract and employee engagement. When talent-pool members perceive that the organisation values their input, supports their development and treats them equitably, they are more likely to reciprocate through higher levels of commitment, performance and retention. Sinisterra, Peñalver, and Salanova (2024) found that TM practices significantly enhance employee engagement and reduce turnover intentions, thus emphasising that TRM is not peripheral but central to organisational success. Further, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) (2018) asserts that employees who are satisfied, well-supported, and feel valued are better positioned to deliver quality products, services, and innovations, underscoring the strategic importance of TRM in TM frameworks.

Effective TRM is a strategic, continuous organisational discipline focused on cultivating and retaining a high-quality workforce to ensure long-term business success. This approach requires a sustained, multi-faceted effort that extends beyond traditional recruitment to encompass the entire employee lifecycle. Foundational to TRM is cultivating a transparent culture that encourages open dialogue, fosters psychological safety, and demonstrates that employee contributions are valued (Al-Ghazali & Taha, 2021). This is supported structurally by implementing regular mentoring and coaching programmes, which are critical for skills development and for helping employees navigate their professional journeys in an increasingly complex work environment (Gössling & Pufahl, 2021). Furthermore, strategic and personalised career pathing, which involves clear discussions about an employee's trajectory and opportunities for growth, is crucial for aligning individual aspirations with organisational objectives and is a significant factor in retention (Ansar & Baloch, 2018). These components are regularly assessed and calibrated through dynamic talent review forums, where managers collectively evaluate employee performance and potential, ensuring agile, fair decisions on development and succession planning (Groves, 2017). Collectively, these integrated practices create a transparent, supportive ecosystem that enhances

recognition, aligns personal and corporate goals, and ultimately improves talent retention and organisational agility. In the digital era characterised by hybrid work and rapidly evolving roles, TRM also demands technological enablers such as digital learning platforms, internal mobility portals, and AI-driven engagement analytics. For instance, Kumari (2025) emphasises that innovative talent-management practices designed for digital workplaces promote inclusive engagement and talent retention by integrating shared leadership models, timely feedback and continuous career support.

TRM intersects with internal mobility and redeployment strategies. According to Schinnenburg (2025), organisations that leverage internal mobility and talent-fluidity mechanisms such as lateral moves, internal project assignments and gig-style roles can boost talent-readiness by up to 60%. This underscores that relationship management goes beyond retention to involve strategically deploying talent, enabling progression, and maintaining momentum in individual careers. Through career path visibility, targeted development opportunities and meaningful recognition, TRM ensures that talent-pool members feel not only valued but also future-ready.

TRM must also embed fairness, diversity, and inclusion. In contexts where transformation and equity are strategic imperatives, such as South Africa, TRM should ensure that talent-pool membership and development opportunities reflect broad demographic representation. For example, Gandhi and Saurombe (2025) found that deficient relationship-management practices in a South African public-sector organisation, particularly in recognition, development, and leadership pathways, were key contributors to talent turnover. Hence, TRM cannot adopt a one-size-fits-all approach: rather, it must adapt to cultural, demographic, and contextual nuances to sustain inclusive engagement.

The linkage between TRM and organisational performance is well documented. Research by Menezes et al. (2025) shows that talent-management practices enhance employee psychological empowerment, which, in turn, supports retention and performance. Thus, TRM plays a strategic role in translating talent identification and development efforts into sustained organisational outcomes. In other words, the relationship-management component ensures that the investment in identifying and developing talent yields return through enhanced engagement, retention and productivity.

It is also critical to recognise that TRM is not an isolated HR function and needs to be integrated across the organisation, involving line managers, talent-programme lead, HR business partners and senior leadership. Leadership behaviours such as frequent meaningful conversations, recognition of achievements, and transparent feedback are central to successful TRM. Indeed, the decline in

manager engagement reported by Gallup (2025) suggests that without invested leaders, engagement of broader talent pools will suffer. Engaged managers are essential conduits of TRM, reinforcing the connection between talent-pool individuals and organisational goals. Thus, talent relationship management is the vital connective tissue within the talent-management architecture and the mechanism through which individuals in the talent pool are engaged, supported, developed, and retained. In today's dynamic and digitally infused work environment, TRM must incorporate inclusive practices, internal mobility, digital platforms, and leadership engagement to ensure that talent-pool members remain motivated, aligned, and future-ready. Organisations that effectively cultivate these relationships are better placed to convert potential into performance, retain institutional expertise, and secure competitive advantage in an era of rapid change.

2.10.4.1 The Psychological Contract as the Foundation of TRM

The concept of the psychological contract is central to understanding the effectiveness of TRM (Rousseau, 1989; Charoenrat, 2025; Olabiyi, 2025). This contract refers to the unwritten set of expectations and obligations that exist between an employee and the organisation, beyond the formal employment contract. For employees identified as "talent," the psychological contract is often relational, involving expectations of long-term employment, career development, and mutual trust, in exchange for high commitment and performance (Aggarwal, Datta, & Bhargava, 2007; Mahadulula & Holtzhausen, 2025; Pandey, 2025). When an organisation identifies an employee as high-potential and places them in the talent pool, it implicitly makes a promise of greater investment and opportunity.

The fulfilment of this psychological contract is a critical determinant of talent retention and engagement (Poisat & Stanz, 2018). When TM practices such as providing promised development opportunities, transparent career paths, and equitable rewards are delivered, the contract is fulfilled, leading to increased job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and reduced turnover intentions (Sinisterra et al., 2024). Conversely, a psychological contract breach occurs when the employee perceives that the organisation has failed to deliver on its promises. For high-potential employees, a breach such as being overlooked for a promotion or receiving inadequate development support can be particularly damaging, leading to feelings of betrayal, cynicism, and a rapid exit from the organisation (Raheem & Khan, 2019). Therefore, TRM is fundamentally the active management of these expectations to ensure the psychological contract remains intact and mutually beneficial.

2.10.4.2 Key Components of a Strategic TRM Framework

An effective, strategic TRM framework extends far beyond the traditional functions of HR, incorporating a multifaceted, integrated approach to ensure the identification, development, retention, and engagement of key talent within an organisation (McDonnell, 2017; Mukwawaya, 2025; Saurombe, 2025). Unlike conventional HR practices that often emphasise administrative processes such as payroll, recruitment, and compliance, TRM positions talent as a central strategic asset, recognising that organisational success is increasingly dependent on the ability to attract, develop, and retain high-performing individuals who can adapt to dynamic business environments (McDonnell, 2017). At the heart of this approach lies personalised development and career pathing, which is a critical departure from the generic, one-size-fits-all training programmes that have long been the norm in many organisations (Silzer & Church, 2009).

Personalised development entails the creation of Individual Development Plans (IDPs) that are co-created with talent-pool members, considering not only the competencies required for immediate or next-level roles but also each employee's long-term career aspirations (Silzer & Church, 2009). This approach necessitates a nuanced understanding of each individual's strengths, developmental needs, and potential career trajectory, ensuring that learning interventions are not only relevant but also motivating and aligned with both organisational objectives and personal growth ambitions (Silzer & Church, 2009). The inclusion of stretch assignments, rotational opportunities, and exposure to high-stakes projects is essential in this process, as these experiences provide practical platforms for employees to develop critical skills, demonstrate capability, and build confidence (Silzer & Church, 2009). Additionally, mentorship from senior leaders serves as both a developmental and relational mechanism, allowing employees to gain insights, guidance, and sponsorship from individuals with organisational experience and influence (Silzer & Church, 2009). Formal leadership training, delivered in combination with experiential learning, ensures that high-potential employees acquire the necessary competencies to navigate increasingly complex organisational challenges, bridging the gap between current performance and future potential (Silzer & Church, 2009).

In parallel, the provision of continuous and multi-source feedback is a cornerstone of effective TRM. Traditional annual performance reviews, which focus predominantly on retrospective assessments of performance, are insufficient for fostering the rapid development of high-potential employees (CIPD, 2018). Instead, TRM requires a systematic approach to feedback that is frequent, constructive, and sourced from multiple perspectives, including peers, subordinates, and managers a practice commonly referred to as 360-degree feedback (CIPD, 2018). This feedback

system not only accelerates the employee's learning curve but also strengthens the relational component of the psychological contract between the employee and the organisation. Employees perceive the investment of time and resources in feedback as a tangible demonstration of organisational commitment to their growth and development, thereby enhancing perceived organisational support and engagement (CIPD, 2018). Moreover, continuous feedback fosters a culture of transparency and accountability, allowing employees to understand their performance relative to expectations and providing actionable insights for improvement (CIPD, 2018). The iterative nature of this feedback loop encourages adaptability and resilience, equipping employees to respond effectively to both current and emerging organisational challenges, and ultimately enhancing organisational agility (CIPD, 2018).

Strategic recognition and reward represent another critical pillar within the TRM framework. A sophisticated TRM approach requires that reward systems are transparent, equitable, and closely aligned with both individual performance and future potential, thereby creating a clear linkage between contribution and recognition (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014; Willis Towers Watson, 2025). While financial incentives remain an important component of the reward structure, TRM extends beyond mere compensation to encompass non-monetary recognition strategies. These include public acknowledgment of achievements, increased visibility to senior leadership, and access to exclusive projects or opportunities that are reserved for high-potential employees (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014). Such practices serve multiple functions: they reinforce desired behaviours, motivate continued high performance, and communicate the organisation's genuine appreciation for the employee's contributions (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014). Importantly, when recognition and reward are perceived as fair and merit-based, they strengthen employees' trust in organisational systems and their commitment to long-term engagement, thereby reducing turnover and increasing organisational stability (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014). Additionally, strategic reward systems can signal the organisation's broader talent philosophy, reinforcing the message that individual growth, potential, and performance are valued equally, creating a holistic approach to employee engagement (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014).

Internal talent mobility (ITM) is another integral dimension of an effective TRM framework, as it allows employees to gain diverse experiences, develop cross-functional capabilities, and build extensive professional networks within the organisation (Schinnenburg, 2025). By facilitating lateral moves across different departments or vertical progression within a functional hierarchy, ITM not only accelerates skill development but also strengthens organisational cohesion and knowledge sharing (Schinnenburg, 2025). A robust ITM system communicates a clear message to

employees that their career growth can be fully realised internally, addressing one of the most significant drivers of voluntary turnover, perceived lack of advancement opportunities (Gandi & Saurombe, 2025). Furthermore, ITM supports succession planning and organisational resilience by ensuring that critical roles are filled by individuals with broad organisational knowledge and diverse skill-sets (Gandi & Saurombe, 2025). This internal mobility strategy also reinforces inclusivity and retention by providing equal access to developmental opportunities, thereby mitigating the risk of talent flight and enhancing long-term organisational capability (Gandi & Saurombe, 2025). It reflects a proactive approach to workforce planning, where talent pipelines are continuously nurtured, monitored, and optimised in alignment with both current operational needs and future strategic objectives (Schinnenburg, 2025; Gandi & Saurombe, 2025).

The success of TRM ultimately rests on leadership accountability, as line managers and senior executives are instrumental in translating strategic talent objectives into actionable practices (Gallup, 2025). Leaders are responsible not only for overseeing the performance of their teams but also for actively developing, mentoring, and advocating for high-potential employees (Gallup, 2025). This requires deliberate investment in building managerial capability, including training leaders to conduct quality talent reviews, engage in meaningful career conversations, and identify and address developmental gaps (Gallup, 2025). Accountability mechanisms, such as regular talent assessments and performance tracking, ensure that leaders remain committed to their role as talent developers and relationship managers (Hazel, Ngirande & Muchowe, 2025). Leaders who are visible, accessible, and genuinely invested in the growth of their teams foster trust, enhance engagement, and cultivate a culture in which employees feel valued and supported (Gallup, 2025). Moreover, leadership accountability signals that TRM is not merely an HR-driven initiative but a shared organisational responsibility, embedding talent development into the core operations and culture of the organisation (Tun, 2024). It also ensures that TRM is sustainable, as continuous leadership support and reinforcement are essential for maintaining momentum and achieving long-term organisational outcomes (Gallup, 2025).

In addition to these core components, effective TRM is inherently strategic, requiring alignment with organisational vision, mission, and long-term goals. It integrates workforce planning, competency mapping, and predictive analytics to anticipate future talent needs, identify potential skill gaps, and implement targeted interventions (McDonnell, 2017). By linking talent initiatives to strategic objectives, organisations can ensure that investment in human capital directly contributes to competitive advantage, innovation, and overall performance (McDonnell, 2017). The holistic nature of TRM also necessitates a continuous review of processes, metrics, and

outcomes, creating a dynamic system capable of evolving alongside organisational needs and external market conditions (McDonnell, 2017). Integration of technology, such as TM software and learning management systems, further enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of TRM, enabling data-driven decision-making, streamlined talent tracking, and personalised learning experiences (McDonnell, 2017). In sum, an effective TRM framework is comprehensive, systematic, and adaptive, combining personalised development, continuous feedback, strategic recognition, internal mobility, and leadership accountability to cultivate a high-performing, engaged, and loyal workforce. By doing so, organisations not only strengthen their talent pipelines but also position themselves to respond proactively to emerging challenges and opportunities, ultimately sustaining competitive advantage in a rapidly changing business environment (McDonnell, 2017).

2.10.4.3 TRM in the Context of Global and Diverse Workforces

The challenges of TRM are amplified in global and diverse workforces. Cultural differences influence how employees perceive the psychological contract, what they value in a relationship, and how they respond to feedback and recognition (McDonnell, 2017). A TRM strategy that is successful in one region may fail in another if it does not account for local norms regarding hierarchy, individualism vs. collectivism, and communication styles. Therefore, global organisations must adopt a global approach, standardising the core principles of TRM (for example, transparency, fairness) while localising delivery mechanisms (for example, types of recognition, styles of feedback) (Poisat & Stanz, 2018).

Furthermore, TRM is essential for fostering an inclusive environment. By actively managing relationships with diverse talent, organisations can ensure that employees from underrepresented groups receive equitable access to high-visibility assignments and sponsorship opportunities, which are often critical for career advancement (Sampson, 2013). Without intentional TRM, systemic biases can marginalise diverse talent, resulting in a "leaky pipeline" in which identified high-potentials leave due to a perceived lack of opportunity or support (Gandi & Saurombe, 2025). TRM is the strategic imperative that converts the promise of talent identification into the reality of sustained organisational capability. By actively managing the psychological contract, personalising development, promoting internal mobility, and ensuring leadership accountability, organisations can build a highly engaged, committed, and future-ready talent pool. The integration of TRM with the broader TM lifecycle ensures that the investment in identifying and developing talent is protected, ultimately driving superior organisational performance and competitive advantage in the global marketplace.

2.10.5 Talent development

Research indicates that talent development is an important aspect of managing talent. Collings and Mellahi (2015) argued that talent development is a key element in the management of talent (Almalki, 2025). Liversage (2015) defined talent development as the implementation and development of strategies to ensure the organisation has an adequate supply of talent in the future. Therefore, it is clear that talent development requires effective policies and strategies to drive the process. Armstrong and Taylor (2014) asserted that policy formulation must be aligned with employees' success profiles, as indicated by the competencies and qualities that need to be developed. Furthermore, the CIPD (2018) pointed out that a link must be established between talent development and other learning and development initiatives, including formal and informal training. Njanjobea (2016) also maintained that the creation of opportunities to advance knowledge that enhances employee performance and career-focused training must be prioritised by organisations.

Kissoonduth (2017) noted that the employee must align development and career planning with the organisation's needs. This implies that employees must understand the organisation's needs and align with them by sharpening their skills to fulfil them. Based on established HR principles, employee development is a shared responsibility between the organisation and the individual. While companies are tasked with providing developmental opportunities, it is ultimately the employee's responsibility to seize these chances for personal and professional growth. Authors such as Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart, and Wright (2014) have emphasised that employees are motivated not just by job security but also by the potential for individual advancement within an organisation. Common tools used for this purpose, widely discussed in HR literature, include mentoring, coaching, job rotation, and role-playing, all designed to enhance skills and broaden an employee's experience.

2.10.6 Employee Development Strategies: Mentoring, Coaching, Job Rotation, and Role Playing

Employee development is a fundamental component of TM, ensuring that employees acquire the skills, knowledge, and competencies necessary to meet organisational goals and advance their career trajectories (Erfan & Bakri, 2025). Organisations employ various developmental strategies to nurture talent, increase engagement, and build a capable workforce. Among the most prominent strategies are mentoring and coaching, job rotation, and role-playing, each of which contributes uniquely to employee growth and organisational effectiveness. Mentoring and Coaching have emerged as widely recognised strategies for developing employees in the contemporary workplace. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD, 2019) observed that these

approaches are extensively used by employers to enhance employee skills, performance, and job satisfaction. Mentoring is defined as a developmental relationship between an experienced mentor and a less experienced mentee, aimed at sharing in-depth knowledge, skills, and expertise to support the mentee's professional growth (CIPD, 2019).

