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Quid pro quo? The future for graduate development programmes through the lens of talent management

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ABSTRACT

The value of graduate development programmes (GDPs) from a talent management (TM) perspective is unknown. The contemporary TM literature focuses primarily on talent programmes for existing employees whereas less attention has been placed on externally recruited talent pools, in particular graduates. Attracting graduate talent is a priority for many organisations, as evidenced by the amount of investment contributed to this activity, but research on the employer's intended outcomes and expectations of participants in GDPs seems to lack coherence. To bridge this gap, this paper aims to develop a conceptual model to explicate the nature and process of GDP, using TM and the wider career literature. The model helps in our understanding of what contextual factors are important and how these factors influence policy and practice to GDPs. We also explore the value of GDPs based on the psychological contract perspective in a contemporary career system. To achieve these aims, the paper investigates how the design and agenda of GDPs may be reframed by analysing several literatures including talent pool segmentation, identity, psychological contract theory and career management. We also expand the existing TM literature by exploring the factors that directly impact the outcomes of GDPs and set future research agenda.

KEYWORDS

Talent management; psychological contract; identity; graduates; context; graduate development programmes

Introduction

Developing future leadership and talent at the workplace often involved preparing specific programmes to high-potential employees, most notably graduate development programmes (GDPs). Many firms and

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organizations hire graduates onto high-status fast-track programmes such as GDPs who are identified by organisations as future leaders (e.g. Bolander et al., 2017; Turner & Kalman, 2015). This practice is considered a critical element of Talent Management (TM), which has become a subject of considerable academic discussion and debate (e.g. Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016; McDonnell et al., 2017) and has developed as one of the fastest growing areas of academic research in management in the past decade (Collings et al., 2015; Tarique, 2021). In their latest review on TM literature, McDonnell et al. (2017) address the significant gaps in TM research to date, suggesting that scholars need to focus on tightening the nature of boundaries between theory and practice in the TM literature. Furthermore, they highlight a need for more research that looks at individual talents as the prime unit of analysis.

Although TM has developed as one of the fastest growing areas of academic research in management in the past decade (Collings et al., 2015; Tarique, 2021), there is still little research examining the factors that influence the success of TM programmes from an individual and organisational level. This paper focuses on the graduate talent pool which has had little attention to date within the TM literature and more specifically those graduates who are selected onto graduate development programmes (GDPs). For the purposes of this paper, we will use the following definition for GDPs by Prospects (2021) 'A graduate development programme is a structured training programme for newly recruited graduates, typically two years in length that provides opportunities for graduates and are run by employers to develop future leaders of their organisation.' Graduates are considered to be a key source of talent within many organisations. Thus, attracting, recruiting, developing and retaining them is seen in practice as a key TM strategy, although little academic attention has been given in the literature to university graduates as part of an organisation's TM strategy and future talent pool (McCracken et al., 2016).

Currently however, it seems that such programmes present new challenges and uncertain outcomes for graduates. This is because accurately spotting leadership potential among graduates with little or no work experience poses a challenge for organisations, which are more accustomed to identifying potential amongst their employees (Kotylar, 2018). Moreover, the demise of the GDPs has been predicted for some time due to employers wanting graduates to contribute to the bottom-line profitability within months of joining an organisation (Hayman & Lorman, 2004). More recently, Whysall et al. (2019), observed a distinct lack of work readiness amongst new graduate hires and a potential two – year lag of substandard performance before graduates become proficient. This brings into question the true value of incoming graduates when they first join organisations.

There is also a lack of research in TM that concerns the experiences, identity and attitudes of graduates named as top talent on GDPs in relation to employees outside that talent pool. A recent study found that graduates enter 'fast track' GDPs with a shared set of preconceived expectations, partially shaped by their own sense of graduate identity but also reinforced through recruitment processes (Clarke & Scurry, 2020). Highly talented individuals can be depicted by a number of characteristics and there is a growing recognition that in order to attract the best graduate talent, organisations and their respective TM practices must now account for generational characteristics and consider their attitudes, values and motivations to address their expectations (Festing & Schäfer, 2014). As a result, organisations need to pay attention to the reasons for recruiting high-potential graduates onto GDPs to prevent unrealistic expectations which may result in poor retention (Jonsson & Thorgren, 2017). GDPs however may not be beneficial for every graduate, and those graduates seeking to obtain the best start in their careers can often become frustrated and unsatisfied due to lack of match between employer vs. employee expectations (Garavan & Morley, 1997; McDermott et al., 2006). Conversely, organisations that invest in GDPs may realise that the investment is not worthwhile due to the challenges of retaining the graduate participants (Du Plessis et al., 2015) Whilst research has been conducted into graduates and their expectations (Clarke & Scurry, 2020; Jonsson & Thorgren, 2017; McCracken et al., 2016), research on the employer's intended outcomes and expectations of graduates participating on GDPs is scarce. This could lead to a mismatch of the psychological contract in terms of promises, obligations and expectations between the graduate and the employer (Jonsson & Thorgren, 2017).

