An Exploratory Qualitative Research To Address Processes That Are Utilised For Managing Talent: A Case Study In A Queensland Regional University[1]

Atheer Abdullah Mohammed[1], Raj Gururajan[2], Abdul Hafeez-Baig[2]

[1]School of Management & Enterprise University of Southern Quessland /Australia, [2]The Industrial Administration Department/College of Administration and Economics/ University of Baghdad/Iraq

ABSTRACT

The key aim of this research is to investigate themes related to Talent Management Processes (TMPs) in Australian universities. This is because of the pragmatic advantages for universities that are focused on improving talents. Talent is a primary source of competitive advantage for educational organisations. Moreover, talent contributes to increased rankings and profits for higher education organisations. The university's ranking is aligned with their talented employees who contribute significantly to a university's performance by attracting new students and securing funds for further research. This study depends on the Focus Group (FG) method as the main tool for data collection. The sample consisted eleven Information Communication Technology (ICT) and human resources managers who are working at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ). A high-level FG session was transcribed and thematically analysed using NVivo 11. Six key themes and sixteen subthemes of TMPs were explored. The key themes were talent retention, talent attraction, talent development, talent acquisition, performance management, and leadership development. Each of these themes and subthemes is discussed. This research is limited to a small sample size

Keywords: Focus Group, Talent Management, Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

In today's business world, organisations have actively recognised that an attracted, motivated and skilled professional staff are the essential to global competitive priority in the talent economy (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016; Kim, Williams, Rothwell, & Penaloza, 2014; Valmohammadi & Ahmadi, 2015). This is because organisations are commonly spending millions of dollars replacing high qualified individuals (Arnold, 2016). Since then, a majority of organisations have started to rethink their procedures and policies to achieve better acquisition and retention of individual talents (Andersson, 2014; Calo, 2008; Sweem, 2009).

The benefits of Talent Management (TM) for higher education organisations are a development of the talent pool, improvement of the productivity of individuals, support for effective planning and improvement of human resources management (Kasemsap, 2017; Wu, Nurhadi, & Zahro, 2016). In addition, a majority of higher education organisations have realised that talented individuals are strategic assets because they play a key role in the success and growth of educational organisations (Bradley, 2016; Wu et al., 2016). The reason for this is that competitive advantage can be maintained by attracting, developing and retaining talented employees in key positions (Gateau & Simon, 2016; Kasemsap, 2017; Mwangi et al., 2014; Waithiegeni Kibui, 2015).

However, TM research in the higher education sector is weak (Paisey & Paisey, 2016). Moreover, the dominant work reported in the existing literature on TM so far has been predominantly theoretical (Gallardo-Gallardo, Nijs, Dries, & Gallo, 2015; Mohammed, Gururajan, & Hafeez-Baig, 2017). Meanwhile, Australian higher education organisations face key challenges, such as, high-quality assurance in their technical expertise and activities (Chiou, 2014; Choon Boey Lim, 2009; Lim, 2010; Lynch, 2013; Shah & Jarzabkowski, 2013) and their ability to be a leading exporter of international education (Carnegie & Tuck, 2010; Chiou, 2014; Harmon, 2015; Lynch, 2013). This study is therefore motivated by the need to fill a gap in knowledge in terms of TM within the higher education environment.

The research starts by presenting the introduction. Secondly, it will review the relevant literature to provide a theoretical foundation for the study. Section three describes the research method to achieve the research objective. Section four discusses the research results. Section five, the research conclusion is summarised.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Globally, TM has received growing attention among various organisation (Ingram, 2016; Kimathi, 2015; Morley, Valverde, & Farndale, 2017). TM can be understood in terms of developmental and cultural (Al-Awamleh, 2009; Baublyte, 2010; Li & Devos, 2008). According to the developmental perspective, TM is a strategic priority for business organisations and is perceived as a crucial driver in developing organisational performance (Davies & Davies, 2010; Ingram, 2016). Similarly, Cannon and McGee (2011); Moczydłowska (2012); R. F. Silzer and B. E. Dowell (2010) explain TM as a set of procedures, programs, and activities applied to highly qualified individuals who are characterised by high performance in their development in order to achieve an organisation's goals now and in the future. The reason for this is that, if an organisation fails to provide talented development and training, it may lose available talent (Torrington, Hall, Taylor, & Atkinson, 2014).