Similarly, Hill and Kissoonduth (2017) describe mentorship as a communicational relationship between senior and junior employees, designed to improve job performance, career advancement, and employee satisfaction. Pasad and Agrawal (2014) highlight that mentoring fosters a positive organisational atmosphere, contributing to employee engagement and morale. Kissoonduth (2017) further emphasises that successful mentoring relationships require both mentor and mentee to share common attributes, interests, and commitment to the process.

Coaching, while closely related to mentoring, focuses more specifically on enhancing performance and productivity by targeting particular skills and goals. CIPD (2019) defines coaching as a systematic approach to improving performance through guidance, feedback, and structured support. Kissoonduth (2017) notes that coaching involves setting clear objectives, providing personalised feedback, and fostering personal development in a manner that promotes engagement and a sense of value among employees. Njanjobea (2016), assert that coaching creates a conducive atmosphere in which employees feel supported, empowered, and recognised, which ultimately strengthens organisational cohesion and loyalty.

Job rotation is another strategic developmental tool used to broaden employees' skills and organisational understanding. Shehansi, Gunarathne, Deysappriya, and Fernando (2019) describe job rotation as the planned movement of employees from one task or position to another over a specific time period. This approach enables employees to engage with multiple roles, gaining diverse experiences that enhance their adaptability, problem-solving capacity, and multi-skilling. Kissoonduth (2017) emphasises that job rotation prevents employees from being confined to a single role for extended periods, thereby promoting skill diversification and fostering organisational flexibility. Whether and Davis (1996), cited in Kissoonduth (2017), argue that multi-skilling benefits both employees, by increasing employability and competence, and employers, by creating a versatile and capable workforce. A study by Antonioli and Della Torre (2016) found that in 118 small and medium enterprises, the use of job rotation was negatively associated with formal training, suggesting that these companies may use job rotation as a substitute for more formal learning methods.

Role-playing is a development strategy that allows employees to experience tasks or challenges associated with different levels of authority within the organisation. According to Kissoonduth

(2017), role-playing enables employees to step into alternative roles, face varied organisational challenges and develop a deeper understanding of other functions. This experiential learning process helps employees recognise the alignment between their responsibilities and those of other roles, fostering empathy, strategic thinking, and collaboration. Barney and Shea (2007), cited in Kisoonduth (2017), note that role-playing also enhances interpersonal skills, communication, and collegiality, which are critical for effective teamwork and networking. By simulating real-world scenarios, role-playing encourages employees to develop confidence, adaptability, and innovative problem-solving skills, contributing to both individual and organisational growth.

Employee development strategies such as mentoring, coaching, job rotation, and role-playing are vital mechanisms for nurturing talent and building sustainable human capital. Mentoring and coaching provide individualised guidance and support that enhance career progression and employee satisfaction (Armstrong, 2020 & Neo, 2020). Job rotation broadens skills and promotes flexibility, while role-playing develops problem-solving, interpersonal, and leadership capabilities. Collectively, these strategies strengthen employee engagement, increase organisational competence, and ensure that the workforce is prepared to meet current and future challenges. Integrating these developmental tools within broader TM frameworks is essential for achieving both organisational success and individual professional growth.

2.11 Talent Development, Retention, and Strategic Management

TM is a strategic approach that ensures an organisation not only attracts but also develops, retains, and effectively utilises its workforce in alignment with its long-term goals. This process integrates various components, including talent retention, career management, succession planning, talent pipelines, and talent pools, each of which helps sustain organisational performance and competitiveness.

Talent Retention is a critical aspect of TM, as it enables organisations to maintain a committed and engaged workforce (SHRM, 2022). Employee retention involves creating a work environment that fosters loyalty, satisfaction, and motivation, thereby reducing turnover rates. When employees feel valued and see a clear pathway for growth within the organisation, they are more likely to remain committed, enhancing organisational stability and reducing recruitment and training costs associated with high employee attrition (Beecheler & Woowar, 2009). Effective retention strategies often include competitive compensation, recognition programmes, career development opportunities, and work-life balance initiatives.

Career management refers to the systematic planning and development of employees' career paths within the organisation (Guan et al., 2015; Martins et al., 2024; Xusheng, 2024). It involves

aligning individual career aspirations with organisational objectives, ensuring that employees have access to training, mentorship, and advancement opportunities. Career management not only addresses employees' personal growth and development but also strengthens organisational capacity by preparing individuals for increasingly complex roles (Latukha, 2015). By providing clear prospects for advancement, organisations can motivate employees to enhance their skills and performance, resulting in a mutually beneficial relationship.

Succession Planning is another essential element of strategic TM. It allows organisations to anticipate future talent needs and prepare qualified employees to fill key positions as they become available. This proactive approach mitigates risks associated with unexpected departures or retirements, ensuring organisational continuity and stability (Dennison, 2024; Talent Acquisition Management Report, 2025). Succession planning is closely linked to career management, as it identifies high-potential employees and provides them with targeted development opportunities to prepare them for leadership roles (Kim & Choi, 2014).

Building a Talent pipeline and Talent pool development are interconnected strategies that focus on ensuring the organisation has access to the right talent at the right time. A talent pipeline involves the continuous development and preparation of employees to meet both current and future organisational demands. It encompasses training programmes, mentorship initiatives, and performance management systems designed to build a ready pool of skilled personnel. Similarly, a talent pool refers to a specific group of employees who possess the skills, competencies, and potential that the organisation may draw upon to fill critical positions as needed. By maintaining a well-prepared talent pool, organisations can respond quickly to workforce changes while minimising operational disruptions (Beecheler & Woowar, 2009).

The benefits of TM are far-reaching. Its primary purpose is to identify, develop, and equip employees considered valuable to the organisation. When effectively implemented, TM enhances organisational competitiveness, increases employee engagement, and fosters innovation. In the South African context, research by Knowledge Resources (2015) revealed that 68% of respondents identified the development of future capabilities as a key objective of TM initiatives. Moreover, aligning TM with organisational strategy can yield substantial financial and operational benefits, as organisations are better able to leverage their human capital to achieve strategic goals (Brunila & Yllner, 2013).

TM and Human Resource Management (HRM) are closely related but distinct concepts. HRM focuses broadly on managing the workforce to optimise organisational performance, encompassing functions such as recruitment, compensation, performance management, and

employee relations (Kim & Choi, 2014). TM, on the other hand, is a specialised aspect of HRM that focuses on identifying and developing high-potential employees to meet strategic objectives. While HRM addresses the management of all employees, TM emphasises critical roles and high-value personnel. Both approaches are integrated into the overall business strategy, with TM drawing selectively on HRM practices to cultivate a workforce capable of sustaining competitive advantage (Latukha, 2015).

TM is a multifaceted approach that combines retention, career development, succession planning, and the strategic cultivation of talent pipelines and pools. Its successful implementation not only enhances employee engagement and development but also strengthens organisational capacity and long-term competitiveness. By integrating these components within HRM frameworks and aligning them with strategic objectives, organisations can ensure a sustainable, capable, and agile workforce prepared to meet both present and future challenges.

2.12 Talent Management Philosophy

Meyers and van Woerkom (2014, p. 20) described the talent philosophies as the “fundamental assumptions and beliefs about the nature, value, and instrumentality of talent that are held by a firm’s key decision makers”. This means that the philosophies reflect how organisations define talent, who they view as talented, how much value they place on talented employees, and how this talent is to be utilised to maximise performance. Talent philosophies are similar to the concept of mental models, which have been widely used in cognitive psychology and cognitive science (Meyers, van Woerkom, Paauwe, & Dries, 2020). Meyers, van Woerkom, Paauwe, and Dries (2020) refer to mental models as those that influence reasoning, decision-making, and the behaviour of individuals. Furthermore, they assert that mental models serve as filters in determining individuals' perceptions and their interpretation of events. The literature on TM suggests that talent philosophies vary across different organisations (Dries, 2013). Dries (2013) pointed out that talent philosophies vary considerably between individual organisations. Meyers et al. (2020) argue that there is disagreement among scholars about whether talent is common or rare (inclusive or exclusive) and whether it is determined by nature or nurture (stable versus developable).



Figure 2-4: The Talent Management Conceptual Framework (Source: Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014:54)

TRM is the strategic imperative that converts the promise of talent identification into the reality of sustained organisational capability. By actively managing the psychological contract, personalising development, promoting internal mobility, and ensuring leadership accountability, organisations can build a highly engaged, committed, and future-ready talent pool. The integration of TRM with the broader TM lifecycle ensures that the investment in identifying and developing talent is protected, ultimately driving superior organisational performance and competitive advantage in the global marketplace.

2.13 Talent Management in Organisations and Higher Education Institutions

TM is a strategic approach aimed at attracting, developing, retaining, and deploying skilled employees to achieve organisational objectives (Baqtayan, 2014; South African Board for People Practices, 2022; Van der Merwe, 2023; Yildiz & Esmer, 2023). It has gained prominence in both corporate and educational sectors due to its capacity to enhance workforce performance, engagement, and long-term institutional sustainability. Effective TM integrates employee development strategies, career progression, succession planning, and talent pool and pipeline cultivation, ensuring organisations have access to the human capital necessary for operational and strategic success.

2.13.1 Employee Development Strategies

Employee development is a cornerstone of TM, as it equips employees with the knowledge, skills, and competencies required for career advancement and organisational effectiveness (De Vos et al., 2011; Debebe, 2023). Various strategies have been implemented to achieve this, including

mentoring, coaching, job rotation, and role-playing. Mentoring and Coaching are widely recognised as effective developmental tools. Mentoring is a developmental relationship in which an experienced mentor shares knowledge, skills, and guidance with a less experienced mentee to facilitate personal and professional growth (CIPD, 2019). Kissoonduth (2017) describes mentoring as a communicational relationship between senior and junior employees aimed at enhancing performance, job satisfaction, and career progression. Research by Pasad and Agrawal (2014) suggests that mentoring creates a positive work environment that promotes employee engagement. Kissoonduth (2017) further emphasises that successful mentorship requires shared attributes, interests, and commitment from both parties.

Coaching complements mentoring by focusing on enhancing performance and achieving specific skills and goals. CIPD (2019) notes that coaching provides structured guidance, feedback, and support, while Kissoonduth (2017) highlights its role in setting clear objectives and fostering personal development. Marshal and Laura (2011), cited in Njanjobea (2016), argue that coaching nurtures employee engagement and a sense of value, contributing to a positive organisational culture. Together, mentoring and coaching serve as essential mechanisms for skill enhancement, motivation, and retention.

Job Rotation is another key developmental strategy that involves moving employees across different roles or tasks within a specified period (Shehansi, Gunarathne, Deyshappriya, & Fernando, 2019). This approach broadens employees' skills, promotes multi-skilling, and enhances organisational flexibility. Kissoonduth (2017) notes that job rotation prevents stagnation in a single role, providing employees with diverse experiences that improve adaptability and problem-solving abilities. Whether and Davis (1996), cited in Kissoonduth (2017), argue that multi-skilling benefits both employees and employers. However, job rotation is most effective in organisations with smaller workforce sizes where oversight and training can be closely managed. Role-Playing allows employees to simulate tasks and responsibilities associated with different levels of authority. Kissoonduth (2017) observes that role-playing helps employees understand other roles, develop problem-solving skills, and improve collaboration. Barney and Shea (2007), cited in Kissoonduth (2017), highlight that role-playing enhances interpersonal skills, teamwork, and networking, creating a supportive and dynamic work environment. By experiencing challenges in various roles, employees develop confidence and adaptability, which are essential for long-term career growth and organisational success.

2.13.2 Talent Retention and Career Management

Talent retention is fundamental to sustaining organisational performance (Macpherson, 2024; Zake, Jonck & Pelsler, 2024; Maphanga & Olivier, 2025). Retaining skilled employees ensures continuity, reduces recruitment costs, and maintains institutional knowledge. Beecheler and Woowar (2009) emphasise that retention strategies, including competitive compensation, recognition, career development, and supportive work environments, are vital to maintaining employee engagement and loyalty.

Career Management complements retention by providing employees with structured pathways for growth within the organisation. It aligns individual aspirations with organisational objectives, offering opportunities for training, mentorship, and progression (Latukha, 2015). Through effective career management, employees are motivated to enhance their skills and contribute meaningfully to organisational goals, creating a mutually beneficial dynamic.

2.13.3 Succession Planning, Talent Pipeline, and Talent Pool

Succession planning ensures organisational continuity by preparing employees to fill critical positions as they arise (Kim & Choi, 2014). By identifying high-potential employees and providing targeted development, institutions mitigate risks associated with retirements, resignations, or unexpected departures. A talent pipeline refers to a systematic approach to cultivating and preparing employees to meet both current and future organisational needs (Peter Cappelli, 2008; David Collings & Kamel Mellahi, 2009; Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2021). It involves continuous development initiatives, mentorship programs, and performance management systems to build a skilled and ready workforce. Similarly, a talent pool represents a group of employees with the competencies and potential that organisations can draw upon when positions become available. Maintaining robust pipelines and pools ensures organisational agility, minimises operational disruptions, and strengthens long-term competitiveness (Beecheler & Woowar, 2009).

2.13.4 Benefits of Talent Management

The benefits of effective TM are multifaceted. Its primary objective is to identify, develop, and retain high-value employees for the organisation. According to Knowledge Resources (2015), 68% of respondents in a South African study indicated that achieving future capabilities was a major goal of TM initiatives. When aligned with organisational strategy, TM can increase employee

engagement, enhance institutional capacity, and yield significant financial and operational benefits (Brunila & Baedeker, 2013).

2.13.5 Talent Management and Human Resource Management

While closely related, TM and HRM are distinct. HRM encompasses a broad spectrum of functions, including recruitment, compensation, performance management, and employee relations (Kim & Choi, 2014). TM, however, focuses on critical roles and high-value employees, leveraging select HRM practices to nurture and retain top talent. Both concepts are integrated into the business strategy, ensuring that workforce management aligns with organisational objectives (Latukha, 2015).

2.14 Talent Management in Tertiary Education Institutions Globally

Universities worldwide face challenges in recruiting, developing, and retaining skilled academics. Samuel and Chimpunza (2013) highlight that talent retention issues are prevalent in both developed and developing countries. In the United States, 7.7% of academics resigned between 1997 and 1998, while Canadian institutions are projected to struggle with recruitment and retention over the next decade. Australia is expected to face a shortage of approximately 20,000 academics in the coming years (Njanjobea, 2016).

2.14.1 Talent Management in Australian Universities

Australia's HE sector is central to the country's economy, driving innovation and growth by producing skilled graduates (Mukwawaya, 2019). However, high turnover rates, heavy workloads, and limited support indicate gaps in TM within the sector (Njanjobea, 2016). Effective strategies, including mentoring, coaching, career management, and structured retention policies, are necessary to sustain workforce capacity and institutional performance.

2.15 Talent Management in African Tertiary Education Institutions

African universities face acute shortages of qualified academics, which hampers graduate output and national development. Makondo (2014) stresses the urgent need for interventions to address recruitment and retention challenges. Rudhumbu and Maphosa (2015) argue that without effective TM, institutions risk reduced capacity to produce graduates who can contribute to the economy.

2.15.1 Talent Management in Kenyan Universities

Kenya exemplifies the challenges faced by African universities. Nge'the, Namusonge, and Iravo (2012) highlight local and international competition for academics, heavy workloads, and inadequate remuneration. As a result, many Kenyan academics seek employment abroad for better conditions, contributing to brain drain and reduced institutional capacity (Samuel & Chimpunza, 2013, cited in Mukwawaya, 2019). Implementing robust TM strategies, including career development, mentoring, and retention initiatives, is critical for sustaining academic workforce quality and capacity.

TM is a critical strategic function across all organisational sectors, particularly in HE, where the availability and retention of skilled academics determine institutional success and national development. Employee development strategies, such as mentoring, coaching, job rotation, and roleplaying, enhance skill acquisition, engagement and adaptability. Retention, career management, succession planning, and the cultivation of talent pools and pipelines ensure that organisations maintain a capable and motivated workforce. Globally, universities face similar challenges in retaining academic staff, though the scale and context differ between developed and developing countries. In Africa, addressing talent shortages is urgent to ensure that institutions produce graduates capable of driving socio-economic growth. Integrated, strategic TM practices are therefore essential for building sustainable, high-performing organisations and tertiary education institutions worldwide.