A psychological contract exists only if both parties believe that the agreement is valid, that promises have been made and that considerations have been offered in exchange (Rousseau, 1995). In an organisational context, the norm of reciprocity within exchange relationships has been used as a framework for understanding mutual opinions, attitudes and behaviour (Baruch & Rousseau, 2019). Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) underlies much of the research in this area, where rules of exchange usually involve reciprocity or repayment activities so the actions of one party lead to a response or actions by the other. In their study of psychological reciprocity, Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler (2002) demonstrated the bi-directionality of the norm of reciprocity between employer and employee. In fulfilling its obligations to employees, the employer creates an obligation on the part of the employee and if the norm of reciprocity holds true, in theory, the exchange relationship between employer and employee could be viewed as an ongoing repetitive cycle.

However, if the psychological contract is breached, as in the case of a lack of match between employer vs. graduate expectations of GDPs, there may be a greater risk of attrition (McDermott et al., 2006). The purpose of the GDP from an organisation's perspective is succession planning and future leaders (Prospects, 2021). Therefore, if graduates are leaving GDPs, they are not meeting the expectations of the business. Based on this argument, we suggest that whilst graduates' expectations are not being met on GDPs – neither are the employers.

In order to align expectations on GDPs, organisations may need to take a more contingent and flexible approach when hiring graduates due to the importance of contextual factors which have often been overlooked to date in TM studies (Gallardo–Gallardo et al., 2020). It seems that GDPs have become homogenous in nature (Hayman & Lorman, 2004). This could be the result of mimetic isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) where organisations refer to imitations of GDP strategies and perceived practices of competitors, rather than focusing on their own individual practices and contextual differences that may achieve far greater successful outcomes. Specific organisational influences such as the GDP structure and HR policies and processes could also impact the overall GDP experience at an individual level. Making the connection between graduate TM definition and GDP implementation arguably highlights the need to understand the organisational characteristics and influences to know what TM approach will be most successful rather than following universal trends and fads in terms of GDPs (Baruch & Peiperl, 1997; Gallardo–Gallardo et al., 2020; Heaton et al., 2008).

This paper investigates two interconnected research questions which are, (I) What is the value of GDPs to both graduates on the programme and to organisations from a TM perspective and through a psychological contract lens? (II) How may contextual factors influence the outcome of GDPs? By doing so, we offer the following contributions to the literature. First, we offer a definition of graduate TM that has been missing from the literature to date. Our second contribution is the conceptualisation of a new model of a successful GDP cycle. We investigate the short and long term impact of participation in GDPs for both participants and the organisation.

Definition of graduate talent management

A key focus of the earlier TM literature has been ascertaining the conceptual boundaries of TM and defining TM. In their review of TM, Lewis and Heckman (2006) noted that it is difficult to come to a finite definition and conceptualisation of TM. It seems that Collings and

Mellahi (2009, p. 304) definition of TM has become the most widely adopted definition (Gallardo–Gallardo et al., 2015). They define TM as:

the systematic identification of key positions which differentially contribute to the organisation's sustainable competitive advantage, the development of a talent pool of high-potential and high-performing incumbents to fill these roles, and the development of a differentiated human resource architecture to facilitate filling these positions with competent incumbents, and to ensure their continued commitment to the organisation.

However, we argue that the Collings and Mellahi's (2019) TM definition has its roots in the Resource Based View, which adopts an internal perspective to explain how an organisation's internal resources and capabilities represent the foundation upon which value-creating strategies should be built. This does not apply to GDPs where external resource is 'bought' from universities and the notion of a pool of high potential and high performing incumbents is unknown upon inception. In this section we therefore outline the dominant talent themes and propose a definition for graduate TM which is at present currently missing.

As indicated above, there is no agreement on what constitutes the notion of graduate talent itself (Scott & Revis, 2008). In terms of approaches to graduate talent, McCracken et al. (2016) has built on Gallardo–Gallardo et al. (2013) typology by making a distinction between inclusive (i.e. all employees) and exclusive (i.e. a specific employee group) approaches to TM. This was done using either a subject (i.e. talent as all people; talent as some people) or object (i.e. talent as natural ability; talent as mastery; talent as commitment; talent as fit) approach. Following this, employers may employ a blended approach, dependent upon the graduate's past performance or potential to perform. Without this evidence, employers were looking for something more nuanced, or someone with an 'edge', (McCracken et al., 2016, p. 2736), which suggests the approach to talent as object (innate characteristics of a person) maybe the one adopted. This potentially causes a tension between what or who constitutes talent, as object and subject perspectives on talent infer different theoretical frameworks and approaches.