In terms of the cultural perspective, TM focuses on social and cultural contexts of available human resources within a range of qualities (Storm, 2015). These qualities include an innate ability, intelligence, and creative skills (Butter, 2015; Dries, Cotton, Bagdadli, & de Oliveira, 2014; Ross, 2013; Scaringella, 2014). Supporters of this perspective propose that individuals are successful only when they have sufficient talent, and believe that the success of organisational work will be followed by their own success (Blass, 2009; Storm, 2015). Thus, TM is a key for organisational success through making it possible for organisational systems to achieve higher aims (Andersson, 2014; Calo, 2008; Daneshfard, Rajae, Bilondi, & Banihashem, 2016; Sweem, 2009).

METHOD

Approach

FG is a qualitative research technique which collects data in a group situation (Albanesi, 2014; Keeley et al., 2016; Krueger & Casey, 2015). It acquires rich information from a group of participants and a deep understanding of the topic being explored (Kozleski, Yu, Satter, Francis, & Haines, 2015; Saberiyan, 2015; Sutton & Arnold, 2013). The aim of this technique for this study is to define the scope of the individual interviews (Dilshad & Latif, 2013; Gururajan, Hafeez-Baig, Clark, Moller, & Sankaran, 2014; Torres & Carte, 2014). The FG methodology is a valuable interview method which is led via a trained moderator to explore particular topics within the problem domain (Cooper & Schindler, 2011; Krueger & Casey, 2015; Silverman, 2014; Zikmund, Babin, & Griffin, 2013). Thus, FG involves the use of in-depth group discussions on themes for which participants are selected (Jeong, 2016; Pearson & Vossler, 2016; Sherriff, Gugglberger, Hall, & Scholes, 2014; Then, Rankin, & Ali, 2014).

Throughout history, the focus group technique has been used extensively to collect data and understand a topic (Doody, Slevin, & Taggart, 2013; Imison, 2014; Tadajewski, 2016). This technique was developed throughout the 1940s when social scientists started using 'Focused Interviews' for a group (C. Davis, 2017; Dickau, 2017; Hennink, 2014; Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013; Krueger & Casey, 2015; Mauceri, 2016; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015; Tadajewski, 2016). This technique was developed by Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton, the latter of which is considered the 'father of the focus group' (Carey & Asbury, 2016; Duarte, Veloso, Marques, & Sebastião, 2015; Tadajewski, 2016, p. 319). Merton found that individuals exhibited sensitive information when they felt comfortable in an environment with individuals like themselves (Abumere, 2014; Eklund, 2015; Hennink, 2014; Krueger & Casey, 2015; Pozzar, Allen, Stamp, & Sampson, 2014; Then et al., 2014). Paul Lazarsfeld was a director at Office of Radio Research (Columbia University) (S. M. Carter, 2008; Nicholls, 2014). In 1933, Lazarsfeld and his colleagues developed a social group method for quantifying data to describe the communities' mood (Mauceri, 2016; Nicholls, 2014). In parallel fashion, in the early 1930s, Lazarsfeld and Herta Herzog who was Lazarsfeld's student, developed 'subsequent methodological and conceptual innovations' of the focus group method (S. M. Carter, 2008; Tadajewski, 2016). Throughout the following decades, the focus group method has become commonly utilized in marketing research and public opinion (Brown, 2015; Tadajewski, 2016). In the 1980s, it was being employed via "sociologists and other social scientists" such as politics, health, education and other researchers (Brown, 2015; Tadajewski, 2016). In the 2000s, it was being utilised by healthcare research (Brown, 2015). After that period until currently, the focus group technique is still extensively used within the management field of research (Tadajewski, 2016).

The FG technique has many advantages and was selected in this research for the following reasons: (1) FG can explore participants' experiences and knowledge in an open-ended format resulting in benefits for interpersonal communication, group dynamics and information sharing (Dilshad & Latif, 2013; Eizenberg, Orenstein, & Zimroni, 2017; Matsuyama et al., 2016; Morgan, Eliot, Lowe, & Gorman, 2016; Thrul, Belohlavek, Kaur, & Ramo, 2017; van Venrooij & Barnhoorn, 2017). Also, (2) through idea evaluation and formulation; the benefits of full, reactive FG discussions are achieved (Boddy, 2012; Eizenberg et al., 2017; Mandić, Crnković, & Vranešević, 2013; Thrul et al., 2017; van Venrooij & Barnhoorn, 2017). In addition, (3) this method is commonly used in qualitative research (Brown, 2015; Morgan et al., 2016; Pearson & Vossler, 2016; Zikmund et al.,