2.15.2 Talent Management in Tertiary Education Institutions in South Africa

TM in South African tertiary education institutions remains a critical yet underdeveloped strategic initiative. Mukwawaya (2019) argues that organisations in the country rarely consider TM a tool for gaining a competitive advantage, and the HE sector is no exception. Dube and Ngulube (2013) note that the sector remains dominated by white male academics, highlighting the slow pace of transformation, while Badat (2010) observes that although the black population accounts for approximately 89% of the national population, only about 17% of academics in South African HEIs come from the black community. This disparity underscores the challenges of equitable representation and inclusion within the sector.

Takawira, Coetzee, and Shreuder (2014) emphasise that South African universities are losing skilled academics to other sectors that offer more competitive remuneration packages, highlighting a critical retention issue that threatens institutional capacity and sustainability. At an institutional level, initiatives vary in scope and implementation. For instance, the University of South Africa's

(UNISA) In the Money strategy (2015) highlights ongoing challenges in addressing key dimensions of TM. Conversely, UKZN recognises all employees as critical assets, as reflected in its ITM procedures and guidelines (2014). The university emphasises talent identification, performance monitoring, mapping talent using performance-potential matrices, identifying talent gaps, and developing a robust talent pool.

Dweck (2012) further highlights that talent identification and mapping are foundational pillars of UKZN's integrated TM framework, illustrating a strategic approach to retaining and developing employees as a core component of institutional success. Collectively, these insights indicate that while some South African universities are adopting structured approaches to TM, significant challenges remain in addressing equity, retention, and strategic workforce planning across the HE sectors.

2.16 Theoretical Framework: Incentive Theory

This study is guided by the Incentive Theory of Motivation, which provides a lens for examining how external rewards influence human behaviour, particularly in organisational contexts. The theoretical framework serves as the foundation for understanding the mechanisms driving employee motivation and performance, guiding both the design of this study and the interpretation of its findings. By adopting this framework, the study situates its analysis within a well-established body of research on behavioural reinforcement, linking motivation to observable outcomes shaped by environmental stimuli.

2.16.1 Overview of Incentive Theory

The concept of motivation, the driving force behind human action, has been central to psychological and organisational studies for over a century. Among the most influential frameworks for understanding motivation is Incentive Theory, which posits that the anticipation of external rewards or the avoidance of punishment largely drives human and animal behaviour. Unlike early biological explanations of behaviour, Incentive Theory shifts the focus from internal drives to external stimuli, arguing that desirable outcomes serve as powerful motivators for action (Kamawu & Juma, 2023; Holliday, 2021).

The theory draws from the principles of operant conditioning, as formulated by B.F. Skinner in his landmark 1938 work *The Behaviour of Organisms: An Experimental Analysis* (Skinner, 1938). According to Skinner, behaviours that produce favourable consequences are more likely to be repeated, forming the empirical basis of Incentive Theory. This perspective is particularly relevant

for organisational research, where recognition, rewards, and other extrinsic incentives shape employee behaviour and productivity.

2.16.2 Historical and Theoretical Foundations

Incentive Theory represents a departure from earlier biological theories, such as Drive Theory, which suggested that behaviour is motivated by the need to reduce internal physiological tension (Hull, 1943). In contrast, Incentive Theory emphasises the role of external stimuli, proposing that incentives "pull" individuals toward a goal rather than internal drives "push" them. Philosophically, the theory aligns with the ancient Greek concept of hedonism, which posits that humans act to maximise pleasure and minimise pain (Bentham, 1789).

Skinner's experimental research with animals in controlled environments ("Skinner Boxes") demonstrated that behaviour is shaped by its consequences. He identified four primary consequences that influence behaviour: positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, positive punishment, and negative punishment. Positive reinforcement occurs when a desirable stimulus is added following a behaviour, increasing the likelihood of that behaviour being repeated. For example, awarding a bonus or public recognition for high performance encourages employees to continue performing well. Negative reinforcement occurs when an aversive stimulus is removed following a behaviour, also increasing the likelihood of the behaviour occurring again. For instance, an employee may complete a difficult task to avoid repeated managerial criticism, reinforcing task completion. In contrast, positive and negative punishment are designed to decrease undesired behaviours, either by adding an aversive stimulus or removing a desirable one. Incentive Theory, in its core application, focuses on positive reinforcement, emphasising how attractive external stimuli can motivate and sustain desired behaviours (McLeod, 2023).

2.16.3 Modern Applications and Relevance

A critical aspect of Skinner's work is the concept of reinforcement schedules, which determine the timing and frequency of incentives (Ferster & Skinner, 1957). Continuous reinforcement, where the desired behaviour is reinforced every time it occurs, leads to rapid learning but also rapid extinction when the reward stops. Intermittent reinforcement, on the other hand, reinforces behaviour only some of the time, producing slower initial learning but greater persistence and resistance to extinction. These insights have direct application in organisational settings, where carefully structured incentive systems can enhance employee motivation, performance, and long-term engagement.

This study justifies its focus on extrinsic motivators in shaping employee behaviour by adopting the Incentive Theory as the guiding framework. It provides a robust theoretical lens to analyse how rewards, recognition, and other incentives influence performance outcomes, guiding both the research design and the interpretation of findings, while offering a foundation for practical recommendations.

2.16.4 The Evolution of Incentive Theory in Organisational Psychology

While Skinner's work provided the behavioural foundation, Incentive Theory was later integrated and refined by organisational psychologists to address the complexities of human motivation in the workplace. This evolution involved moving beyond simple, direct rewards to consider the cognitive and social dimensions of incentives.

A major evolution occurred with the introduction of cognitive elements into the purely behavioural model. The Expectancy Theory of Motivation, most notably developed by Victor Vroom in 1964, is a direct descendant and refinement of the Incentive Theory (Vroom, 1964). If any factor is zero, the motivation is zero. This cognitive perspective acknowledges that an incentive only works if the employee expects to achieve it, believes the organisation will deliver it, and values the reward itself. This marked a shift from a simple stimulus-response model to a more nuanced, cognitive-behavioural approach (Vroom, 1964).

Another significant contribution came from Frederick Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (also known as Motivation-Hygiene Theory), which emerged in the late 1950s (Herzberg et al., 1959). While not strictly an Incentive Theory, it provided a crucial distinction regarding the types of incentives that truly motivate employees. Herzberg categorised workplace factors into two groups: Hygiene Factors and Motivators. Hygiene factors (Extrinsic), such as salary, job security, working conditions, and company policy, are factors that do not motivate in a positive sense, but the absence of which can cause strong dissatisfaction. These factors are necessary to maintain a baseline level of contentment. On the other hand, Motivators (Intrinsic), such as achievement, recognition, the work itself, responsibility, and advancement, are the true sources of job satisfaction and motivation. Herzberg's work reinforced the Incentive Theory's focus on recognition and extrinsic rewards (Hygiene Factors like salary are incentives), but it also highlighted the limitations of purely monetary incentives. It suggested that while money can prevent dissatisfaction, true, sustained motivation comes from incentives that address the employee's need for growth and achievement, such as recognition (Herzberg et al., 1959).

The evolution of the Incentive Theory led to a critical distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, a dichotomy that defines much of modern motivational research (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The Incentive Theory of motivation posits that behaviour is primarily influenced by external factors, suggesting that individuals are "pulled" toward actions that lead to desirable outcomes (LibreTexts Social Sciences, 2024). This theory, which has roots in behaviourism, emphasises the role of Extrinsic Motivation, which is defined as engaging in an activity to attain a separable consequence (Ryan & Deci, 2000). These external rewards, or incentives, can take various forms, such as money, grades, praise, or the avoidance of punishment (Bandhu, 2024). The motivation, therefore, originates from outside the individual, and the activity is a means to an end. In contrast, Intrinsic Motivation refers to the drive to engage in an activity for the inherent satisfaction and enjoyment it provides, rather than for any external consequence (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The reward is the activity itself, stemming from internal factors such as personal interest, a sense of accomplishment, or the pleasure of skills development (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

While the Incentive Theory traditionally focuses on the power of extrinsic rewards, modern psychological perspectives, particularly those informed by Self-Determination Theory (SDT), recognise that the most effective motivational systems integrate both types (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Research in organisational psychology suggests that while extrinsic rewards can be useful for compliance and routine tasks, intrinsic motivation is a stronger predictor of long-term engagement, creativity, and overall well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Bandhu, 2024).

The challenge, as highlighted by the work of Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (SDT), is that excessive reliance on extrinsic incentives can sometimes crowd out or diminish intrinsic motivation, a phenomenon known as the over justification effect (Deci et al., 1999). If an employee who loves their job is suddenly paid a large bonus for doing what they already enjoy, they may begin to attribute their motivation to the money rather than the inherent satisfaction of the work, potentially reducing their long-term intrinsic drive.

2.16.5 Modern Applications of Talent Management in the Workplace

The Incentive Theory remains a cornerstone of modern HRM and organisational design (Hussain et al., 2025). Its principles are applied across various systems designed to drive performance, shape corporate culture, and retain talent (Aguinis, 2019; Nazarpouri et al., 2025). The most direct application of the Incentive Theory is through financial rewards, which are powerful extrinsic motivators. Performance-Based Pay (PBP) directly links an employee's compensation to their performance metrics, with examples including bonuses, commissions, profit-sharing, and merit-based salary increases (Gerhart & Newman, 2020). PBP is a classic application of positive reinforcement, where the financial incentive is the consequence that reinforces the desired high-performance behaviour (Gerhart & Rynes, 2003). Similarly, offering employees a stake in the

company's future success through Stock Options and Equity is a long-term incentive designed to align individual goals with organisational goals, reinforcing behaviours that contribute to the company's overall value (Oyer & Schaefer, 2011; Andersson, 2024). Gainsharing is another system where employees or teams receive a portion of the financial gains achieved through improved efficiency or cost savings, reinforcing collective problem-solving and efficiency-focused behaviour.

Modern Incentive Theory acknowledges that non-monetary rewards can be equally, if not more, effective than financial ones, particularly in addressing the "Motivator" factors identified by Herzberg. Formal Recognition Programs, such as "Employee of the Month" awards, public ceremonies, and formal letters of commendation, use social recognition and status as the incentive, satisfying the human need for belonging and esteem (Stajkovic & Luthans, 2001). Furthermore, simple, timely, and specific informal Praise and Feedback from a manager or peer acts as an immediate positive reinforcer, often more effective than a delayed annual bonus. Finally, Perks and Benefits, such as flexible working hours, remote work options (Bloom et al., 2015), enhanced vacation time, or subsidised gym memberships, are highly valued extrinsic rewards that reinforce loyalty and productivity.

Incentive Theory is also implicitly integrated into goal-setting frameworks. The process of setting a Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound (SMART) goal and attaching a reward to its completion is a sophisticated application of the theory. Management by Objectives (MBO), developed by Peter Drucker (1954), involves managers and employees collaboratively setting, documenting, and monitoring goals over a specific period. The achievement of these objectives is directly linked to performance reviews and, crucially, to incentives like bonuses or promotions (Drucker, 1954). The goal itself becomes the target behaviour, and the promised reward is the incentive.

2.16.6 Critical Analysis and Limitations

Despite its widespread application and empirical support, Incentive Theory is not without its critics and limitations. Modern motivational science has identified several areas where a purely incentive-based approach can be counterproductive or insufficient. The most significant critique is the over-justification effect (Deci et al., 1999). Studies have shown that when individuals are given extrinsic rewards for tasks they already find intrinsically rewarding, their intrinsic interest in the task can decrease. The motivation shifts from "I do this because I enjoy it" to "I do this because I get paid." This is particularly problematic for jobs requiring high levels of creativity, problem-solving, and intellectual curiosity, where intrinsic drive is paramount. A purely incentive-driven culture can

also foster an environment of unhealthy competition and short-term focus, leading to ethical and social concerns. If incentives are tied solely to narrow metrics (for example, sales figures), employees may be motivated to engage in unethical or illegal behaviour to hit targets, as seen in various corporate scandals (Kerr, 1995).

The incentive reinforces the outcome, regardless of the process. Furthermore, highly individualised incentive systems can discourage teamwork and knowledge sharing, as employees may view their colleagues as competitors for a limited pool of rewards. Incentive systems also tend to focus on tasks that are easily quantifiable (for example, units produced, sales closed) while neglecting crucial but less measurable activities like mentoring, long-term planning, or improving organisational culture (Pfeffer, 1998).

Incentive Theory, particularly in its original behaviourist form, is often criticised for being too simplistic and mechanistic, failing to account for the full spectrum of human needs and motivations (Beckmann & Heckhausen, 2025). Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs suggests that once basic needs (physiological and safety) are met, higher-order needs (belonging, esteem, and self-actualisation) become the primary motivators (Rojas, Méndez, & Watkins-Fassler, 2023; Saif, 2024). While incentives can address lower-level needs (salary for physiological needs), they often fail to satisfy the need for self-actualisation, which requires intrinsic motivation and meaningful work. Additionally, employees do not evaluate incentives in isolation. An objectively large incentive may still demotivate an employee if they perceive that a colleague is receiving a disproportionately larger reward for similar work. The incentive's value is therefore relative and socially constructed, not absolute (Hasyim & Bakri, 2024).

The Incentive Theory of Motivation, with its deep roots in B.F. Skinner's operant conditioning has profoundly shaped our understanding of how external consequences drive behaviour. It provides a powerful, empirically validated framework for designing systems that effectively shape and sustain desired actions in the workplace. The theory's core premise that individuals are motivated by the expectation of rewards and will repeat behaviours that lead to positive reinforcement remains fundamentally true and is visible in every compensation structure, bonus program, and recognition scheme across the corporate world.

The evolution of the theory, particularly through the lens of cognitive psychology (Vroom's Expectancy Theory) and organisational behaviour (Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory), has demonstrated that a purely behaviourist approach is insufficient for the modern, knowledge-based economy. Effective motivation requires a sophisticated blend of extrinsic and intrinsic factors. The future of the Incentive Theory lies in its integration with other motivational frameworks. Modern

organisations are moving toward systems that contextualise incentives, applying extrinsic incentives primarily to routine, algorithmic tasks, while relying on intrinsic motivators (autonomy, mastery, purpose) for complex, creative tasks (Pink, 2009; Batanova, 2024). They also personalise rewards, recognising that the valence (value) of an incentive is subjective, and offering a menu of rewards (e.g., flexible hours, professional development, public recognition) rather than a one-size-fits-all monetary bonus. Finally, they prioritise recognition, shifting the focus from delayed, large financial incentives to timely, specific, and non-monetary recognition that reinforces the desired behaviour immediately and addresses the higher-order need for esteem. In conclusion, the Incentive Theory, born from the experimental rigour of B.F. Skinner's laboratory has matured into a vital component of organisational strategy. It is a powerful tool, but one that must be wielded with an understanding of its cognitive and social context. According to Iqbal, Bureš, Zanker, Abdullah and Tootell (2023), by recognising the interplay between external rewards and internal drives, organisations can design motivational systems that not only drive performance but also foster engagement, ethical behaviour, and long-term job satisfaction.

2.17 Conclusion

The preceding literature review demonstrates that effective TM is a crucial strategic priority, with Talent Identification and TRM forming the core pillars of organisational competitiveness in an evolving global landscape. The literature shows that these two processes are deeply interconnected, as the strength of one directly shapes the success of the other. Talent Identification is presented as a forward-looking process aimed at recognising individuals who exhibit strong current performance and the capacity for future growth in key roles. Although traditional tools such as the 9-Box Grid offer a structured method for differentiating and allocating talent, scholars highlight limitations, particularly the subjective assessment of “potential,” which is vulnerable to bias and may reinforce homogeneity within leadership pipelines. Recent studies, therefore, call for more dynamic, data-driven, and behaviour-based approaches that incorporate analytics and artificial intelligence to enhance objectivity and inclusivity. This shift also encourages a broader perspective that values the fluidity of talent across the workforce, rather than focusing narrowly on a small elite group.

TRM serves as the mechanism through which identified potential is nurtured into sustained organisational value. Central to TRM is the psychological contract, the implicit expectations between employees and the organisation. When promises of development, support, and fairness are honoured, engagement and retention strengthen. However, breaches of this contract, especially for high-potential employees, often lead to voluntary turnover. Effective TRM, therefore, requires

personalised development, continuous feedback, strategic recognition, and internal mobility opportunities, supported by committed leadership rather than HR alone. Contemporary TM demands rigorous, bias-aware identification processes coupled with relational practices that uphold the psychological contract. Integrating these components enables organisations to protect and maximise their human capital, building a committed and future-ready workforce.

Chapter 3

Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

Chapter 2 reviewed the existing literature on TM in HE and highlighted gaps this study sought to uncover and address. This chapter discusses the research methods employed in the study. It outlines the research paradigm, research design, target population, sampling methods, data collection methods, data analysis, data quality assurance, ethical considerations, and study limitations.