The blended approach towards defining graduate talent could also be due to the programmatic element of the talent pool, with recruitment and selection processes focused on 'talent as object' and measuring the characteristics of graduates in terms of their future potential due to lack of work experience. Upon completion of the GDP, those graduates who have demonstrated potential and high performance throughout the GDP may then be defined as 'talent as subject' (Gallardo–Gallardo et al., 2013). Up to this point the graduates were deemed as high potential and successful completion of the GDP has now validated that.

Organisations who buy talent rather than build talent put a great deal of time and investment in hiring the best young talent and high-status fast-track programmes such as graduate and trainee programmes (Bolander et al., 2017). Attracting this group, who are considered as future leaders of their organisations and expected to advance quickly is seen as a key TM practice. Selection to these relies heavily on formal assessment tools, including a wide range of tests and assessment centre methodology, to ensure that the talented few are identified and selected. Furthermore, Bolander et al. (2017) identified an elitist type where recruiting the most talented by organisations is done almost exclusively at entry level, and there is a strong reliance on developing talents. For many established organisations, only students with the highest grades from the best universities are considered, causing tension in the literature as to how graduate employers' practices constitute potential implicit processes of social exclusion and thus impact against the achievement of more equitable graduate outcomes and fair access to the 'top jobs' (Ingram & Allen, 2019). Organisations however, are beginning to move away from relying on target universities and stipulating grade requirements for GDP applications as this raises diversity issues as well as a sense that educational grades are too broad brush to successfully identify high potential (Institute of Student Employers, 2019). In a more recent ISE survey (2020), it was evident that organisations are taking many actions to reform their HR policies and processes in response to attracting a wider diverse candidate pool onto GDPs.

With this further context on GDPs and building on McCracken et al.'s study (2016) which undertook to identify how graduate talent is conceptualised, we aim to extend this definition whilst contributing to TM literature in proposing a definition for graduate TM. We propose that talent as object better reflects this talent pool which refers to an individual's capabilities to perform better than others. The object/subject discussion is an important one as this differentiates the Collings and Mellahi (2009) definition which talks about high potential incumbents. However, currently there is no evidence whether graduates on GDPs will be high performing/potential as there is not enough evidence on their past work performance to predict future potential. Hence why we argue that talent as object is the right approach. Our graduate TM definition points to committed and impending high potential graduates which differentiates this definition from other TM definitions. We also consider the generational characteristics of this talent pool which in recent research has been missing.

Therefore we propose:

Graduate TM refers to systematically identifying and developing a diverse talent pipeline of capable, committed and impending high potential graduates that are deployed in activities that will demonstrate and maximise their potential and opportunities for learning, and will instil in them a sense of purpose.

However, as Wiblen and McDonnell (2020) point out, given that talent is a socially constructed concept, talent meanings are subjective and theorising about talent concepts requires an understanding of the discursive processes related to how certain individuals, skills and capabilities come to be categorised as ‘talent’ within organisational contexts. This could include the internal culture surrounding an exclusive approach to talent – being identified and selected for an exclusive talent pool such as GDPs.

What is the value of GDPs from the graduate and organisation’s perspective?

Understanding the value of GDPs from an individual, organisational and societal level as well as research into the graduate talent pool as part of an organisation’s talent strategy is scarce. This may be due to the difficulty of finding willing organisations to participate in such research (Hayman & Lorman, 2004; McCracken et al., 2016). However, McDermott et al. (2006) suggested that organisations employ graduates to increase an organisation’s intellectual capital, innovation and growth. Moreover, building a pipeline of talent of future leaders and succession planning for organisations was also seen as the main purpose of GDPs. (Bolander et al., 2017; Meyers, 2020; Wiblen & McDonnell, 2020). Having gained a better understanding of the purpose of GDP’s, our attention turns to the factors that contribute to a successful GDP and the value from a graduate and organisation’s perspective.

Talent pool, segmentation and identity

From an employee’s perspective, being designated as talent and forming part of a prestigious and exclusive talent programme is understood as a sign that the organisation is recognising an individual’s potential, and this is commonly understood to be a critical component of TM in order for organisations to sustain competitive advantage (Becker et al., 2009). It seems that whilst talent identification is an HR-led process which involves HR-facilitated identification practices, TM is a dynamic and on-going process which directly involves line managers who become directly involved in HR practice implementation (King, 2016).