2013); and (4) this kind of qualitative technique improves a researcher's experience in terms of participants' perspectives and experiences (Eizenberg et al., 2017; Jeong, 2016; Mandić et al., 2013; Thrul et al., 2017; Tshehla, 2014). Finally, (5) it can be low cost compared to other surveying methods, with results obtained relatively quickly and an increased sample size by talking with several individuals at once (Brown, 2015; Eizenberg et al., 2017; Jeong, 2016; Masadeh, Al-Ababneh, Al-Sabi, & Maaiah, 2016; Morgan, 1997; Pearson & Vossler, 2016; Saberiyan, 2015; Yelding & Cassim, 2016; Zikmund et al., 2013).

Nevertheless, there are some difficulties with the FG technique such as the following First of all, FG data can be more complicated to analyse than individual interviews (Doody et al., 2013; Masadeh et al., 2016; Then et al., 2014). Given this, FG results depend on dynamic responses of a group but these may be difficult to analyse (Masadeh et al., 2016; Sæther & Mehus, 2016). This means it is difficult to conduct even one FG (Morgan et al., 2016). The second drawback is that the environmental and social context may negatively influence comments from a group (Besen-Cassino, 2017; Goyder & Shickle, 2016; Then et al., 2014). Thirdly, the logistics of session facilitation in the FG technique is difficult. For example, to get a FG team of professionals from specialised segments, to work together at the same time and in the same place can be challenging (Dilshad & Latif, 2013; Mandić et al., 2013; Morgan et al., 2016; Then et al., 2014). The fourth challenge is that little vocal participants are likely to dominate the FG discussion and, in this sense, can be a negative influence on group dynamics (Dilshad & Latif, 2013; Pearson & Vossler, 2016; Sæther & Mehus, 2016; Then et al., 2014; Zikmund et al., 2013). Finally, FG members may conform to the common view, and findings cannot be generalised because a group may not be a representative sample of a target population (Cochran, Baker, Benson, & Rhea, 2016; Giles & Adams, 2015; Mandić et al., 2013; Masadeh et al., 2016; Then et al., 2014).

The following strategies were taken to overcome the challenges of the FG method. In the case of data analysis, the research relied on the limited use of focus groups (a single session and group). This was enough to define the scope of the individual interviews (Dilshad & Latif, 2013; Gururajan et al., 2014; Torres & Carte, 2014). For the environmental and social context, the researchers were careful to invite participants from a diverse range of social environments. All FG participants were from a range of different sections of the university and a mixture of position levels. In regards to logistics of session facilitation, the facilitator used his experience in "Negotiation Management" from when he was a manager at the University of Baghdad. This facilitated the approval process of talented individuals to participate in the FG session. Moreover, there is a practicable alternative to conduct FG session via telephone, Skype or Zoom (Morgan et al., 2016).

To overcome a group member dominating in the session, the researchers were careful to provide equal time to all, to increase the attention capacity and sharing rate of participants (Goldenberg & Wiley, 2011; HÄgg & Musse, 2016; Kavadias & Sommer, 2009; Kornish & Hutchison-Krupat, 2017; Litcanu, Prostean, Oros, & Mnerie, 2015). Moreover, an expert moderator was used to manage the FG session (Cooper & Schindler, 2011; Goldenberg & Wiley, 2011; Gururajan, Hafeez Baig, Sturgess, Clark, & Gururajan, 2015; Krueger & Casey, 2015; Litosseliti, 2003; Sherriff et al., 2014; Silverman, 2014; Zikmund et al., 2013). In the case of dealing with a generalisation of results, the FG method was used to define the scope of the individual interviews. Therefore, the generated results of the research will be based on the quantitative survey questionnaire technique, which will be developed from the outcomes of the three steps of the qualitative study. Overall via utilising the strategies discussed above, the FG session can be beneficial for developing the individual interviews protocol (Campbell, 2005; Gururajan et al., 2015).

Deriving Data Collection

The aim of conducting a FG session is to provide qualitative data from a focused discussion of a topic (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Researchers in FG should be as flexible as possible to enable the members' discussion to guide new topics and interests and shed light on them (Litosseliti, 2003; Tshehla, 2014). The focus is bringing new themes and concerns to clarify them in depth with the resulting data from 60-90 minute FG discussions (Cooper & Schindler, 2011; Krueger & Casey, 2015). Ahmed, Hay, and El-Gohary (2015) address optimal processes for conducting and analysing FG, which involves a researcher first determining the number of participants, followed secondly by the date, time, and place. The third task is conducting data collection, which should involve an introduction, objective of a FG session, main questions, discussion, and conclusion of the topic. The final task is acquiring and analysing the data as well as formulating results.