3.2 Research design

The research design serves as the blueprint for the study, linking the paradigm's philosophical assumptions to practical methods of data collection and analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Maree, 2019). It provides a structured framework that guides the researcher in planning, implementing, and interpreting the study, ensuring alignment between the research objectives, questions, and methodological choices. This study adopts an exploratory qualitative design, underpinned by the interpretivist paradigm, with the primary aim of gaining an in-depth understanding of context-specific perceptions and experiences of TM within the Finance Department at UKZN (Tenny, 2022).

Exploratory research is particularly suited to studies where phenomena have not been extensively examined or where existing knowledge is limited (Aithal & Aithal, 2024). Its purpose is to investigate new or complex issues, generate insights, and define problems in contexts that are poorly understood, rather than to test predetermined hypotheses (Hunter, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018). In the context of TM in South African HE, such an approach is necessary because limited empirical research exists regarding how managers perceive and experience talent-related policies and practices within their departments. By employing an exploratory design, the study can capture the subtleties of organisational dynamics, uncover unanticipated challenges, and illuminate the meanings that managers attach to TM processes and concepts.

An exploratory qualitative design allows for flexibility in data collection, enabling the researcher to adapt questions and focus areas based on participants' responses. Techniques such as semi-structured interviews facilitate in-depth conversations that reveal rich, descriptive data, providing insight into both shared and divergent experiences of participants. This approach aligns with the

interpretivist paradigm by acknowledging that social reality is subjective and context-specific (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In this study, the exploratory design is essential for understanding the nuanced experiences of managers within the Finance Department at UKZN. Given the complex organisational and cultural context of South African HE, an exploratory approach enabled the researcher to examine how TM is enacted in practice, how it is perceived by managers, and what challenges or opportunities exist. By prioritising participant narratives and contextually grounded data, the study generates insights that are both rich and actionable, contributing to a deeper understanding of TM practices in a sector where empirical evidence remains scarce.

3.3 Research approach

A qualitative research approach is a systematic, interpretive method used to understand social phenomena through the meanings and experiences individuals or groups assign to them (Creswell, 2014). Unlike quantitative research, which seeks to measure and quantify variables, qualitative research focuses on exploring the complexity of human behaviour, perceptions, and interactions in their natural contexts (Patton, 2015). This approach allows researchers to capture rich, detailed narratives that reflect the lived experiences of participants, providing insights that are deeply embedded in social, cultural, and historical settings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The origins of qualitative research can be traced back to the social sciences, particularly anthropology and sociology, where scholars sought to understand human behaviour and social life from the perspective of the people being studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Qualitative research is inherently inductive, as it allows patterns, themes, and theories to emerge from the data rather than imposing preconceived hypotheses (Patton, 2015). This flexibility enables researchers to adapt to the complexity of social life, ensuring that the research is contextually grounded and sensitive to the participants' realities (Tracy, 2013).

Common qualitative research methods include in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, participant observation, and document analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Each of these methods is designed to provide a holistic understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, capturing both the observable behaviour and the underlying motivations, beliefs, and attitudes of participants. In-depth interviews, for instance, allow participants to narrate their experiences in their own words, while focus groups facilitate interactive discussions that can reveal shared cultural norms and divergent viewpoints (Creswell, 2014). Participant observation, on the other

hand, involves the researcher immersing themselves in the field to observe behaviours, interactions, and processes as they naturally occur (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

A fundamental principle of qualitative research is the concept of reflexivity, which recognises the researcher's influence on the research process. Researchers acknowledge that their background, values, and perspectives inevitably shape the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data (Tracy, 2013). This reflexive practice ensures transparency and credibility, as researchers critically examine how their positionality might affect participants' responses and the conclusions drawn. Furthermore, qualitative research emphasises contextuality, considering how social, cultural, institutional, and historical factors influence human behaviour and experience (Patton, 2015). By attending to these factors, qualitative research produces "thick descriptions," which are richly detailed accounts that provide a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon studied (Geertz, 1973; Sankofa, 2023).

Quality and rigour in qualitative research are assessed differently from quantitative studies. Rather than relying on statistical measures of validity and reliability, qualitative researchers focus on credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility ensures that the findings accurately reflect participants' realities, often achieved through prolonged engagement in the field and triangulation of data sources. Transferability refers to the extent to which findings can be applied to similar contexts, while dependability addresses the consistency of the research process. Confirmability ensures that findings are grounded in the data rather than researcher bias, achieved through transparent documentation and audit trails (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

A qualitative research approach is ideal for studies aiming to understand complex human experiences in depth, particularly in contexts where social, cultural, and institutional factors play a significant role. Its strength lies in its ability to provide rich, detailed, and contextually grounded insights, making it particularly suited for exploring phenomena that are not easily quantifiable. Through methods such as interviews, focus groups, and observation, qualitative research enables the discovery of meanings, perceptions, and behaviours from the perspective of those experiencing them, offering invaluable insights for both theory and practice (Creswell, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Patton, 2015). Methods such as semi-structured interviews and focus groups enable participants to express themselves freely, while thematic analysis allows for the identification of patterns and key themes relevant to policy and practice. This approach ensures that the study

produced meaningful insights grounded in the local context rather than abstract, generalised conclusions (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

3.4 Research Paradigm

A research paradigm is a worldview or a set of philosophical assumptions that guides the design and conduct of an investigation (Creswell, 2014). It provides a framework for formulating research questions, collecting data, and interpreting findings. This study is anchored in the Interpretivist Paradigm, also known as the Constructivist Paradigm. The interpretivist paradigm emphasises understanding the subjective meanings and experiences of individuals within their social contexts (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022; William, 2024). It assumes that social reality is multiple, constructed, and interpreted by individuals based on their lived experiences. This perspective aligns with the exploratory nature of this study, which seeks an in-depth understanding of perceptions and experiences related to TM within the Finance Department at UKZN.

In an ontological perspective, reality is subjective and socially constructed by individuals (Boet, 2021; Berger & Luckmann, 2023). This study focuses on participants' lived experiences and interpretations of TM, recognising that different managers may perceive and experience reality differently. Epistemologically, knowledge is generated through social interaction and interpretation (*Verstehen*), with the researcher and the researched inherently connected (Sol and Heng, 2022). The researcher engages directly with participants to understand their perspectives rather than maintaining a detached, objective stance. In terms of axiology, research is value-bound, meaning the researcher's values, background, and experiences influence the research process (Razali & Fernando, 2024). Reflexivity and transparency are maintained to acknowledge and account for this influence during data collection and analysis. Methodologically, the interpretivist paradigm favours inductive, holistic, and qualitative methods aimed at understanding reality rather than testing predetermined hypotheses (Paudel, 2024). This study employs a qualitative research design, using semi-structured interviews to allow themes and ideas to emerge naturally from participants' narratives.

In the context of this study, the interpretivist paradigm is particularly appropriate as it facilitates an in-depth exploration of managers' experiences and perceptions of TM within a complex organisational environment. By recognising that reality is subjective and socially constructed, this approach enables the researcher to capture nuanced insights into how managers interpret policies, practices, and challenges in their work context. The paradigm also emphasises the interactive relationship between researcher and participant, allowing for a deeper understanding of

organisational culture and human behaviour. Through qualitative data collection and inductive analysis, this study can generate context-specific findings that reflect the realities of TM in the Finance Department at UKZN, offering rich, practical, and theoretically grounded insights that would not be attainable through quantitative approaches alone (Tenny, 2022).

3.5 Population and Sample

The target population refers to the group of individuals or objects the researcher is interested in studying and to which findings are intended to generalise (Maree, 2019; Firestone, 1993). In qualitative research, analytical generalisation is the focus rather than statistical generalisation. The target population for this study comprises line managers within the Finance Department at UKZN, who are directly involved in the implementation and experience of TM practices. This population was chosen for its context specificity because line managers are key informants responsible for the daily execution of TM processes, making their experiences central to the research objectives (Stake, 1995).

The study purposively selected ten managers to allow for an in-depth exploration of managerial experiences while maintaining a manageable dataset for qualitative analysis. This sample size was sufficient as data saturation was reached, whereby the same themes and ideas kept being repeated by respondents. A mixed-gender sample was included to reflect the diverse composition of the organisation and to capture potential differences in perceptions, leadership styles, and experiences between male and female managers. Including both genders enhances the richness and inclusivity of the findings, minimises gender bias, and ensures that the results are representative of the broader managerial context.

3.6 Sampling Methods

Sampling involves selecting a subset of the population to participate in a study, providing a manageable and information-rich group from which to draw insights (Luborsky, 1995; Patton, 2015). In qualitative research, the focus is on selecting participants who can provide in-depth, relevant, and diverse perspectives, rather than achieving statistical representativeness. For this study, purposive sampling was employed, a non-probability technique in which participants are intentionally selected based on their knowledge, experience, and relevance to the research topic (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016; Palinkas et al., 2015). Specifically, the study targeted ten-line managers within the Finance Department at UKZN, as they possess direct experience with TM practices and are able to provide detailed, context-specific insights.

Purposive sampling was particularly appropriate for this study because it allows for the deliberate inclusion of participants who are most capable of contributing rich, meaningful data aligned with the research objectives. Given the small and bounded population of line managers within the department, this approach ensures that all relevant perspectives are considered, enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). By focusing on information-rich cases, the study can explore the nuances of TM practices, including perceptions of policy implementation, challenges encountered, and the strategies managers use in practice.

In the context of this study, purposive sampling enables a detailed exploration of how TM is experienced and perceived by those directly involved in its implementation. By selecting managers who have specific knowledge and responsibilities within the Finance Department, the researcher can capture diverse insights while remaining focused on participants who are most relevant to the research objectives. This method ensures that the findings reflect the real-world dynamics of TM at UKZN, providing contextually grounded and actionable insights into managerial practices, challenges, and perceptions within the HE environment. It also supports the interpretivist paradigm by prioritising subjective, lived experiences and enabling the co-construction of knowledge between the researcher and participants (Etikan et al., 2016; Palinkas et al., 2015). In this study, the inclusion criteria comprised permanent and contract employees within the Finance Department at UKZN who were directly involved in, or affected by, TM practices such as recruitment, performance management, career development, and retention. Participants were required to have a minimum period of service within the department to ensure that they had sufficient exposure to institutional TM processes and could provide informed perspectives. Both managerial and non-managerial staff were included to capture a range of perceptions across hierarchical levels.

The exclusion criteria applied to employees who were not based within the Finance Department, as well as temporary staff, interns, and external consultants whose short-term engagement limited their exposure to formal TM systems at UKZN. Staff on extended leave during the data collection period were also excluded, as they were not readily available to participate in interviews and may not have been actively engaged with current TM practices.

3.7 Data Collection

The primary data collection method for this study involved semi-structured virtual interviews, which are particularly suitable within the interpretivist paradigm as they allow participants to articulate their experiences, perceptions, and meanings in their own words (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Semi-structured interviews strike a balance between structure and flexibility,

guided by an interview schedule developed from the research objectives. This approach ensures that key topics related to TM are addressed while providing the researcher with the flexibility to probe, clarify, and explore unexpected insights raised by participants (Vecchi, Piana, Feola & Crudele, 2021).

Interviews were conducted virtually using Zoom and Microsoft Teams, a decision justified by the geographic dispersion of participants, cost considerations, and time constraints. Virtual platforms also create a comfortable and convenient environment for participants, enabling them to engage openly and provide rich, detailed responses (Keen & Wray, 2022; Irvine, Drew & Sainsbury, 2013). Each interview lasted approximately 20 to 40 minutes, providing sufficient time for in-depth discussion while respecting participants' professional schedules. All interviews were conducted in English, the common language of communication within the Finance Department at UKZN, ensuring clarity and consistency in data collection.

The principle of data saturation guided the data collection process, where interviews continued until no new themes or insights emerged (Saunders et al., 2018; Fusch & Ness, 2015). This sample size was sufficient to achieve saturation, allowing the study to comprehensively capture the perceptions and experiences of managers regarding TM practices. The semi-structured interview format and purposive selection of participants ensured that data collected were rich, contextually relevant, and aligned with the study's exploratory and interpretivist objectives.

In this study, semi-structured interviews provided a means to explore the nuanced experiences of managers within the Finance Department at UKZN. Conducting interviews virtually allowed participants to engage from familiar environments, facilitating honest and reflective responses. The flexibility of the semi-structured format enabled the researcher to capture both anticipated and emergent themes, reflecting the complexity of TM practices in a HE context. Conducting interviews in English ensured shared understanding and consistency, while the 20–40-minute duration was sufficient to delve into key issues without overburdening participants. This approach ensured that the data were rich, detailed, and directly aligned with the interpretivist aim of understanding participants' subjective experiences in context. In exploring perceptions of TM in the Finance Department at UKZN, the use of semi-structured interviews presented specific limitations. Participants may moderate their responses due to organisational hierarchies, fear of victimisation, or concerns about confidentiality, leading to socially desirable answers rather than candid reflections on TM practices. The flexible nature of semi-structured interviews may also lead to inconsistencies across interviews, making it difficult to systematically compare perceptions

across staff categories within the department. Additionally, data quality is highly dependent on the interviewer's skill in probing sensitive institutional issues without introducing bias. The time-intensive process of conducting and analysing interviews may further limit the number of participants, potentially narrowing the breadth and representativeness of the perspectives captured.

3.8 Data Analysis

The qualitative data collected from semi-structured interviews were analysed using thematic analysis, a widely used method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Thematic analysis allows for a flexible and systematic approach to interpret complex, context-specific experiences, making it suitable for this study under the interpretivist paradigm. The analysis was guided by six key steps to ensure rigour, transparency, and alignment with the research objectives.

The first step involved familiarisation with the data, where all audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the researcher repeatedly read the transcripts to gain a deep understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The second step was generating initial codes, during which meaningful data segments were identified and labelled to reflect significant features related to TM practices (Wong, 2008). NVivo software was employed to facilitate systematic coding and organisation of the data, enhancing efficiency, transparency and traceability of codes.

The third step involved searching for themes, in which codes with shared meanings were grouped into broader categories that reflected recurring patterns and concepts across the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The fourth step was reviewing themes, where initial themes were refined, merged, or split to ensure coherence and consistency, and were checked against the raw data to confirm their relevance and accuracy. The fifth step was defining and naming themes, in which each theme was clearly described and named to encapsulate its essence and link it to the research objectives and theoretical framework. The final step was writing up the findings, which involved interpreting the themes in relation to the research questions, literature, and contextual realities of the Finance Department at UKZN (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

In this study, thematic analysis facilitated an in-depth understanding of managers' experiences and perceptions of TM within the HE context. The six-step process enabled the researcher to systematically capture and interpret nuanced insights while maintaining alignment with the exploratory and interpretivist nature of the study. Using NVivo ensured that coding and theme

development were structured and transparent, supporting the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. By linking emergent themes to both the research questions and the organisational context, the analysis provided rich, contextualised insights into the challenges, strategies, and perceptions surrounding TM practices in the Finance Department at UKZN. This method allowed the researcher to highlight both shared and divergent experiences, producing a comprehensive picture of managerial practices and their implications within a South African HE setting.

3.9 Data Quality (Trustworthiness)

Ensuring data quality in qualitative research is essential to establishing the credibility and rigour of findings. In qualitative research, trustworthiness serves a similar role to validity and reliability in quantitative studies, providing a framework to assess whether the results genuinely represent participants' perspectives and experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This study adhered to the four criteria of trustworthiness proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility was enhanced by employing multiple strategies. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to provide detailed, authentic accounts of their experiences, while member checking ensured that interpretations accurately reflected the study participants' intended meanings (Birt et al., 2016). Triangulation of data sources, although limited in scope due to the small, bounded sample, involved comparing perspectives across all ten-line managers to identify consistent themes. Transferability was addressed by providing thick, detailed descriptions of the research context, participant characteristics, and organisational environment, enabling other researchers to evaluate the applicability of findings to similar settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability, or the consistency of the research process, was maintained through an audit trail that documented all methodological decisions, including sampling rationale, data collection procedures, and coding processes, using NVivo software. This transparency allows external reviewers to trace the research steps and verify the reliability of findings (Wong, 2008). Confirmability was ensured through reflexivity, which involved acknowledging the researcher's background, assumptions, and potential biases, and maintaining reflective memos throughout data collection and analysis. By systematically applying these criteria, the study minimised subjectivity and maximised the trustworthiness of findings, demonstrating that the results are both credible and contextually grounded. Overall, these strategies ensured that the research presents a rigorous, dependable, and ethically sound exploration of TM experiences in the Finance Department at UKZN.