Two studies from the literature review focused on talent identification regarding GDPs: Tansley and Tietze (2013) and Kotylar (2018). Tansley & Tietze focused on the individual response with identity work and the utilisation of Van Gennep (1960) three stages of rites of passage (separation, liminality and incorporation) to illustrate the revision of identities during moments of transition. They found that new graduates

enter the first separation phase by leaving behind their university life in order to join an organisational talent pool, enter the next phase of liminality by engaging in temporary '*stretch projects*' (2013, p. 1807). This tests their technical competences and upon completing their *stretch projects* successfully, they reach incorporation stage through transformation into aspiring professionals. For those formally identified as organisational talent, accepting a place on a TM programme such as a GDP will also mean having to accept high levels of pressure to identify with the organisational values and identity (Painter-Morland et al., 2019). However, the advantages of inclusion in a talent pool from an individual perspective drives more commitment, positive attitudes and higher levels of engagement (Björkman et al., 2013; Crowley–Henry et al., 2019).

The second study (Kotylar, 2018) was a case study which focused on a new graduate programme implemented by a Canadian division of a large multinational manufacturer and distributor of food producers. Part of the study focused on the non-designates reactions to the graduate programme which were positive, and the graduates were seen as being valuable, result-driven and highly regarded. However, there were more concerns and frustrations about the programme itself which some viewed the company as being overly and unfairly focused on the graduate's career advancement and offered limited opportunities for regular employees (Baruch, 2022). The next section explores this concept further by looking at reciprocity on GDPs through the psychological contract.

What is the value of GDPs from a psychological contract perspective?

From the literature, it is evident that for graduates, TM processes have the potential to either meet or breach their psychological contract expectations (e.g. De Hauw & De Vos, 2010; McDermott et al., 2006; Sturges et al., 2002). Early research (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994) noted that the frequency of violation may be unusually high on GDPs. This is due to graduates being in high demand and organisations may have made promises that could not be kept to lure the best and brightest graduates to the firm. Rousseau and Greller (1994) found that in practice, HR activities such as recruiting, involves several possible contract makers, (e.g. line managers) and promises thrive in recruiting and selection practices and whilst the interviewers making the statements might later argue, they were stating personal opinions, the effect is to create lasting expectations. A mismatch in terms of expectations between employees and organisations can arise when initial expectations are not fulfilled, reflecting the dynamic nature of psychological contracts (Baruch & Rousseau, 2019). These should generally be socialised through the initial

employer's branding and recruitment process, which is thought to contribute to, and influence the initial psychological contract between graduates and employers (Scholarios et al., 2003).

Research by Kelley–Patterson and George (2002) exploring the components that form the initial psychological contract of graduates found that the graduates had transactional expectations, but employers had expectations that were both relational and transactional. One of the major differences between these two contracts is that the relational contract encompasses relational exchanges such as long–term employment, trust and loyalty. These exchanges arguably underpin TM programmes such as GDPs. More recently however, Baruch and Rousseau (2019) explains how the psychological contract can develop over time into lower level beliefs between the individual and another party such as the obligation to pursue development, and higher order beliefs to make sense of their employment arrangements.

Social influences can also affect the perceived fulfilment of the psychological contract and individuals may derive certain kinds of information regarding their psychological contract from different individuals (Baruch & Rousseau, 2019). This is evidenced by Jonsson and Thorgren (2017) who discovered that recent graduate's expectations were consistent with the manager's expectations during the programme, in terms of the trainee taking responsibility, their expectation of undergoing personal and professional development and the trainee's commitment. Yet, there was a mismatch in terms of manager's expectations of the trainee's delivery due to a lack of communication and internal consensus between HR and the managers, and discontentment around career opportunities after the programme. These findings suggest evidence of psychological contract breaches from both an organisational and trainee perspective. From both early studies (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994) and more recent research (e.g. Clarke & Scurry, 2020) it is clear that challenges and violations of the psychological contract with reference to GDPs still exist and are very much in contention.

Positive experiences of HRM procedures implemented by line managers are expected to signal to employees the perceptions of support and consideration, reciprocated in turn by positive employee attitudes and behaviours (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960). In their study, Fu et al. (2020) point out that line managers play a crucial role in converting formal HR policies into the lived employee experience. When line managers are able to apply TM practices in a way that is both consistent and receptive to individuals, the benefits of these practices are enhanced. The importance of effective line managers was cited in the literature in that maybe amid the many stakeholders affecting psychological contract fulfilment or breach, immediate line managers are the most critical agents that influence experiences on GDPs at the individual level. (Clarke

& Scurry, 2020; Fu et al., 2020). Research by Joyce and Slocum (2012) identified that one of the critical capabilities of organisations was that managers should manage talent in light of the organisation's strategic needs. The findings from this study reinforced the importance of the line manager's role. On the one hand, the findings found that limited line manager support led to frustration and potentially a more transactional contract approach. Conversely, line manager participation seems to not only influence the overall graduate's experience on GDPs and fulfil expectations, but also supports on-going development and career opportunities (Jonsson & Thorgren, 2017). These findings are in line with a study by Clarke and Scurry (2020) who found a polarised view from graduates regarding the support received from line managers. These ranged from line managers being highly supportive to some graduates receiving very low levels of managerial support and clear direction.