Actual Data Collection

In this research, the FG schedule was designed and piloted through two sessions with six participants (each session: three professional participants). A high-level the FG session was conducted to define the scope of individual interview of TMPs. The facilitator arrived an hour prior to the beginning time for preparation of all required materials such as writing materials, refreshments, and recording devices. The facilitator approached possible participants with an information sheet of the project including the research objectives (in person or by email). This enabled the prospective respondents to be fully informed about the nature of the research before being involved in the FG session. Once they agreed to participate in the FG session, further

details were provided as well as the consent form. The participants needed to read the consent form and sign it. The participants were advised that the participation in this research is purely voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time without consequence.

The FG session started with a short introduction where the moderator and the facilitator welcomed participants with an introduction to themselves and the research topic. A quick summary explanation of the purpose of the session was supplied and the eleven participating managers (eight males and three females) were then tasked with group introductions before beginning the formal discussion. This took about five minutes. One question was designed to collect information for around 20-30 minutes on the scheduled day (Cooper & Schindler, 2011; Krueger & Casey, 2015) (Figure 1). Answering this question was significant to define the scope of individual interviews while working towards the main research objective. This assisted to determine themes of TM. Each round optimally requires five minutes for each participant to answer (BÖrekÇİ, 2015).

The eleven participants shared their thoughts and information for forty to thirty minutes, about TMPs in their university. Before the FG session ended, the moderator asked participants for any final opinions or additional comments. Finally, the moderator and facilitator acknowledged and thanked participants for their time and effort. It was evident that participants felt involved and motivated about the research topic due to the particularly meaningful discussion that occurred. After this session, the researchers evaluated the details and formulated a synopsis of events prior to undertaking the procedures for transcription. The FG session was also audio-recorded in MP3 format, then transcribed without eliminating the spontaneous character of the speeches. The following diagram shows the main process with the estimated time of each part of the FG session.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We used both manual and text analysis software (NVivo 11) to code, recode and generate themes (Ngulube, 2015; Paulus & Bennett, 2017). In this data analysis, it was found that participants provided valuable information of the TMPs which are used for administering talent in their university. The FG session has outlined sixteen subthemes of TM. These were grouped into six key themes: talent retention, talent attraction, talent development, talent acquisition, performance management, and leadership development. Table 1 provides a summary of TMPs used in Australian HE.

The FG session investigated six themes of TM. Talent retention is the first key theme explored by this research. The majority of the respondents expressed the university's need to maintain the unique talent represented by academic and professional individuals. This is due to the great performance provided via those individuals and their strategic role in achieving organisational success. These findings are consistent with Alnaqbi (2011); Koranteng (2014) who state that an organisation ought to retain highly qualified employees to enhance a unique source of competitive advantage which can lead to organisational success. According to the opinions of participants, it included three subthemes: *(i) competitive benchmarking; (ii) employee empowerment; and (iii) employee motivation.* The first key element of talent retention is *competitive benchmarking.* AlKerdawy (2016); Bhattacharyya (2015); Stahl et al. (2012) point out that competitive compensation is an essential element of successfully retaining highly qualified individuals within an organisation that seeks to achieve a competitive advantage. This may be more relevant for universities in large cities rather than in regional areas. USQ may not be as concerned with competitive compensation as an element of talent retention due to the regional position of the university. This means that there are fewer employment opportunities within the region, and comparable employment opportunities are likely to be a considerable distance away. The second key element of talent retention is *employee empowerment.* Participants' FG expressed how the ability of USQ to offer empowerment to employees enabled it to retain talented staff. In a parallel fashion, the findings reveal that employee empowerment is an essential process in helping USQ to retain its talented staff through increasing productive time, encouraging new ideas, supporting employees, as well as enhancing skills. These outcomes are consistent with Chitorelidze (2017); Tsai (2012) who observe that employee empowerment in educational workplaces assists in retaining talented staff, both academic and professional. It also improves job satisfaction through providing them self-efficacy in their workplaces (Saleem, Nisar, & Imran, 2017; Twyman-Abrams, 2017). The final and third subtheme of talent retention in this research is *employee motivation.* This highlighted that motivation through financial rewards should be employed by USQ to retain talented staff. These results conform to the view of participants as stated by AlKerdawy (2016); Jindal and Shaikh (2015); Kimathi (2015); Moayedi and Vaseghi (2016); Nakhate (2016); Ogbogu (2017); Veer Ramjeawon and Rowley (2017) who emphasise that motivational and valued work, professional advancement, and a supportive learning environment prove to be a key driver in retaining talented employees.