3.10 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are fundamental to the conduct of research, particularly in studies involving human participants. This study adhered to the ethical guidelines of UKZN and followed established principles to ensure the protection and dignity of participants. Therefore, the gatekeeper's letter in (Appendix 2) was obtained from UKZN to conduct research within the institution. Permission from the UKZN Ethics Committee (Appendix 1) was obtained, and no data was collected before the approval. Informed consent in Appendix 3 was obtained from all participants, who were provided with comprehensive information about the purpose, procedures, and expected outcomes of the study. They were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty, thereby respecting the principle of voluntary participation (Orb, Eisenhauer & Wynaden, 2001).

Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained rigorously throughout the research process. Participants' identities were protected using pseudonyms, and all identifying information was removed from transcripts and reports. Data were securely stored on password-protected devices and encrypted software to prevent unauthorised access, in accordance with UKZN data security protocols. Non-maleficence, or the principle of doing no harm, was considered by ensuring that questions posed during semi-structured interviews were non-intrusive, culturally sensitive, and relevant to participants' professional experiences.

Ethical integrity also extended to the data analysis process. Participants' narratives were treated with respect and accuracy, and interpretations were verified through reflexivity and member checking to ensure they genuinely reflected participants' perspectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). By adhering to these principles, the study ensured that participants' rights were safeguarded and that the research process met both institutional and professional ethical standards. These measures collectively underpin the credibility and legitimacy of the research, providing confidence in the integrity of the findings.

3.11 Limitations of the Study

All research studies have limitations, and this study acknowledges several factors that may have influenced the findings. Firstly, the study is context-specific, focusing solely on the Finance Department at UKZN. This bounded scope limits the generalisability of the results beyond this department or comparable HE contexts (Maxwell, 2013). However, the study aimed to provide an in-depth, exploratory understanding rather than broad generalisations, which is consistent with qualitative research principles.

Secondly, the small sample size of ten-line managers, while sufficient for achieving data saturation, may have limited the diversity of perspectives, particularly in capturing outlier experiences. Thirdly, virtual interviews, conducted on Zoom and Microsoft Teams, posed limitations in observing non-verbal cues, body language, and group dynamics that are often accessible in face-to-face interviews. While virtual interviews enhanced convenience, geographic flexibility, and comfort for participants, some nuances of interaction may have been less discernible (Irvine, Drew & Sainsbury, 2013).

Finally, researcher bias is an inherent consideration in qualitative inquiry, particularly where the researcher occupies an insider position. As a member of the Finance Department at UKZN, the researcher's positionality, professional background, and pre-existing institutional knowledge may have shaped aspects of data collection, interpretation, and analysis. While this insider status offered valuable contextual insight and facilitated access and rapport with participants, it also required careful management to minimise the influence of subjective assumptions and power dynamics.

To address this, the study employed rigorous reflexive practices, including continuous self-reflection, the maintenance of detailed audit trails, and systematic documentation of analytical decisions. Member checking was used to validate interpretations with participants, while transparent reporting of the research process enhanced the study's credibility and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015). These strategies helped ensure that participants' perspectives, rather than the researcher's personal experiences or expectations, remained central to the analysis.

Despite these limitations, the study maintained a high level of methodological rigour and transparency. The acknowledged constraints are therefore not viewed as weaknesses but as contextual factors that shape the interpretation of the findings and delimit their transferability. Within these boundaries, the study provides credible and valuable insights into TM practices within the UKZN Finance Department.

3.12 Conclusion

This chapter detailed the research methodology employed to explore line managers' perceptions and experiences of TM within the Finance Department at the UKZN. The study was underpinned by the interpretivist paradigm, which prioritises understanding subjective realities within their social and organisational contexts (Creswell, 2014). An exploratory qualitative design was adopted

to gain rich, in-depth insights into context-specific phenomena related to TM in the South African HE setting of the UKZN (Tenny, 2022).

Purposive sampling was employed to select ten-line managers, ensuring comprehensive representation of the population and allowing all managerial perspectives to be captured. Semi-structured virtual interviews, conducted in English and lasting 20–40 minutes, provided a flexible yet focused method for data collection, enabling participants to articulate experiences in their own words. Thematic data analysis, guided by a six-step process and supported by NVivo software, facilitated the systematic identification of themes and patterns, ensuring that findings were robust and grounded in participants' narratives.

Measures to ensure trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, were carefully applied through strategies such as member checking, thick description, audit trails, and reflexivity (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Ethical considerations, including informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity, confidentiality, and data security, were strictly adhered to in accordance with UKZN guidelines. Limitations related to sample size, context-specificity, virtual interviews, and researcher bias were acknowledged and mitigated where possible. Collectively, these methodological choices provided a rigorous, ethical, and contextually grounded framework, setting the stage for the presentation and discussion of findings in the next chapter.

Chapter 4

Results and Discussion

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a comprehensive integration of the research findings and their subsequent discussion, exploring the perceptions of TM within the Finance Department at UKZN. The synthesis of these two critical components results in an interpretation into a single chapter, titled "Findings and Discussion," which is designed to provide a cohesive and holistic narrative. This approach ensures that the empirical data gathered from participants is immediately contextualised, interpreted through the theoretical lens, and rigorously compared against the existing body of literature. The primary goal is to fulfil the study's objectives while maintaining a thematic structure and minimising repetition.

The analysis is structured around the three primary research objectives: determining the importance of TM, assessing the effectiveness of current TM practices, and identifying the challenges and recommendations for improvement. Throughout this integrated discussion, the findings are interpreted through the lens of Inclusive Theory, the foundational theoretical framework. Inclusive Theory, as articulated by scholars such as Barak (2015) and Shore, Cleveland, & Sanchez (2011), posits that an inclusive workplace values and ensures equitable participation, recognises the diverse capabilities of all employees, and facilitates the meaningful integration of every staff member into organisational development processes. In the context of TM, this framework moves beyond merely identifying 'high-potential' employees to underscore the importance of ensuring that development initiatives and career pathways are accessible to the full diversity of employees within the Finance Department, thereby cultivating a sense of belonging and fairness (Kaliannan, 2023).

The chapter begins by outlining the thematic structure derived from the qualitative data analysis. It then proceeds to a detailed, integrated discussion of each theme, systematically presenting the study's findings often through direct participant quotations and immediately engaging with the theoretical and empirical implications. This integrated approach enables a more in-depth examination of the nuances of participants' perceptions, particularly the interplay between formal TM policies and the lived experience of inclusivity and equity within the department. Furthermore, to ensure the discussion is current and robust, recent academic citations from 2022 to 2025 have been incorporated to broaden the comparative context and highlight contemporary trends in inclusive TM across HE and public-sector finance domains.

4.2 Thematic Structure of Findings and Discussion

The qualitative analysis of participant responses yielded a clear structure, organised into three overarching themes corresponding to the study’s research objectives. These themes, along with their associated sub-themes, provide the framework for the integrated discussion that follows.

Table 4.1: Themes and Sub-themes

Research Objective	Theme	Sub-theme
To determine the importance of talent management for the Finance Department at UKZN	Theme 1: Importance of Talent Management	Contribution to Departmental Goals
		Impact on Employee Performance and Development
To identify the benefits and effectiveness of talent management for the Finance Department at UKZN	Theme 2: Benefits and Effectiveness of Talent Management	Improved Performance and Productivity
		Employee Satisfaction and Retention
To identify the challenges of talent management for the Finance Department at UKZN	Theme 3: Challenges and Recommendations for Talent Management	Structural and Organisational Constraints
		Human Resource and Capacity Issues
	Additional Insights	Engagement and Proactive Growth

Source: Researcher’s own

4.3 Theme 1: The Importance of Talent Management

The first objective of this study sought to explore how TM is understood and valued within the UKZN Finance Department. The findings overwhelmingly suggest that TM is perceived not as a peripheral administrative function, but as a critical strategic imperative essential for both operational continuity and long-term institutional resilience. This perception is rooted in the practical realities of the department, where specialised financial expertise and institutional knowledge are vital assets. The discussion below integrates findings on the importance of TM, structured around its contribution to departmental goals and its impact on individual performance and development.

4.3.1 Contribution to Departmental Goals

The empirical evidence highlights that participants view TM as indispensable for maintaining operational stability and ensuring effective leadership succession. This finding moves beyond a generic appreciation of HR to a specific recognition of TM's role in mitigating risks associated with staff turnover and knowledge loss.

a) Finding: Succession Planning and Operational Continuity

Participants consistently identified TM as critical for operational continuity and leadership succession. The need to proactively prepare internal staff to step into higher-level roles was a recurring motif.

“Leaders should be concerned about their own growth and development so that the day we leave, we have already prepared people who will step in, and there will be no disruption. The department must be able to operate efficiently.” (P1)

This sentiment was echoed by P2, who described the department as a *“moving train” that must continue functioning efficiently even when staff leave, highlighting TM's role in safeguarding institutional performance.* P3 stressed the necessity of proactive internal staff development: *“We must grow our own timber. When vacancies arise, staff should be prepared to take over without disruption. Managers have a responsibility to train, mentor, and expose staff to higher-level opportunities.”*

Further expanding on this, P5 noted the vulnerability of sections with single-point dependencies, stating, *“If one person who has been here for twenty years leaves tomorrow, and we haven't groomed anyone to take over their specific reconciliations, the whole section stalls. We cannot afford these siloes of knowledge anymore; we need a system that forces us to share and develop.”* This underscores the urgency of moving from accidental to intentional succession. P7 reinforced this by highlighting the psychological impact on the remaining team: *“When a senior person leaves, and there is no plan, the workload on the rest of us becomes unbearable. It's not just about the work; it's about the morale. Knowing there is a pipeline makes us feel secure.”*

P8 added a dimension of institutional risk, remarking, *“In finance, errors are costly. If we bring in someone who doesn't understand our specific grant funding cycles because we didn't develop an internal successor, we risk audit findings and financial loss. Succession is a risk-mitigation strategy as much as a development one.”* This highlights that TM is not merely a 'soft' HR initiative but a hard-nosed financial necessity. P10 also commented on the speed of transition: *“An internal*

person developed through TM already has the trust of the stakeholders. They don't need six months to prove themselves; they have already built that credibility during their development phase."

These responses reveal anxiety over fragile institutional memory. The *'moving train'* (P2) and *'growing our own timber'* (P3) metaphors suggest participants see the department as an organism needing constant renewal. P5's *"siloes of knowledge"* indicate fragmented expertise, where one departure can trigger systemic failure, highlighting a need for collective resilience. P8's focus on *"audit findings"* elevates TM to a core governance issue. Consensus shows that without a robust, inclusive succession plan, the department remains vulnerable. This vulnerability is not just operational; it is existential, as the department's ability to fulfil its mandate is directly tied to the continuity of its expertise.

"Growing timber takes time and care. You can't just plant a seed and expect a tree tomorrow. TM is the process of watering and nurturing that talent over the years so that when the old trees are harvested, the forest remains strong. If we don't invest now, we'll be left with a wasteland," elaborated Participant 4 (P4) on the *"timber"* metaphor. *"When you develop someone from within, you aren't just getting a worker; you're getting an ambassador. They know the culture, they know the people, and they are loyal to the mission. You can't buy that on the open market,"* P4 added, providing a perspective on institutional loyalty.

P4's responses deepen the understanding of *"growing our own timber."* P4's *"wasteland"* warning highlights the long-term consequences of neglecting talent development. P4's *"ambassador"* concept suggests that internal development builds social and cultural capital that is unique to the institution. These insights indicate that participants view TM as a long-term investment in the department's *"ecosystem."* An inclusive approach ensures that this nurturing is available to all, creating a diverse and resilient *"forest"* of talent.

b) Discussion: Strategic Imperative and Inclusive Succession

The emphasis on succession planning and *"growing our own timber"* (P4) aligns with established literature that positions TM as a strategic function designed to preserve organisational memory and ensure continuity (Clunies, 2007). However, interpreting this finding through Inclusive Theory adds a crucial layer of nuance. The participants' focus on internal preparation suggests an implicit understanding that relying on external recruitment is not only disruptive but also risks overlooking the diverse talent pool already existing within the department.

From an inclusive perspective, effective succession planning is not merely about filling future vacancies; it is about creating equitable pathways for all employees to gain the necessary

experience and training for advancement (Dries & Kaše, 2023). When development pathways such as mentoring, cross-functional exposure, and formal training are transparently and equitably distributed, the department affirms the value of diverse employee contributions and cultivates meaningful engagement across the entire workforce (Mor Barak, 2015). This proactive approach ensures that critical development opportunities are not restricted to a select few, thereby fostering inclusion while simultaneously safeguarding departmental objectives.

The challenge, as highlighted by P4, is that external recruitment often delays workflow because new staff lack institutional knowledge. This underscores the high value placed on contextual competence – the deep understanding of UKZN’s specific financial systems, regulatory environment, and institutional culture. Inclusive TM, therefore, becomes the mechanism by which this contextual competence is systematically transferred and developed across all levels of staff, ensuring that the ‘moving train’ maintains its momentum regardless of individual departures. This perspective is supported by recent research in the public sector, which stresses that upskilling existing employees is vital for creating an adaptable and resilient workforce capable of navigating complex, evolving environments (Deloitte, 2025).

The integration of participant voices reveals that “*growing our own timber*” (P4) is not just a preference but a survival mechanism. “*When we lose a veteran and hire a stranger, we spend months teaching them what we already know. It’s a drain on our time and the university’s money. If we had an inclusive development plan, that knowledge would already be distributed,*” (P5) articulated Participant 5 (P5), regarding the danger of the “*knowledge vacuum*.” This points to the economic cost of non-inclusive practices. “*If only the ‘stars’ get developed, the rest of us just wait for our turn to leave. But if the development is broad, the whole team gets stronger, and the department becomes more resilient to shocks,*” (P5) further argued, suggesting that inclusive succession builds a more robust department.

P5 highlighted the tension between exclusive and inclusive talent models. P5’s “*knowledge vacuum*” shows financial consequences of fragmented expertise. P5 critiques focusing on ‘stars,’ arguing it creates a ‘disengaged majority’ and weakens departmental capacity, aligning with Inclusive Theory’s emphasis on full participation. Participants advocate for democratised development, where ‘timber’ grows across the entire organisation. This shift from elite-focused to broad-based development is a fundamental requirement for a truly inclusive culture, ensuring that the “*moving train*” has a capable crew at every level. This democratisation of development is a key strategy for dismantling the informal hierarchies that often exclude minority groups from leadership pipelines. “*Succession isn’t just about the job description. It’s about knowing how to handle politics, stakeholders, and pressure. An inclusive system makes that ‘hidden curriculum’*

visible to everyone, not just the chosen few. That's how you build real equity," commented Participant (6) on the "hidden curriculum" of leadership. *"If we want to see diversity at the top, we have to start at the bottom. We have to make sure the entry-level staff have the same access to mentoring as the senior managers. That's what 'growing our own timber' really means,"* (P6) added.

P6's responses identify 'transparency' and 'early intervention' as inclusive succession. P6's "hidden curriculum" is a powerful metaphor for the informal knowledge that often acts as a barrier to advancement. P6's "start at the bottom" call is a reminder that inclusion is a long-term process that requires commitment at every level. The analysis suggests that the department must move beyond formal training and focus on making the 'unwritten rules' of success accessible to all. This is a core inclusive practice that ensures that talent, not just 'fit,' drives advancement.

4.3.2 Impact on Employee Performance and Development

a) Finding: Dual Responsibility and Continuous Improvement

Participants clearly articulated that TM enhances both individual performance and departmental efficiency, viewing it as a shared responsibility between management and staff.

"Managers do have a responsibility to identify what the training needs are, so that they are ready to move to the next level. It's also for the staff members to put in the effort. It's an investment on your part." (P1)

This dual perspective was reinforced by P2, who noted that TM is a combination of managerial responsibility and personal initiative, encouraging employees to pursue further studies and challenging tasks. P3 emphasised that TM heightens awareness of career opportunities among both managers and employees, fostering proactive engagement. Furthermore, P6 and P9 consistently underscored that TM cultivates a culture of continuous improvement, develops competence at all levels, and empowers staff to take ownership of their career growth.

When the university pays for my degree, I feel a deep sense of obligation to perform better. It's not just about the certificate; it's about the fact that they believed in me enough to invest. That belief is what drives my performance," (P8), expanding on the "investment" aspect. This highlights the emotional and motivational power of inclusive development. *"Continuous improvement isn't just a buzzword; it's what we do every day. If I'm not learning something new, I'm falling behind. TM provides the structure that keeps me moving forward,"* (P8) added.