Contextual factors impacting GDP outcomes

There appears to be limited research in earlier TM papers on how contextual factors influence the approach to TM and a lack of clarity on the role that contextual factors may have on the organisations under study (Thunnissen et al., 2013). It is considered that investigating the impact of contextual factors on GDPs more explicitly and deliberately will help to clarify what organisations aim to achieve with GDP outcomes, and how effective they are in doing that (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016).

From examining the literature, it could be argued that the models and activities of TM should be context and organisation dependent; factors that seem to have often been ignored in practice when organisations build their TM and development practices (Siikaniemi, 2012). It is evident however that the inclusion of context in TM studies is becoming more popular and the call for more research investigating contextual factors is being addressed due to the increased number of papers which focus on context latterly in the review. Tables 1 and 2 highlight external and internal contextual factors found in the literature review that could impact GDP outcomes from a broader and macro context to internal contexts. There are various implications in terms of external and internal factors that could impact GDP outcomes. For example, the economic context in terms of labour supply and demand will determine the GDP cohort size and the opportunities available, which could potentially increase competition to secure a position. The literature review has also identified generational traits including the characteristics of Millennials and Generation Z that could potentially influence their career choices (Fratricova & Kirchmayer, 2018). Specific organisational influences such

Table 1. Examples of external factors influencing GDPs.

	External factors	Examples – the what?	Examples – the how?	Examples sources	
Broader context	Higher education landscape	Student loan vs. benefits of Higher Education. Transition from HE to the workforce	Student perceptions regarding benefits vs. associated costs of pursuing higher education and employability may either attract or deter students to attend university.	Donald et al. (2019); Scholarrios et al. (2003); Tansley and Tietze (2013)	
	Economical	Labour supply and demand, impacting graduate hiring numbers	Labour supply and demand may determine the GDP cohort size and the opportunities available, which could potentially increase competition to secure a position.	Clarke and Patrickson (2008); McDermott et al. (2006)	
	Legal	Employment contracts, Employment law.	Elements such as maximum working hours, minimum wage and pay conditions and discrimination and equal rights will all be elements influence GDP's.	Donald et al. (2018)	
	Political	Immigration policies	Immigration policies which either rely or restrict talent, especially for graduates where their place of study will have different visa implications.	Festing et al. (2013); Holland et al. (2007); Hirt et al. (2017).	
	Demographic shifts	Aging populations	An aging population may mean a demand of labour supply for younger generations to fill the potential talent gap.	Festing et al. (2013)	
	Global mobility	Movement of graduate talent.	Knowledge transfer and TM could be impacted by the global graduate movement and career patterns.	Tolkach and Tung (2019)	
	Technological	Impact of automation, AI and IoT on jobs and careers,	Increasing technological sophistication diminishes the Resource Based View of physical and organisational capital, with heavier reliance on human capital.	Holland et al. (2007)	
	Generational traits	Characteristics of Millennials and Generation Z	Generational traits such as enjoyment in their careers, fairness, tolerance and equity in the workplace.	Barron (2008); Gupta (2019); Li et al. (2018); Naim and Lenka (2018); Self et al. (2019)	
	Specific context	Career orientations	Traditional career paths vs. boundaryless careers	Influences on career ownership and movement between organisations to enhance career development.	Donald et al. (2019); Dries et al. (2012)
		Skills – (transferable / shortages)	Skills gaps and skills shortages –	Organisations to apply more creative TM strategies to build talent.	Cappelli (2015); Meyers et al. (2013)
Sector's Attributes		Sectors cited in the literature included: Public Sector, Hospitality and Consultancy.	The hospitality sector for example has been cited to have a poor reputation for low pay, anti-social working hours, menial work and limited opportunities for career progression.	Chang and Busser (2017); Clarke and Scurry (2020); Kravariti and Johnston (2020); Swailes and Blackburn (2016); Tansley and Tietze (2013)	
Competition/market forces		Competition and market forces drive labour practices that create differentiation.	Potential increase in competition for GDP participation.	Baruch and Rousseau (2019); Gallardo-Gallardo et al. (2020)	

Table 2. Examples of internal factors influencing GDPs.