The second theme explored in this research is talent attraction. The outcomes emphasised that USQ is interested in attracting talented individuals to careers because those individuals have a significant impact in relation to achieving its aims, growth, and organisational success. This theme according to the views of participants included three subthemes: (i) *career advancement; (ii)*

No.	Themes	Participants of the FG session											Σ	%
		1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**	**11**		
1	Retaining talent												10	90.9
	Competitive benchmarking										✓			
	Employee empowerment	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓		
	Employee motivation	✓			✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓		
2	Attracting talent												10	90.9
	Career advancement	✓		✓	✓		✓		✓					
	Work-life balance		✓					✓		✓	✓	✓		
	Work environment				✓									
3	Developing talent												9	81.8
	Coaching talent	✓		✓	✓	✓				✓		✓		
	Training need identification	✓	✓		✓	✓								
	Opportunities for talented development					✓						✓		
	Training and support	✓							✓					
	Proper development strategies									✓				
	Skills gap analysis										✓			
4	Talent acquisition		✓					✓		✓			5	45.4
	Building talents					✓					✓			
5	Performance management			✓			✓	✓			✓		4	36.3
6	Leadership development												3	27.2
	Role-assignment			✓										
	Outcomes of leadership development										✓			
	Requirement of leadership					✓								

Table 1: TMPs used in australian higher education
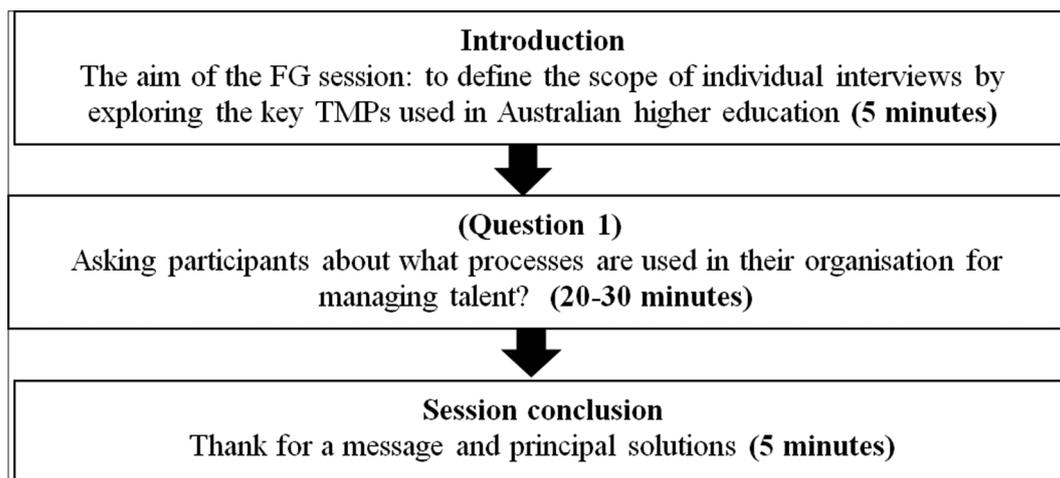
Figure 1: The schedule of the FG session

work-life balance; and (iii) work environment. The results from the career advancement support the view of G. W. Carter, Cook, and Dorsey (2011); Kimathi (2015); Schlechter, Hung, and Bussin (2014); Thompson (2013) who point out that an organisation should create opportunities for highly qualified individuals that would lead them to improve their career paths. *Work-life balance* is another factor mentioned by participants which should be highlighted by USQ to attract talented individuals. This outcome is supported by Chandra (2012); Kimathi (2015); Thompson (2013); Yap (2016) who state that work-life balance is a determinant factor for attracting new talented individuals, because organisations expect their employees to work in tandem with their objectives. Participants' FG emphasised that *work environment is* the third key element of talent attraction. This result conforms to Chandra (2012); Lyria (2014); Ogbogu (2017); Schlechter et al. (2014); Thompson (2013) who emphasise that having an organisation characterised by the perfect working environment can be a motivating factor to attract talented employees.