“Sometimes staff don’t even know what they’re capable of until a manager points it out and gives them a chance. Inclusive TM is about finding that potential in everyone, not just the ones who shout the loudest,” (P9), regarding the role of managers in identifying ‘hidden’ talent. This reinforces management's proactive role in fostering equity. *“Being given a difficult project was the best thing that happened in my career. It forced me to grow and showed me I could handle more than I thought. That’s what real TM feels like,”* (P9) also commented on the impact of challenging tasks.

P9 notes that talent is often latent, requiring active “discovery,” an inclusive practice to find potential beyond the obvious “stars.” This challenges managers to be more observant and less biased. P9’s experience with “*challenging tasks*” shows that development, while uncomfortable, is necessary. Therefore, an inclusive TM model must use fair “*stretch assignments*” to create a system that is both nurturing and challenging, driven by managers trained to unlock potential in everyone. This active ‘talent scouting’ by managers is a critical, inclusive intervention that disrupts the ‘halo effect’ and ensures that quiet contributors are not overlooked. It requires managers to move beyond their ‘comfort zones’ and engage with the full diversity of their teams.

“The university can provide the door, but I have to walk through it. Inclusivity means the door is open for everyone, but the performance comes from the individual's drive to grow. It’s a 50/50 split,” (P10) on the ‘effort’ part of the equation. *“When I see my colleagues putting in the effort and getting promoted, it makes me want to work harder too. It’s a positive cycle of growth that lifts the whole department,”* (P10) added

b) Discussion: Fostering Proactive Engagement and Equity

The findings here resonate strongly with the concept of a psychological contract in the workplace, where the organisation invests in the employee's development, and the employee reciprocates with effort and commitment (Eisenberger et al., 1986). The recognition that TM is an "investment" (P1) signals that employees understand the reciprocal nature of this relationship.

The integration of findings and discussion reveals that this dual responsibility is a key mechanism for inclusive practice. When managers actively identify training needs, they perform a crucial inclusive function: ensuring that development is tailored and accessible. However, the expectation for staff to "put in the effort" ensures that development is not passively received but actively pursued, fostering a culture of self-efficacy and proactive growth.

From an Inclusive Theory perspective, equitable access to mentoring and development enables all employees, regardless of tenure or hierarchical level, to participate meaningfully in achieving

departmental objectives. This is where TM transcends its role as a mere performance tool and becomes a vehicle for enhancing organisational equity and participation (Dries & Kaše, 2023). By making development a continuous, visible process, the department signals that every employee's potential is valued. This continuous development is particularly vital in the finance sector, which is rapidly evolving due to technological advancements such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) and automation. Recent literature suggests that successful organisations must balance fast technological change with inclusive practices, ensuring that AI-driven HR strategies do not inadvertently exclude employees who require upskilling to remain relevant (Lazar, 2025).

4.4 Theme 2: Benefits and Effectiveness of Talent Management

4.4.1 Improved Performance and Productivity

The most immediate and frequently cited benefit of TM, according to the participants, is the direct improvement in departmental performance and productivity. This improvement is largely attributed to the strategic development and leveraging of internal human capital, particularly the deep well of institutional knowledge held by long-serving employees.

a) Finding: Leveraging Institutional Knowledge and Internal Networks

Participants strongly articulated that internal talent development is a superior mechanism for enhancing productivity compared to external recruitment, primarily due to the immediate availability of contextual competence.

“Because our internal candidate has institutional knowledge, they’re able to hit the ground running, whereas when you bring someone from outside... even those under them have to end up training them.” (P1)

This perspective was reinforced by P3, who added, *“...internal promotions allow staff to leverage institutional knowledge, networks, and skills to maintain efficiency.”* The consensus among participants P4–P10 was that internal talent development ensures continuity, significantly reduces onboarding time, and preserves departmental memory, all of which are critical drivers of productivity in a complex financial environment. P2 further observed that assigning challenging tasks and supporting further studies prepares staff for higher-level responsibilities, directly increasing efficiency by expanding the capacity of the existing workforce.

The analysis of P1 and P1's responses identifies ‘social capital’ and ‘error-reduction’ as key benefits of internal TM. P1’s focus on ‘networks’ suggests that efficiency in the Finance

Department is not just about individual skill but about the ability to navigate complex interdepartmental relationships. P1's mention of 'pitfalls' and 'accuracy' highlights that institutional knowledge is a safeguard against costly mistakes. These insights suggest that productivity in this context is a social and systemic phenomenon, not just a technical one. An inclusive TM system that promotes from within is therefore not just rewarding loyalty; it is actively preserving the 'connective tissue' that makes the department function smoothly. This preservation of internal networks is vital for navigating the bureaucratic complexities inherent in a large public university. It ensures that 'the right hand knows what the left hand is doing,' reducing duplication and enhancing collective impact.

"When I see the department using our own people to solve problems instead of hiring expensive consultants, it makes me feel like my expertise is valued. It makes me want to work harder because I know I am part of the solution," noted (P2), regarding the motivational benefit of internal leveraging. This links productivity directly to employee valuation. *"The train doesn't stop for new passengers. Internal candidates are already on the train; they just move to a different seat. That's why we are more productive with internal development,"* (P2) commented on the "moving train" once more.

P2's response is a powerful reminder of the 'valuation effect.' When internal expertise is prioritised over external consultants, it sends a strong signal of respect and trust. This boost to morale translates directly into increased effort, a clear example of the link between inclusion and productivity. P2's "moving seat" metaphor elegantly summarises the efficiency of internal moves. The analysis indicates that participants view internal development as a 'win-win': it is more efficient for the department and more rewarding for the staff. The challenge for UKZN is to ensure that the 'seats' are available and that the path to them is fair and transparent for everyone on the 'train.' This 'win-win' dynamic is the hallmark of a high-performance, inclusive culture. It aligns individual aspirations with institutional needs, creating a powerful engine for growth.

"Every time we hire from outside, we pay a 'learning tax.' We pay for their mistakes, we pay for their training, and we pay for the lost time. Internal TM is about avoiding that tax by investing in the people who already know the business. It's just smart finance," reflected (P3) on the 'cost of learning.' *"Productivity is about trust. I can work faster with someone I've known for five years because we have a shorthand. Internal development preserves that trust and keeps the speed of the department high,"* (P3) added.

P3 responses provide a clear economic and social rationale for internal development. P3's

“*learning tax*” is a vivid way to describe the hidden costs of external recruitment. P3’s “*shorthand*” metaphor highlights the value of the ‘relational capital’ that is built over time. These insights suggest that participants view internal development as a primary driver of ‘operational excellence.’ An inclusive TM system that facilitates these internal moves is therefore a key strategy for enhancing the department’s ‘competitive advantage.’

b) Discussion: The Strategic Value of Contextual Competence

The findings underscore that in a specialised environment like a university Finance Department, institutional knowledge is arguably the most valuable form of human capital. This knowledge encompasses not only technical financial skills but also an understanding of UKZN’s specific governance structures, historical budget allocations, internal political landscape, and informal operational processes. This contextual competence cannot be quickly acquired by external hires, leading to the observed delays and the burden of training new staff.

The effectiveness of TM, therefore, lies in its ability to systematically capture, transfer, and expand this institutional knowledge. When TM practices, such as structured mentoring, cross-training, and internal promotion, are implemented, they act as conduits for knowledge transfer, ensuring that the department’s operational efficiency is maintained and enhanced (Dube & Ngulube, 2013). This internal focus is particularly strategic given the current global finance talent shortage, where 83% of financial executives report experiencing a lack of skilled talent (Work for Impact, 2025). By "growing their own timber," the UKZN Finance Department is not only addressing its immediate needs but is also building resilience against external market pressures.

From the perspective of Inclusive Theory, the emphasis on internal development ensures that the benefits of enhanced productivity are equitably distributed. When development opportunities are accessible to all employees, each individual is empowered to contribute effectively to organisational performance. This approach removes barriers and creates equitable pathways for growth, ensuring that the benefits of talent are widely distributed rather than concentrated among a select few (Mor Barak, 2015). This fosters a collective sense of ownership over departmental success.

The act of assigning challenging tasks is a form of developmental inclusion. It signals trust in the employee’s potential and provides the necessary stretch assignments that accelerate growth. This is a practical application of the Inclusive Theory principle of recognition of diverse capabilities, where the organisation actively seeks to identify and utilise the unique strengths of every employee, thereby maximising collective output (Shore et al., 2011). The resulting improvement

in performance is not just a sum of individual efforts but a product of a cohesive, well-integrated, and equitably developed team.

“When everyone feels they have a role to play in the department’s success, the productivity takes care of itself. We don’t need to be micromanaged because we are all invested in the outcome. That’s the real benefit of an inclusive talent system,” reflected (P4), on the power of inclusive productivity. This aligns with the idea that inclusion fosters intrinsic motivation.

“One well-trained person can lift a whole team. If we have an inclusive system where everyone is getting developed, that effect is multiplied across the whole department. The productivity doesn’t just add up; it grows exponentially,” commented (P5) on the ‘multiplier effect’ of inclusion. *“Inclusion means we don’t waste any talent. We find the person who is good at data, the person who is good at people, and the person who is good at systems, and we develop them all. That’s how you build a powerhouse department,”* (P5) added.

P5 responses identify ‘synergy’ and ‘specialisation’ as key benefits of inclusive TM. P5’s *“multiplier effect”* highlights the collective impact of individual growth. P5’s *“powerhouse”* vision suggests that inclusion is the strategy for maximising the department’s ‘human potential.’ These insights indicate that participants view inclusion as the key to ‘unlocking’ the full capacity of the workforce. An inclusive TM system is therefore not just about fairness; it is about ‘performance optimisation.’

4.4.2 Employee Satisfaction and Retention

The second major benefit identified by the study is the strong link between effective TM and positive employee outcomes, specifically motivation, satisfaction, and long-term retention. Participants clearly stated that visible investment in their careers directly translates into loyalty and commitment to the institution.

a) Finding: Visible Career Progression Fosters Trust and Loyalty

Participants directly linked the presence of effective TM practices to enhanced motivation, job satisfaction, and reduced turnover intention. The visibility of successful career trajectories within the department was a powerful motivator.

P1 noted that the career trajectory of a colleague who started in student fees demonstrated that *“opportunities for growth and advancement are real within the university,”* giving hope to many staff.

P2 and P3 highlighted that visible career progression fosters trust in management, commitment, and loyalty. P4 and P10 further emphasised that recognition, mentoring, and structured career pathways improve morale and reduce turnover. This suggests that employees view TM as a critical component of the psychological contract, the unwritten expectations between the employee and the organisation.

“When I see someone I’ve worked with for years move up to a management role, it’s a celebration for all of us. It shows that the system works and that we aren’t just cogs in a machine. It makes me want to stay and see where my own journey leads,” (P6). This highlights the communal aspect of visible progression. *“Loyalty is a two-way street. If the university shows loyalty to me by developing my skills, I show loyalty to them by staying and giving my best. It’s that simple,”* (P6) added.

The analysis of P6 and P6's responses brings out the social and ethical dimensions of retention. P6's success in an inclusive system boosts the morale of the entire team. P6's *“two-way street”* metaphor articulates social exchange theory: retention is about perceived fairness and generosity. For UKZN, the best retention strategy is a visible, fair promotion system that strengthens commitment when staff see ‘people like them’ succeed. This collective celebration of individual success is a powerful indicator of an inclusive culture where everyone feels they have a stake in each other's growth. It transforms individual ambition into collective pride.

“A department where people are stuck in the same roles for ten years is a depressing place to work. But a department where people are moving and growing is full of energy. That energy is what keeps us here, even when the work is hard,” commented (P7) on the role of morale. *“It’s not enough to say there are opportunities; we need to see the path. When the path is structured, it removes the fear of being overlooked. That security is a major reason why I stay,”* (P7) reinforced the importance of structured pathways.

Participant 7 highlights that TM impacts the department's ‘affective’ state and provides *“security.”* An inclusive TM system provides psychological safety and hopes for long-term commitment. Retention results from a positive emotional climate and a clear, fair career structure. This psychological safety is essential for fostering innovation and risk-taking, as employees feel secure enough to challenge the status quo and propose new ideas. It fosters a culture of ‘continuous renewal,’ where the department constantly evolves and grows.

“Every time a good person leaves, we lose more than just a body. We lose a piece of our history and a piece of our heart. TM is about keeping that heart whole by making sure people have a reason to stay,” reflected (P8) on the ‘cost of turnover.’ *“Retention is not about trapping people;*

it's about making them want to stay. An inclusive system is the best 'retention tool' because it makes you feel like you belong. And you don't leave where you belong," (P8) added.

P 8 responses provide a poignant perspective on retention. P8's "*piece of our heart*" metaphor highlights the emotional impact of turnover. P8's "*sense of belonging*" is the ultimate goal of an inclusive culture. These insights suggest that participants view retention as a product of 'emotional connection' and 'institutional belonging.' An inclusive TM system that fosters these connections is therefore the most effective strategy for building a stable and committed workforce.

b) Discussion: Inclusive Practices as Drivers of Retention

These findings align with extensive literature demonstrating that development opportunities significantly enhance employee engagement and organisational commitment (Bhatnagar, 2013). However, the interpretation through Inclusive Theory provides a deeper understanding of why this link is so strong in the UKZN Finance Department.

Inclusive Theory interprets these positive outcomes as products of fair and equitable practices. When employees perceive that the advancement system is transparent and accessible to all, they feel valued, included, and able to actively participate in the organisation's success (Mor Barak, 2015). The example cited by P1, a colleague's successful journey from a junior role, is a powerful demonstration of procedural justice and the reality of meritocracy. This visibility is crucial; it transforms abstract policy into concrete, attainable goals, reinforcing a sense of hope and commitment among the wider workforce.

"Being included in talent development makes me feel like I belong at UKZN. It's not just a job anymore; it's my professional home. You don't leave your home easily," noted (P8), regarding the impact of inclusion on the "*sense of belonging*." This emotional connection is a powerful deterrent to turnover. *"When the system is fair, the competition for roles is healthy. It's not about who you know; it's about what you can do. That fairness is what keeps the best people from leaving,"* (P8) added.

Participant 8 reveals that inclusion fosters affective commitment. P8's "*professional home*" metaphor indicates high-level engagement. P8's focus on 'healthy competition' calls for meritocracy; top performers fear bias, not competition. An inclusive TM system ensuring a level playing field is the best way to retain high-quality talent by creating a fair and rewarding environment. This sense of belonging is a powerful competitive advantage in the war for talent, as it creates a bond that is difficult for other organisations to break. It turns 'employees' into 'stewards' of the institution's future.

“A department that is known for developing its people becomes a magnet for talent. People stay because they know they are in the best place for their careers. Inclusivity builds that reputation, and that reputation is what keeps us here,” commented (P9) on the ‘reputation’ of the department. *“When the university invests in me, I feel like I have a future here. That future is what I’m loyal to. Inclusive TM is about giving everyone a future,”* (P9) added.

P9 responses identify ‘employer branding’ and ‘future-focus’ as key drivers of retention. P9’s *“magnet for talent”* highlights the external benefits of an inclusive culture. P9’s ‘future’ focus suggests that retention is about ‘hope’ and ‘opportunity.’ These insights indicate that participants view inclusive TM as a strategy for building a ‘high-reputation’ and ‘future-ready’ department. Inclusion is therefore the key to both attracting and keeping the best talent.

4.5 Theme 3: Challenges and Recommendations for Talent Management

The third objective of this study was to examine the key challenges associated with implementing and sustaining TM practices within the UKZN Finance Department. While the preceding sections established the perceived importance and benefits of TM, this section critically analyses the systemic and human factors that hinder its effectiveness. Interpreting these challenges through the lens of Inclusive Theory reveals that most barriers fundamentally undermine equitable access and participation, thereby limiting the transformative potential of TM initiatives (Mor Barak, 2015). The discussion is structured around two primary sub-themes: structural and organisational constraints, and human resource and capacity issues, followed by a synthesis of additional insights.

4.5.1 Structural and Organisational Constraints

Despite strategic recognition of TM, participants consistently identified structural and systemic challenges that severely compromise its effectiveness, particularly in technology integration and the rigidity of career pathways.

a) Finding: Disconnected Systems and Static Processes

A significant finding was the perception that the existing TM infrastructure is fragmented and fails to support strategic, data-informed decision-making.

“The platform is essentially a digital filing cabinet; we log our development conversations, but there’s no evidence the data is ever synthesised into actionable reports for strategic decision making,” noted (P1). Rigid processes compound this technological disconnect. *“Our career progression paths are too prescriptive, almost like a fixed ladder. It doesn’t account for cross-functional potential, and the succession pipeline feels more like a formality than a living strategy,”*

P1 highlighted. *“A completely static process,”* P1 described the TM process, noting the failure of the system to integrate with the learning management platform, meaning identified skill gaps never automatically translate into targeted training recommendations.