	Internal factors	Examples – the what?	Examples – the how?	Sources
Organisational influences	Business strategy/vision	Alignment of TM strategies with business strategy influences TM programmes.	Impacts the structure and framework of GDP's to align graduate talent with overall business strategy.	Collings (2014); Donald et al. (2019); Liu et al. (2021); Naulleau (2019)
	Brand/reputation	Organisations positioning themselves as an appealing employer to attract the best talent.	Aligning the branding messages to match the generation characteristics and traits that organisations are targeting.	Maxwell and MacLean (2008); Powell et al. (2013); Wallace et al. (2012)
	HR policies and practices	Employees use the psychological contract to view their employer's practices and policies.	Promises of development and training, career progression, pay and condition are all examples of how HR policies can influence the psychological contract.	Lee et al. (2011); Kelley-Patterson and George (2002); Meyers et al. (2020); Rousseau and Greller (1994);
	GDP structure	The GDP structure can potentially impact the psychological contract between graduates and the organisation	The GDP structure regarding the length, supervision, programme structure, training and promotion prospects could all fulfil or breach the psychological contract.	McDermott et al. (2006)
	Supervisory support	Impact of actors and supervisory support on psychological contracts.	Line managers and those supervisory support actors play a crucial role in converting formal HR policies into the lived employee experience.	Chang and Busser (2017); McDermott et al. (2006)
	Recruitment and selection	Assessment and selection processes	Gamification and AI influencing selection processes	Tansley et al. (2016)
	Intrinsic/extrinsic rewards	Influence of tangible rewards and intangible rewards that are personable.	Share ownership – extrinsic retention rewards. Job challenges and meaningful work – intrinsic rewards	Holland et al. (2007); Kravartiti and Johnston (2020); Lee et al. (2011)

as the GDP structure and HR policies and processes could also impact the overall GDP experience at an individual level. A study by Naulleau (2019) highlighted the key organisational issues influencing TM strategies. These stem from the internal culture and history of the organisation, identity, brand reputation and history to the organisational structures, people and leadership. This study found that the implementation and effectiveness of TM practices such as GDPs can impact the overall individual experience as well as outcomes. The internal organisational culture surrounding the GDP can be beneficial or detrimental as discussed in the literature when considering the graduate identity. Inaccurate workforce planning and not being able to predict future skills accurately impacts the opportunities and effectiveness on GDPs, thus compromising the psychological contract (McDermott et al., 2006). This makes a contribution to TM literature as contextual factors which may potentially impact GDP outcomes is an unexplored area to date.

Towards a successful GDP cycle

The objective of this paper was to investigate the value of GDPs from a psychological perspective and investigate what contextual factors, if any, impact GDP outcomes. Our review indicates there is a lack of focus in the TM literature on graduate pools in terms of conceptualisation of graduate talent, graduate TM definitions, graduate reactions on GDPs in respect of being identified as talent, and the value of GDPs from an organisation's perspective.

It seems that the value and outcomes of GDPs are clearly overlooked and the psychological contract reciprocity on GDPs often ignored (Clarke & Scurry, 2020). From this perspective, the main question is not how effective GDPs are, but rather what characteristics and environments determine a successful cycle of GDPs where the outcomes meet the organisational aims of building a high potential talent pipeline, and graduates align with a strong organisational identity and build a positive psychological contract? In view of this question, a conceptual framework is proposed as shown in [Figure 1](#) connecting TM practices to psychological contract theory, identity and implications that contextual factors could have on the outcomes of GDPs. Five sub-areas of the model add significance to this original theoretical contribution: (a) GDP participation (b) positive early adjustment, (c) positive psychological contract (d) enabling contextual factors (e) strong organisation identity.

These are now addressed in turn.

- a. Once participants join the GDPs, the formation of the psychological contract has already commenced (Clarke & Scurry, 2020). In

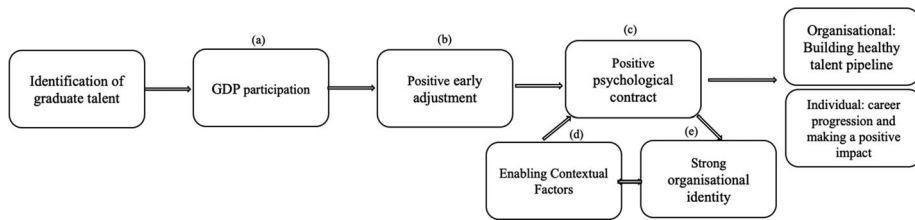


Figure 1. A successful graduate development programmes cycle.