The third key theme explored in this research is talent development. In general, the majority of the respondents expressed the willingness of USQ to make talented employees learn tasks at ever-increasing levels to enable them to become more rapidly productive; yet there are some challenges which may obstruct talent development such as availability of experts of TM. These results conform to the view of participants as stated by Chuai (2008); Moayedi and Vaseghi (2016); Mohan, Muthaly, and Annakis (2015); Wu et al. (2016) who point out that a talent development process needs to be embedded within staffing progress, and regarded as a successful measure for organisations to improve the skills of their highly qualified individuals. According to the views of participants, it involved six subthemes: *(i) coaching talent; (ii) training need identifications; (iii) opportunities for talented development; (iv) training and support; (v) proper development strategies; and (vi) skills gap analysis*. From the empirical results in the current case study clarify that *talented coaching* is a key process of talent development at the university. These outcomes are consistent with AlKerdawy (2016); Garavan et al. (2012); Meyers and Van Woerkom (2014) who indicate that coaching talent can be a significant tool for achieving high talent development through learning skills and creating knowledge. Participants mentioned in their discussion to the importance of *training need identifications* and *opportunities for improving skills of highly qualified individuals* as key parts of talent development. The findings of these subthemes show that USQ supports academic staff through providing suitable development opportunities to gain required knowledge and skills. These outcomes are consistent with AlKerdawy (2016); Kimathi (2015); Lyria (2014); Wu et al. (2016); Xue (2014) who recommend that an organisation should offer its employees proper development strategies to improve their strong points and hence improve their total performance including particular competencies, strengthening their motivation and boosting their career development. *The fourth key practice* of talent development is training and support. This outcome is supported by Prinsloo (2017); Walker (2017) who emphasise that training and mentoring programs are valuable tools for developing talents. Participants' FG evidenced that proper development strategies *(the fifth subtheme)* are essential for developing high qualify employees. These results are in line with Horváthová and Durdová (2011); Nyaribo (2016); Wu et al. (2016) who outline that organisations should offer their experienced individuals to develop their strong points. These literature recommend that individuals should develop their total performance containing particular competences, strengthening their motivation and improving their job advancement. Skills gap analysis *is the six element* of talent development. The results of this theme clarify that USQ identifies job description, learning content systems and competency models depending on the required training of its talented staff. These outcomes are consistent with Bersin (2013) who recommends that an organisation should create a set of simple self-assessments which describe essential skills required and experience needed for each functional position in the organisation.

The fourth key theme of this research is talent acquisition. Five participants indicated that acquiring skilled talented individuals is needed to meet USQ's requirements. These results correspond to the work of Randhawa (2017); R. Silzer and B. Dowell (2010) who notice that an organisation should build its talented staff skills to meet organisational needs.

The fifth key theme of this research is performance management. Four participants discussed the necessity of the performance management process within talent management processes in USQ. They indicated that although the performance management system is complex, it can be an actual tool for achieving job satisfaction through applying the job enrichment strategy. These findings are consistent with Mdluli (2015) who observes that job enrichment is an active strategy to improve the performance management system within an organisation.

Three participants mentioned the leadership development process as the sixth and final key theme used in USQ. The outcomes of the leadership development are similar to the previous studies of D. R. Davis and Maldonado (2015); Peet (2010) who agree that innovative organisations should focus on viable TM potentials and leadership development within higher education. In the same vein, Chami-Malaeb and Garavan (2013); Dalakoura (2010) state that the leadership development process enables leaders to obtain the skills and competences necessary to be effective by role-assignment leadership programs.

CONCLUSION

The FG session has explored six key themes and sixteen subthemes of TMPs in Australian higher education. Some of the findings are similar to the results of the brainstorming approach, however, they were additional significant findings. The key themes were talent retention, talent attraction, talent development, talent acquisition, performance management, and leadership development. These performance management and leadership development were the additional themes. There is a strong desire of USQ to attract, develop and retain the highly qualified individuals represented by academic and professional staff. As a result, participants deem those practices as critical keys to organisational success. Hence, the researchers recommend that the investigated themes should be particularly emphasised by USQ and other Australian universities in general to increase their profits and ranking. There is a need to host external experts and specialists in the field of TM to raise the awareness of management and employees to the strategic role that TM plays in achieving sustainable success.

Nonetheless, a small sample size is one of the main limitations of this research. There is only one Queensland regional university. A single case study is adopted with one group of human resources and ICT managers who are working in one university. Moreover, outcomes of this research cannot be generalised to other organisational settings. Further educational work would be beneficial to cover the examination to a broader sample of firms within different industries.

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END NOTES

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