“I have my performance review in one system, my training records in another, and my leave in a third. Nothing talks to each other. How can management decide for me if they can’t see the whole picture? It feels like we are flying blind,” (P2) elaborated on the frustration of ‘data siloes.’ This lack of integration is a major barrier to strategic TM. *“The ‘digital filing cabinet’ is where dreams go to die. We put in all this effort to document our goals, but if no one ever looks at them to create opportunities, what’s the point? It becomes a box-ticking exercise,”* (P2) added.

P2 reveals cynicism regarding technological tools. P2’s *“flying blind”* suggests TM is perceived as guesswork. P2’s *“Where Dreams Go to Die”* critiques the ‘box-ticking’ culture that damages morale. An inclusive TM system needs an integrated, responsive platform turning data into action. Digital transformation must make the system work for people. This technological gap is a significant barrier to achieving the department’s strategic goals, as it prevents managers from having a holistic view of the talent available to them. It also creates an ‘information asymmetry’ that can be exploited by those with better informal connections.

“In a modern finance department, we need people who understand both accounting and IT. But the system only sees you as an accountant. If you want to move into a systems role, there is no path. The ladder is too narrow,” (P3) commented on the rigidity of the ladder.’ This highlights the need for a more flexible, lattice-like career structure. *“The world is moving at 100 miles an hour, but our TM process only moves once a year. By the time we identify a skill gap, it’s already too late. We need a dynamic, real-time system,”* (P3) reinforced, regarding the ‘static’ nature of the process.

P3 identifies ‘narrowness’ and ‘slowness’ as structural barriers. P3’s focus on ‘cross-functional’ needs reflect the modern workplace. P3’s *“100 miles an hour”* highlights the disconnect between operations and slow HR processes. To be inclusive, TM must move from a ‘ladder’ to a ‘lattice’ model for non-linear growth and a ‘continuous’ cycle for real-time development. This agility is crucial for navigating the rapid changes in the financial and technological landscape. It requires a fundamental shift in how the organisation thinks about ‘roles’ and ‘careers.’

“The system is so clunky that managers just avoid it. They do the minimum to get the form signed. If we want real TM, we need a system that is easy to use and actually helpful. Right now, it’s just a hurdle,” (P4). Participant 4 reflected on the ‘bureaucratic burden.’ *“Static systems produce static*

results. If we want a dynamic department, we need a dynamic platform. One that suggests training, alerts managers to potential, and keeps the conversation alive all year,” (P4) added.

P4 responses highlight the ‘user experience’ of TM. P4’s “*hurdle*” metaphor is a powerful description of how poor technology can undermine policy. P4’s “*dynamic platform*” vision is a call for a more proactive and automated system. These insights suggest that the department's technological failures are a major ‘inclusive barrier,’ as they discourage engagement and prevent the systematic identification of talent. An inclusive system must be ‘user-friendly’ for all, regardless of their technical proficiency.

b) Discussion: The Barrier of Systemic Inflexibility

The structural deficiencies described by the participants, particularly the reliance on static systems and disconnected data, directly impede the shift from reactive administration to proactive, data-informed strategy (Mukwawaya, 2019). This is a critical failure point for inclusive TM. Inclusive Theory posits that organisational structures must be intentionally designed to facilitate broad access and flexibility; otherwise, the TM framework risks becoming an exclusive mechanism that favours a select few and perpetuates systemic inequities (Mor Barak, 2015).

“If the system is too complicated to use, the only people who benefit are the ones who have the time to sit and figure it out. That’s usually not the people on the front lines. A non-inclusive system creates barriers instead of removing them,” (P5). Participant 5 articulated regarding the “*exclusion by design*.” This is a powerful critique of bureaucratic complexity. *“Inflexibility is the enemy of diversity. If we only have one way to succeed, we only get one kind of leader. We need a system that can handle different backgrounds and different ways of growing,”* (P5) added.

P5 identifies ‘complexity’ and ‘uniformity’ as barriers. P5’s “*exclusion by design*” suggests bureaucratic hurdles affect those with less institutional power. P5’s link between ‘inflexibility’ and ‘lack of diversity’ shows that ‘one-size-fits-all’ paths favour ‘one-size-fits-all’ employees. Truly inclusive TM must be simple and flexible. The department must ‘de-bureaucratise’ processes for accessibility. This de-bureaucratism is not just about efficiency; it is a fundamental act of inclusion that empowers every employee to take charge of their own development. It requires a ‘human-centred’ approach to system design.

“When the system is rigid, the managers become the gatekeepers. If they like you, they find a way around the rules. If they don’t, they use the rules to stop you. Inclusivity is about taking that power away from the gatekeepers and giving it back to the system,” (P6). Participant 6 commented on the ‘power of the gatekeepers.’ *“A fair system does not need a ‘champion’ to make it work. It should work for everyone, automatically. That’s what we are missing,”* (P6) added.

P6 responses provide a stark warning about ‘managerial bias.’ P6’s “*gatekeeper*” metaphor highlights how rigidity can actually strengthen informal networks. P6’s “*automatic*” vision is a call for systemic fairness. These insights suggest that the department's structural challenges are actively undermining its inclusive goals. To be truly inclusive, the TM system must be ‘bias-resistant’ by design, reducing the reliance on individual managerial discretion.

4.5.2 Human Resource and Capacity Issues

The findings point to a reactive, rather than proactive, approach to TM implementation, often constrained by timing and resource limitations.

a) Finding: Reactive Implementation and Resource Scarcity

This reactive cycle leads to suboptimal outcomes, where training is rushed and potentially less effective. Participant 1 noted that line managers should proactively identify training needs, while Participant 1 suggested that staff require additional guidance and orientation on TM processes. The collective experience of P1–P10 cited timing issues, financial constraints, and insufficient managerial support as obstacles to effective TM.

“By October, everyone is trying to finish their audits and their year-end reconciliations. That’s the exact time HR decides we need to go on a three-day training course. It’s impossible. We either miss the training or we fall behind on the work. It’s a lose-lose situation,” (P7). Participant 7 expanded on the ‘end-of-year scramble.’ This highlights the lack of alignment between HR and departmental operations. *“Reactive training is just box-ticking. You don’t learn anything because your mind is on the work you are missing. Real development needs to be spread out when we actually have the capacity to learn,”* (P7) added.

P7 identified a failure in ‘operational alignment.’ P7’s “*lose-lose*” scenario shows how poor timing turns a benefit into a burden. P7’s “*box-ticking*” suggests reactive training has no developmental value. Currently, the department ‘does TM to’ employees; an inclusive approach requires consulting staff on scheduling to ensure they have the ‘mental bandwidth’ to learn. This operational misalignment is a significant drain on institutional resources and a major source of employee frustration. It turns ‘development’ into a “*stressor*.”

“We are always told there is no money for training, but then we see thousands being spent on external consultants to do the work we could have done if we were trained. It’s a short-sighted way to run a department. Inclusive TM is about spending that money on us, for the long term,” (P8). Participant 8 commented on the ‘financial barrier.’ *“Resource scarcity is an excuse for poor planning. If we planned better, we could use our internal resources more effectively. We have the talent; we just don’t have the support,”* (P8) added.

P8 responses highlight the ‘opportunity cost’ of poor TM. P8’s “*short-sighted*” critique is a powerful indictment of the current spending priorities. P8’s “*excuse*” observation suggests that participants see a lack of commitment, not just a lack of funds. These insights indicate that for UKZN, the ‘resource challenge’ is as much about ‘mindset’ as it is about ‘money.’ An inclusive approach requires a strategic shift in how resources are allocated, prioritising internal development over external fixes.

4.5.3 Theme 4: Additional Insights - Engagement and Proactive Growth

The final theme synthesises additional insights provided by participants, focusing on the ideal state of TM, one where it is fully integrated into the daily fabric of the department. These insights serve as implicit recommendations for enhancing the inclusivity and effectiveness of TM.

a) Finding: Integration into Routine Activities

Participants stressed that TM is most effective when integrated into routine departmental activities rather than treated as an occasional, isolated initiative.

“We need to talk about it throughout the year and not only once in a while. I enjoy training people and letting them go to conferences,” (P1). Participant 1 reflected that ongoing mentoring, workshops, and networking opportunities are critical for staff development and leadership preparation. The collective view of P1–P10 emphasised that continuous engagement ensures equitable access to opportunities, reinforcing inclusion and enhancing organisational resilience.

“Development should be like a heartbeat, steady and constant. Not like a lightning strike that happens once a year. When it’s part of the routine, it’s not scary, and it’s not a burden. It’s just how we work,” (P2). This is a beautiful metaphor for embedded TM. *“The best learning happens in the corridors and the coffee breaks. We need more informal spaces where we can learn from each other. That’s where the real inclusion happens,”* (P2) reinforced, on the networking aspect.

P2 identified ‘normalisation’ and ‘informality’ as keys. P2’s “*heartbeat*” suggests routine development loses its ‘exclusionary’ feel. P2’s focus on ‘informal spaces’ highlights informal learning. The department should move beyond formal workshops to create ‘informal learning spaces’ in the ‘flow of work.’ The ideal TM system is ‘invisible’ because it is integrated into the daily routine. This integration ensures that development is not seen as an ‘extra’ task, but as a core component of professional experience. It fosters a ‘culture of curiosity’ where everyone is constantly learning and sharing.

“A good mentor is like a mirror. They show you your potential, and they show you your gaps. But that only works if the relationship is ongoing. A once-off workshop can’t do that. We need a system

that supports these long-term relationships,” (P3). Participant 3 on the ‘power of mentoring.’ *“Networking is not just for the ‘important’ people. Everyone needs a network to succeed. An inclusive department helps everyone build those connections, across sections and across campuses,”* (P3) added.

P3 responses highlight the value of ‘relational development.’ P3’s “*mirror*” metaphor is a beautiful description of the mentoring process. P3’s “*network for everyone*” call is a fundamental, inclusive demand. These insights suggest that participants view ‘social capital’ as a key outcome of TM. An inclusive system must therefore formalise support for these informal connections, ensuring that everyone has the ‘social bridge’ they need to succeed. This is a critical strategy for dismantling the ‘silos’ that often hinder institutional effectiveness.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter integrated the study’s findings and discussion to examine perceptions of TM within the Finance Department at UKZN, guided by Inclusive Theory. The findings confirm that TM is broadly recognised as a strategic imperative for ensuring operational continuity, leadership succession, and sustained organisational improvement. Participants viewed effective TM as essential for maintaining institutional stability and enhancing long-term performance.

The study demonstrated a strong empirical relationship between effective TM practices and positive organisational outcomes. Internal talent development emerged as a key mechanism for harnessing contextual competence, thereby improving productivity and efficiency within the department. Clear and visible career progression pathways were identified as significant contributors to employee satisfaction, motivation, and retention, strengthening the psychological contract between employees and the institution. These outcomes were most evident where TM practices were perceived as transparent, fair, and equitable, aligning closely with the principles of Inclusive Theory. Despite this recognition, the study revealed several structural and operational barriers that limit the effectiveness of TM. These include fragmented and outdated HR systems, rigid career structures that restrict cross-functional mobility, and limited managerial capacity to implement TM proactively. Resource constraints, reactive approaches, and uneven managerial support further undermine equitable access to development opportunities, weakening the inclusivity of current TM practices.

Consequently, while TM is valued in principle, its strategic and inclusive potential remains constrained by systemic inflexibility. The chapter emphasises the need for a shift towards a unified, data-driven human capital management system, skills-based career pathways, proactive resource

allocation, and inclusive leadership development. Addressing these issues would enable the Finance Department to enhance employee engagement, retention, and performance. Ultimately, the study argues that inclusive TM is not merely an HR function but a strategic transformation in how the department values its workforce. By embedding equity, transparency, and development at all levels, the UKZN Finance Department can strengthen its resilience, support institutional transformation, and contribute meaningfully to the university's broader mission of excellence and social justice.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

This final chapter serves as the culmination of the research, providing a comprehensive synthesis of the study's findings, which investigated the perceptions of inclusive TM within the Finance Department at UKZN. The preceding chapters established the methodological foundation, reviewed the relevant literature, and presented an integrated discussion of the empirical results, all of which are interpreted through the critical lens of Inclusive Theory. The primary objectives of this research are to determine the importance, assess the effectiveness, and identify the challenges of TM practices, which have been systematically addressed. This concluding chapter now transitions to the broader academic and practical implications of the study. It begins with a detailed summary of the key findings, followed by an extensive discussion of the study's theoretical, empirical, and practical contributions. Furthermore, it critically examines the limitations inherent in the research design and concludes with a set of robust recommendations for both future scholarly inquiry and strategic organisational action. The purpose of this detailed exposition is to ensure that the study's impact is fully articulated, providing a definitive closure to the thesis while setting a clear agenda for subsequent research and institutional development.

5.2 Summary of Key Findings

The qualitative analysis revealed a complex and nuanced understanding of TM within the UKZN Finance Department, establishing its perceived importance, effectiveness, and the systemic challenges hindering its full potential. The findings consistently positioned TM not as a peripheral HR function, but as a critical strategic imperative essential for the department's operational continuity and long-term institutional resilience. This perception is deeply rooted in the practical realities of the finance sector within a HE context, where specialised financial expertise and deep institutional knowledge are indispensable assets.

The study confirmed that TM is viewed as vital for ensuring effective leadership succession and mitigating the risks associated with staff turnover and knowledge loss. Participants overwhelmingly emphasised the necessity of proactively preparing internal staff the concept of "growing our own timber" to step into higher-level roles without disruption. This internal focus is driven by the high value placed on contextual competence, which encompasses an understanding of UKZN's specific financial systems, regulatory environment, and institutional culture. The findings demonstrated that internal promotions, facilitated by effective TM, allow staff to leverage

this institutional knowledge, networks, and skills, leading to immediate productivity gains and reduced onboarding time compared to external recruitment (Dube & Ngulube, 2013).

The research established a strong link between effective TM practices and positive employee outcomes, particularly enhanced motivation, job satisfaction, and long-term retention. The visibility of successful career trajectories within the department was identified as a powerful motivator, fostering trust in management and reinforcing the psychological contract between the employee and the organisation (Eisenberger et al., 1986). This visibility transforms abstract policy into concrete, attainable goals, which is a crucial element of procedural justice and a key driver of employee commitment (Mor Barak, 2015). The effectiveness of TM, therefore, was found to be directly measurable in the stability of the workforce and the preservation of institutional knowledge.

Despite the clear recognition of TM's importance and benefits, the study identified significant systemic and human factors that compromise its effectiveness and inclusivity. The challenges are primarily rooted in structural constraints, such as the reliance on fragmented, static HR systems that fail to support strategic, data-informed decision-making. The TM platform was described as a "digital filing cabinet," indicating a technological disconnect that prevents the synthesis of development data into actionable reports. This technological inflexibility is compounded by rigid, prescriptive career paths that participants felt were too much like a "fixed ladder," failing to account for cross-functional potential and limiting employees' ability to explore diverse roles (Mukwawaya, 2019).

In addition to structural issues, the study highlighted human resource and capacity deficits, particularly concerning the reactive implementation of TM initiatives. Training opportunities were often clustered at the end of the fiscal year, a "scramble" that leads to suboptimal outcomes and potentially wasted resources. This reactive approach, coupled with insufficient managerial support and a lack of comprehensive staff orientation on TM processes, creates an uneven playing field. Interpreted through Inclusive Theory, this reactivity disproportionately affects employees with less flexibility or institutional capital, thereby constraining equitable access to development opportunities and limiting the transformative potential of TM for the broader workforce (Mor Barak, 2015). The findings collectively underscore that, while the intent to manage talent exists, its execution is hindered by systemic inflexibility and a lack of proactive, continuous engagement.

5.2.1 Addressing Research Objectives

The research objectives of this study were as follows;

- To determine the importance of talent management for the Finance Department at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.
- To identify the benefits of talent management for the Finance Department at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.
- To identify the challenges of talent management for the Finance Department at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

5.2.1.1 The importance of Talent Management for the Finance Department at the University of KwaZulu-Natal

The findings reflected that TM was perceived as important for operational continuity, succession planning and long-term sustainability of the institution, where institutional knowledge and expertise are considered to be of paramount importance. Participants reiterated the vital need for internal staff development captured in their notion of “growing our own timber”, to alleviate the risks of staff turnover and institutional knowledge loss.