a successful GDP cycle, this means that the brand and marketing messages align to a realistic experience the graduate participant should expect (Sparrow & Makram, 2015). Realistic expectations regarding the GDP are signalled throughout the recruitment and selection process. A study by Rousseau and Greller (1994) reported that during the recruitment process, numerous promises are made by several possible contract makers unintentionally which can set unrealistic expectations. The structure of the GDP is articulated with realistic outcomes, and the process regarding the GDP roll-off communicated. The GDP roll off process seems to be an activity where expectations are not met. This was a finding from the study which also aligned with the literature (Jonsson & Thorgren, 2017). The internal culture surrounding the GDP supports successful inclusion of new GDP participants. This was confirmed by Kotylar (2018) who found that some of the non-high potentials expressed frustrations that those designates regarded as talent were fast-tracked ahead of those with more experience and tenure. This is also an important point if organisations are moving away from elitist recruitment and wanting to introduce a much broader diversity of GDP participants (Stahl et al., 2012). This aligns with the literature that highlights the fundamental challenge for organisations to fully integrate CSR into their strategies and build cultures that support the necessary transformation of mind-sets and behaviours (Stahl et al., 2020).

- b. Positive early adjustments include a smooth transition for the GDP participant from university to the workplace. Studies from Tansley and Tietze (2013) illustrate the rites of passage and the three stages that graduates pass through on GDPs. Upon joining the organisation, a support network for each GDP participant has been made available. This includes mentoring and strong line manager support which aligns with the literature (Fu et al., 2020).
- c. A positive psychological contract is built where the GDP participant and the organisation attain reciprocity. Consideration is given to the organisation's expectations of the GDP. The GDP construct,

design and TM approach align accordingly. As changes occur over time, ascertaining the factors which account for the reciprocity of the contract are re-evaluated. It also seems that the impact of HRM practices play a central role in shaping psychological contract beliefs (Dries & De Gieter, 2014).

- d. GDP participants incorporate the organisation's identity into their own identity, building positive reciprocal relationships. This in turn supports a positive psychological contract (Zagenczyk et al., 2011).
- e. Enabling contextual factors for a successful GDP include buoyant economic conditions, alignment of generational traits, (Festing & Schäfer, 2014) positive internal culture, brand reputation (Pandita & Ray, 2018) and strong leadership which supports the GDP (Naim & Lenka, 2018).

Our framework proposes that after positive early adjustments from graduates transitioning from university to the workplace (Tansley & Tietze, 2013). The value of GDPs once identified will become a reality if there is a positive psychological contract (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2002), strong organisational identity and enabling contextual factors (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020). This should ultimately lead to positive outcomes such as building a high performing talent pipeline and potential which can be a source of sustained competitive advantage for organisations (Narayanan et al., 2019).

Theoretical contributions

This paper offers two original theoretical contributions to the literature. First a definition of graduate TM and conceptualisation of a new model of a successful GDP cycle. In the TM literature, the complexity of coming to a finite definition and conceptualisation of TM was deliberated (Lewis & Heckman, 2006). Whilst Collings and Mellahi (2009) definition of TM seems to be widely supported, we argue that it does not support graduate TM. Without the potential evidence or record of past work performance, talent as object – innate characteristics of a person (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013) was the chosen adopted approach for the graduate TM definition. Drawing from the scant research on graduate talent, it was evident that graduates were identified from a highly competitive selection process (McCracken et al., 2016). This signals that organisations are looking for high potential individuals who will contribute and make an impact on organisational outcomes (Tansley, 2011). From the literature, it was clear that diversity and generational traits were important to include in the definition and it seemed that organisations were moving away from hiring the elitist type (Stahl et al.,

2012). Future leaders were not referenced in the definition as from the literature review there was no real evidence to substantiate the claim. However, it was evident from the findings that graduates do contribute to organisational performance and are committed, and that only time reveals and validates their true high potential as a leader.

The second theoretical contribution this article offers is conceptualisation of a successful GDP cycle. By connecting TM, psychological contract and identity theory, this conceptual framework expands and articulates the positioning of GDP in TM studies. Finally, the conceptual framework considers how contextual factors can impact GDP outcomes. The model advances TM theory by advancing the understanding of the value of GDPs both from an individual and organisational perspective.

Practical implications

It is critical that if organisations continue to invest in GDPs, the concept and value of GDPs should be articulated. By providing measurable outcomes of GDPs the reality of what organisations hope to achieve from this talent pool can be realised. Hence, organisations should design GDPs that will meet the specific prognosticated future demands of skills and jobs in order to gain competitive advantage.

The term 'future leader' should also be redefined to set realistic expectations for graduates as well as addressing the typical outcomes of a GDP once completed. Accurately spotting leadership potential is difficult for organisations and those organisations who adopt an exclusive approach to TM, have to be absolutely certain that the people defined as talent are the actual 'talent' that the organisations needs to be successful both now and in the future. Environments are changing rapidly, and TM strategies and processes need to change at a similar pace. Reshaping GDPs to reflect the unique contextual factors of individual organisations will ultimately lead to more successful outcomes, both for graduates and the organisation.