5.2.1.2 The benefits of Talent Management for the Finance Department at the University of KwaZulu-Natal

The Participants highlighted that the improved employee motivation, job satisfaction, and retention were strongly linked to the benefits of TM. The effectiveness of TM was then related to workforce stability, reduced onboarding time and the preservation of critical talent within the institution’s Finance Department. The collective view of the participants emphasised that continuous engagement ensures equitable access to opportunities, reinforcing inclusion and enhancing organisational resilience.

5.2.1.3 The Challenges of Talent Management for the Finance Department at the University of KwaZulu-Natal

The discussion highlighted significant challenges hindering the effectiveness and inclusivity of TM within the department. This alludes to fragmented HR systems that do not support TM initiatives within the department, a lack of training and development initiatives, inadequate senior managerial support and limited TM processes awareness by the employees. Participants emphasised that TM is most effective when integrated into routine departmental activities rather than treated as an occasional, isolated initiative

5.3 Contributions of the Study

This research makes several substantial contributions to the academic discourse and professional practice in the fields of HRM, TM, and HE administration. These contributions are categorised into theoretical, empirical, and practical domains, each providing a distinct advancement in knowledge.

5.3.1 Theoretical Contribution: Extending Inclusive Theory to Public Sector TM

The most significant theoretical contribution of this study lies in the systematic application and extension of Inclusive Theory to the analysis of TM within a public sector, HE context. While Inclusive Theory, as championed by scholars such as Mor Barak (2015) and Shore, Cleveland, & Sanchez (2011), is foundational to understanding diversity and inclusion, its application often remains broad. This study operationalises the theory by using its core tenets equitable participation, recognition of diverse capabilities, and fostering a sense of belonging as a diagnostic tool to evaluate the efficacy of TM processes.

The research demonstrates that the failure of TM in this context is not merely a failure of policy, but a failure of inclusive design. The finding that static HR systems and rigid career paths act as barriers is a direct theoretical contribution, illustrating how structural inflexibility fundamentally undermines the principle of equitable participation. When data is siloed and career paths are linear, the system inadvertently favours those with existing visibility or senior connections, effectively excluding diverse talent whose potential lies in non-traditional or cross-functional areas. This extends theoretical understanding of inclusion by showing that structural barriers are as potent, if not more insidious, than overt bias in limiting equitable access to developmental resources (Kaliannan, 2023).

The study contributes to the theoretical understanding of talent identification within an inclusive framework. Traditional TM theory often focuses on identifying a narrow band of "high-potential" employees (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020). In contrast, this study's findings, interpreted through Inclusive Theory, suggest that effective TM in a public institution must adopt a broad-based, developmental inclusion model. This model mandates that the organisation's focus shift from selecting the few to developing the many, ensuring that all employees receive the necessary exposure and training to contribute meaningfully. This reframing of TM from an exclusive selection process to an inclusive development strategy offers a vital theoretical counterpoint, particularly relevant for public institutions mandated to serve a diverse populace and committed to internal equity.

5.3.2 Empirical Contribution: Contextual Competence and Institutional Knowledge

Empirically, this study provides rich, contextual data that addresses a significant gap in the literature concerning the TM experiences of non-academic staff in HE. Much of the existing research on university TM focuses on the recruitment and retention of academic faculty, often overlooking the critical administrative and financial functions that ensure institutional operation (Dube & Ngulube, 2013). By focusing specifically on the Finance Department, this research provides granular evidence of the unique value proposition of internal talent.

The most compelling empirical finding is the high value placed on contextual competence the deep, tacit knowledge of UKZN's specific operational environment. The participants' strong preference for "growing our own timber" over external recruitment is not based on mere sentiment, but on a pragmatic recognition that external hires, regardless of technical skill, lack the institutional knowledge required to "hit the ground running." This finding empirically validates the notion that in complex, highly regulated environments like public university finance, institutional knowledge acts as a critical form of human capital and a significant barrier to entry for external candidates. This empirical insight is crucial for informing TM strategy, suggesting that investment in knowledge transfer and internal succession planning yields a higher return on investment than external talent acquisition in this specific context.

The study provides empirical validation for the link between procedural justice in TM and employee loyalty. The qualitative data, particularly the participants' reference to visible career progression as a source of "hope" and commitment, empirically support the theoretical concept of the psychological contract (Eisenberger et al., 1986). The study demonstrates that when employees perceive the system for advancement to be transparent and accessible, a key component of procedural justice, their sense of belonging and commitment is significantly strengthened, leading to reduced turnover intention. This empirical evidence, grounded in the lived experiences of the employees, offers a powerful case study for the efficacy of inclusive practices as a retention strategy in the public sector.

5.3.3 Practical Contribution: A Roadmap for Inclusive TM Reform

The practical contribution of this research is highly significant, providing the UKZN Finance Department and similar institutions with a clear, evidence-based roadmap for strategic TM reform. The study moves beyond merely identifying problems by translating the empirical findings and theoretical interpretations into a set of actionable, strategic recommendations.

The practical recommendations address the core systemic failures identified in the research. For instance, the call for implementing a unified Human Capital Management (HCM) system directly

addresses the "digital filing cabinet" problem, offering a practical solution to integrate performance data and learning records. This integration is a necessary precursor to data-driven, equitable talent identification. Similarly, the recommendation to transition to a skills-based career architecture directly counters the rigidity of the "fixed ladder" perception. Practically, this involves developing skills taxonomies and formalising opportunities for cross-functional assignments, thereby creating non-linear, accessible pathways for diverse talent (Ly, 2025).

The practical emphasis on managerial accountability and inclusive leadership training is crucial. Managers are the frontline implementers of TM policy; their commitment is essential for success. The recommendation to mandate training and hold managers accountable for proactive, continuous development conversations directly tackles the issue of reactive implementation and inconsistent application of policy. By providing a structured framework for managerial engagement, the study offers a practical mechanism to embed inclusive practices into the department's daily operational fabric, ensuring that the benefits of TM are consistently and equitably distributed across the entire workforce. These practical contributions provide a tangible blueprint for transforming TM from a bureaucratic exercise into a strategic, inclusive function.

5.4 Recommendations for Future Research

The limitations of this study, coupled with the rich empirical data generated, provide fertile ground for several avenues of future research. These recommendations are designed to build upon the current findings, enhance generalisability, and deepen the understanding of inclusive TM in the HE and public sectors.

5.4.1 Quantitative Validation and Generalisability

The most immediate and necessary recommendation is to conduct a large-scale quantitative study to test the generalisability and statistical significance of the qualitative findings. This research should involve developing a robust survey instrument, informed by the thematic structure and key concepts identified in this study (e.g., contextual competence, procedural justice, structural inflexibility). The survey should be administered to a larger, statistically representative sample of non-academic staff across multiple departments within UKZN, or ideally, across several South African universities. Such a study would provide statistical evidence to confirm the prevalence and significance of the identified structural and human capacity challenges, moving the conclusions from contextual insight to broader empirical generalisation. For instance, a quantitative approach could measure the correlation between perceived transparency in career progression and employee retention intention, providing hard data to support the qualitative observations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

5.4.2 Longitudinal Study on Inclusive Interventions

A longitudinal study is strongly recommended to track the impact of the inclusive TM strategies proposed in this research. Should the UKZN Finance Department, or a similar institution, adopt recommendations such as implementing a unified HCM system or transitioning to a skills-based architecture, future research should monitor the effects of these interventions over a three-to-five-year period. This longitudinal approach would allow researchers to move beyond measuring perceptions to measuring actual outcomes, such as changes in employee engagement scores, reductions in staff turnover rates, improvements in the diversity of employees accessing developmental opportunities, and the time-to-fill for senior roles. This type of research is crucial for establishing the causal link between inclusive TM practices and sustainable organisational performance, providing empirical proof of concept for the theoretical model proposed in this thesis (Dries & Kaše, 2023).

5.4.3 Comparative Analysis of Stakeholder Perspectives

Future research should undertake a comparative analysis of multiple stakeholder perspectives on TM. This would involve conducting parallel qualitative studies with central HR personnel, senior executive leadership (e.g., Chief Financial Officer, Deputy Vice-Chancellors), and line managers across various departments. By triangulating the data from these different groups, researchers could gain a more complete understanding of the systemic barriers identified in this study. For example, HR's perspective on the "reactive implementation" challenge might reveal budgetary constraints or policy mandates that are invisible to the Finance Department employees. This multistakeholder approach would provide a holistic diagnosis of the TM ecosystem, enabling the development of more targeted and effective institutional-level interventions (Shore et al., 2011).

5.4.4 Exploring the Impact of Technology and AI on Inclusion

Given the rapid technological evolution in the finance sector, future research should specifically explore the impact of emerging technologies, particularly Artificial Intelligence (AI) in HR, on inclusive TM practices in HE. As suggested by Lazar (2025), the adoption of AI in talent acquisition and development presents both opportunities and risks for inclusion. Research could investigate how AI-driven tools can be leveraged to reduce human bias in talent identification and ensure equitable access to upskilling opportunities. Conversely, it is also vital to study the potential for algorithmic bias to inadvertently reinforce existing inequities, particularly in the context of a diverse workforce. This research would be critical for ensuring that technological advancements in TM are implemented in a manner that aligns with the principles of Inclusive Theory, promoting fairness and equitable participation rather than creating new forms of exclusion.

5.4.5 Cross-Cultural and Cross-Sectoral Comparative Studies

Finally, to enhance the external validity of the findings, cross-cultural and cross-sectoral comparative studies are recommended. Research could compare the TM perceptions and challenges in the UKZN Finance Department with those in a similar department in a university in a different country (for example, the United Kingdom or Australia) or with a finance department in a different public sector entity within South Africa (for example, a state-owned enterprise). Such comparisons would help to delineate which findings are universal to the public sector finance function and which are unique to the South African HE context, thereby refining the theoretical model of inclusive TM and its applicability across diverse organisational settings.

5.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has provided a critical and comprehensive analysis of TM perceptions within the UKZN Finance Department, establishing its strategic importance while highlighting the urgent need for a more inclusive and structurally robust implementation framework. By integrating empirical findings with the theoretical rigour of Inclusive Theory, the research not only contributes to scholarly understanding but also offers a practical foundation for organisational change. The future success and resilience of the Finance Department, and indeed the wider university, will depend on its willingness to transition from a reactive, fragmented approach to one that is proactively committed to the equitable development and meaningful inclusion of every member of its diverse workforce. This commitment is the essential next step in ensuring sustainable institutional performance and fostering a truly inclusive workplace. The recommendations outlined herein provide a clear pathway for both the institution to achieve this strategic transformation and for future researchers to continue building a robust, empirically grounded understanding of inclusive TM in the public sector.

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APPENDIX 1: ETHICAL CLEARANCE LETTER



23 January 2025

Mclord Lungani Qwabe (20000718)
Grad School of Bus & Leadership
Westville Campus

Dear ML Qwabe,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00008006/2024

Project title: Exploring perceptions of talent management in the Finance Department at the University of KwaZulu-Natal

Degree: Masters

Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 25 November 2024 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number.

PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

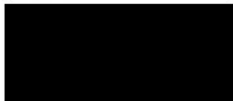
Incidents of adverse events and serious adverse events (AEs and SAEs) should be reported in writing to HSSREC, the study sponsors, and any regulatory authority (where appropriate), within 7 working days of the occurrence for local sites and 14 days for all other South African sites.

This approval is valid until 23 January 2026.

To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Health Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours sincerely,



Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)
/nng

Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban, 4000, South Africa

Telephone: +27 (0)31 260 8350/4557/3587 Email: hssrec@ukzn.ac.za Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics>

Founding Campuses: Edgewood Howard College Medical School Pietermaritzburg Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

APPENDIX 2: GATE KEEPER'S LETTER



7 November 2024

Mr McLord Lungani Qwabe (SN 200000718)
Graduate School of Business and Leadership
College of Law and Management Studies
Westville Campus UKZN
Email: 200000718@stu.ukzn.ac.za Gerwel@ukzn.ac.za SinghN1@ukzn.ac.za

Dear Mr Qwabe

RE: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

Gatekeeper's permission is hereby granted for you to conduct research at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), provided Ethical clearance has been obtained. We note the title of your research project is:

"Exploring perceptions of talent management in the Finance Department at the University of KwaZulu-Natal."

It is noted that you will be constituting your sample by conducting interviews with line managers within the Central Finance Department (Zoom, Teams or telephone interviews recommended) on the Westville campus.

Please ensure that the following appears on your notice/questionnaire:

- Ethical clearance number;
- Research title and details of the research, the researcher and the supervisor;
- Consent form is attached to the notice/questionnaire and to be signed by user before he/she fills in questionnaire;
- gatekeepers approval by the Registrar.

You are not authorized to contact staff and students using the 'Microsoft Outlook' address book. Identity numbers and email addresses of individuals are not a matter of public record and are protected according to Section 14 of the South African Constitution, as well as the Protection of Personal Information Act. For the release of such information over to yourself for research purposes, the University of KwaZulu-Natal will need express consent from the relevant data subjects. Data collected must be treated with due confidentiality and anonymity.

Yours sincerely

Mr MA TUFTS
Director Governance & Administration

Office of the Registrar

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban, 4000, South Africa
Telephone: +27 (0)31 260 7971 Email: registrar@ukzn.ac.za Website: www.ukzn.ac.za

Founding Campuses: Edgewood Howard College Medical School Pietermaritzburg Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

APPENDIX 3: CONSENT FORM

UKZN HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (HSSREC)

APPLICATION FOR ETHICS APPROVAL For research with human participants INFORMED CONSENT RESOURCE TEMPLATE

Note to researchers: Notwithstanding the need for scientific and legal accuracy, every effort should be made to produce a consent document that is as linguistically clear and simple as possible, without omitting important details as outlined below. Certified translated versions will be required once the original version is approved.

There are specific circumstances where witnessed verbal consent might be acceptable, and circumstances where individual informed consent may be waived by HSSREC.

Information Sheet and Consent to Participate in Research

Date: September, 02, 2025.

Humble greetings

My name is McLord Lungani Qwabe, student from the Graduate School of Business at the University of KwaZulu Natal with the following contact details; contact number: 031-2607308 email address: 200000718@stu.ukzn.ac.za

You are being invited to consider participating in a study that involves research in Exploring perceptions of talent management within the Finance Department at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The aim of the study is to understand how talent management is being perceived within the University of KwaZulu-Natal Finance Department. The study is expected to enrol 10-line managers. It will involve the following procedures a scheduled interview session with you where you will be required to provide your input to the semi structured interview questions (Zoom or Team) will be employed. The duration of your participation if you choose to enroll and remain in the study is expected to be not more than an hour.

The study may involve some discomforts where some of the questions may be challenging to answer. The study will provide no direct benefits to you as the participant. However, this study will provide benefits to your department in better understanding the talent management strategy being utilized within the department.

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (approval number_HSSREC/00008006/2024).

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions you may contact the researcher at (031260-7308) or the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus
Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001
Durban
4000
KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA
Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609
Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Participation in this research is voluntary, participants may withdraw participation at any point. There will be no potential consequences to the participant for withdrawal from the study and the participant may email the researcher if he/she wishes to withdraw from the study.

There are no costs to be incurred by participants as a result of participation/withdrawing in the study.

The researcher will keep the participants details confidentially by not disclosing the participants information in the study. All data received from participants will be password protected and only used for the purposes of the study.

CONSENT (Edit as required)

I have been informed about the study entitled Exploring the perceptions of talent management within the finance department at the University of KwaZulu-Natal by McLord Lungani Qwabe

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study (add these again if appropriate).

I have been given an opportunity to answer questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without affecting any of the benefits that I usually am entitled to.

I have been informed about any available compensation or medical treatment if injury occurs to me as a result of study-related procedures.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study I understand that I may contact the researcher at 031-260-7308 or 200000718@stu.ukzn.ac.za

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION
Research Office, Westville Campus
Govan Mbeki Building
Private Bag X 54001
Durban
4000
KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA Tel: 27
31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Additional consent, where applicable

BREC UKZN Oct 2008

BREC UKZN Oct 2008

I hereby provide consent to:

Audio-record my interview / focus group discussion YES / NO Video-record my
interview / focus group discussion YES / NO

Use of my photographs for research purposes YES / NO

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Witness
(Where applicable)

Date

Signature of Translator

Date (Where applicable)

APPENDIX 4: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. How do you perceive talent management in the Finance Department at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, in your view?
2. What are your thoughts about the implementation of talent management within the University?
3. Why is talent management important in the Finance Department at the University of KwaZulu-Natal?
4. How has the Finance Department benefited from talent management since its implementation?
5. What are the challenges of talent management within the Finance Department at the University of KwaZulu-Natal?
6. Do you have any suggestions on how to improve talent management in the Finance Department at the University of KwaZulu-Natal?
7. Is there anything else that you would like to add?