For graduates, the GDP potentially offers an opportunity to develop their personal and professional development. The role of HR professionals is to help graduates identify their innate talents as well as developing their knowledge and skills based on the identified needs and their interests (Mehdiabadi & Li, 2016). Graduates will also gain support from supervisors, mentors as well as peer support from the graduate talent pool. The GDP also gives an opportunity for graduates to enhance their social capital by building a network internally with a range of stakeholders across the organisation (Donald et al., 2019). This could aid future career opportunities for the graduates. For

organisations who implement TM programmes for graduates gain fresh thinking, new ideas and an opportunity to raise an organisation's intellectual capital with high potential individuals (McDermott et al., 2006). For those organisations with an ageing demographic, the GDP offers an opportunity to hire committed graduates to develop high levels of managerial competence to be considered as future talent pipeline.

Limitations and future research agenda

The theoretical conceptual development aspect of the research is limited by its very nature and requires further empirical testing. In this context, we suggest additional areas for future research.

It is clear from the TM literature review that the focus is primarily on talent programmes for existing employees and less focus has been placed on externally recruited talent pools such as graduates. Further empirical research is required to understand the definition of graduate talent and how and why graduate talent is conceptualised in this manner (McCracken et al., 2016).

More research into understanding the expectations of organisations, as well as investigating talent identification and graduate talent pools from an individual and organisational perspective is integral for GDPs to be more effective in achieving the organisation's future TM goals (Jooss et al., 2021). This will help to illuminate any impacts or reactions that being designated and identified as talent on GDPs has on the graduate participants (Dries & De Gieter, 2014). Another gap identified in the research is an understanding of what happens to the talent identification label when graduates roll off GDPs and whether these individuals are still classed as 'future leaders'.

Of the two studies found in the literature review which specifically focused on GDPs and the psychological contract (Clarke & Scurry, 2020; Jonsson & Thorgren, 2017), there was no mention of the value or desired outcomes of GDPs. Nor was there a sense of what was happening in reality regarding the initial concept of the GDPs and how organisational identification impacts outcomes. Where there was evidence of psychological contract breach in terms of expectations not being met on GDPs, this seemed to occur at the end of the programme (Jonsson & Thorgren, 2017). Again, there is a research gap in terms of what this means in reality for organisations who are at risk of losing graduates they have invested in as a future talent pipeline. More research into the value of GDPs will help organisations to adapt TM strategies on GDPs to encourage psychological contract reciprocity as well as a create a strong organisational talent pipeline.

Furthermore, the GDP, a TM construct which formed part of the traditional linear career could now be construed as being out-dated with new and diversified types of employment arrangements and various modes of work (part-time and flexi-time) (Alcover et al., 2017). More empirical research needs to be conducted to ascertain how the GDP system fits into today's contemporary career system in practice, and in turn, where career ownership sits on GDPs. Clarke and Patrickson (2008) argue that employers still retain the upper hand in the balance of power as they decide who they will hire and fire, and when and who will be offered long-term positions within the organisation. However, the shifting of responsibility for careers from organisations to employees has encouraged a more individualised career orientation (Hall, 2004). In their study, Crowley-Henry et al. (2019) argue that organisations need to consider employees with boundaryless career mindsets as well as employees with a preference for traditional organisational career paths, in order to best manage all talents.

More empirical research is also needed to ascertain how the impact of contextual factors as well as the role of actors in a specific context, impact GDPs outcomes. In the literature, it is cited that the individual employee constructs their psychological contract under the influence of both internal and external factors. At the internal level, the influence of management in the employing organisation is the most obvious while externally, there are a wide range of social and economic factors from which an employee can construct a set of value judgements and expectations (Cullinane & Dundon, 2006). By examining multiple cases of GDPs to compare similarities and differences in the psychological contract between the graduate and organisations in various contexts, such as private versus public sectors, and in different kinds of industries such as the charity, utilities and technology sector will also provide more context for building successful GDP outcomes for the future. Also, there is an opportunity to update and refresh the generational characteristics of graduates as generation Z entering the workforce will be currently recruited on to GDPs (Wood, 2013).

Conclusions

Drawing on the cover of empirical literature and theoretical frameworks of TM practices, psychological contract and identity, this paper has explored the value of GDPs and what factors influence GDP outcomes and how. The review was carried out to explore how graduate talent is defined in organisations, to understand the value of GDPs from a psychological contract perspective and how contextual factors influence the outcomes of GDPs. The paper also offers contributions to theory by connecting TM, psychological contract and identity theories. Directions

for future research agendas are considered, helping to advance the field of TM and talent pools.

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