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Exploring the role of a work integrated learning programme in facilitating sustainable graduate employment in the Transport Industry: A conceptual paper

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Abstract: The main objective of this preliminary research was to present a conceptual framework that can best guide the work integrated learning practices for graduates of the South African transport industry. More specifically we aimed at identifying the talent intelligent gratributes required to ensure employable graduates. Furthermore we also aimed at detecting the talent management strategies, processes and practices needed for sustainable graduate employment in the transport industry. Drawing from existing research and literature, we identified multiple intelligences such Emotional Intelligence (EQ), Cultural Intelligence (CQ), Business Intelligence (BQ), Social Intelligence (SQ) and Digital Intelligence (DQ) as key to the development of employable talent intelligent graduates. In addition we propose a graduate talent life cycle for the effective talent management of graduates in the workplace. The graduate talent life cycle includes seven steps: Talent Mind-set, Talent preparation, Talent Branding, Talent acquisition and mapping, Talent development, Talent performance and recognition and Talent retention. Finally we present an integrated work integrated learning framework for graduates by incorporating work integrated learning stakeholders, talent intelligent gratributes and talent life cycle components.

Keywords: *Graduates, Talent, Talent Management, Work integrated learning*

Introduction

The contribution of work integrated learning (WIL) programmes towards graduate employability is widely documented. Scholars, managers and practitioners advocate that WIL programmes are useful for academics to integrate theory into practice (Govender & Wait, 2017) and “assist students in their transition from educational to professional practice” (Abery, Drummond & Bevan, 2015, p. 87). Work integrated learning programmes guide the career choices and plans of students (Swart, 2013). Applied within the South African context the utility and effectiveness of WIL programmes were proven in various academic disciplines and contexts such as Information, Communication and Technology (Pop, 2010), Human Resource Management (Alson, Schutte, Barkhuizen & Paadi, 2016), Agriculture (Leutle, 2017), Marketing (Govender & Wait, 2017) and Education (Swart, 2013). Research on the application of WIL programmes in the South African Transport Industry is yet to be forthcoming.

The purpose of this preliminary research is to present a conceptual framework on how WIL programmes can best be applied in the South African transport industry to enhance sustainable graduate employability. More specifically we address the following research questions:

- What are the talent intelligent gratributes required to ensure employable graduates in the South African transport industry?
- What talent management strategies, processes and practices are required to ensure sustainable employment for graduates in the transport industry?

The transport industry worldwide and also in South Africa, traditionally does necessarily invoke respect. The vast majority of the population is oblivious to the fact that transport contributes between 22% and 26% towards the Gross Domestic Profit of the South African economy. Currently transport and related qualifications are offered by a very limited number of higher educational institutions in South Africa. The benefit for individuals being capacitated in this field is that it is seen as a critical scarce skill, which is associated with a general expectation that individuals being trained therein, would be in a position to seek and secure employment after the completion of their studies. The questions however arise: Why are there still vast numbers of unemployed individuals holding qualifications in transport and related fields? Why are individuals holding formal qualifications in transport and related fields not in a position to seek and secure sustainable employment? Furthermore, what do educational institutions do to improve the employability of their graduates?

For the purpose of this research we refer to graduates, Generation Y and Millenials interchangeably. Generation Y or Millennials (born between 1980 and 1995) are currently entering the workplace at a vast pace and are searching for stability and opportunities in an uncertain world (Deloitte, 2017). Generation Y is characterized by confidence, demanding nature, impatience, collective action, teamwork and optimism (Srinivasan, 2012; Weingarten, 2009). Consequently Generation Y employees are perceived to be of high maintenance and difficult to manage. Higher education institutions are therefore required to equip and prepare such graduates with the necessary workplace skills and business acumen to meet the requirements of employers. Employers need to ensure that they have a graduate talent management strategy in place that will facilitate graduate expectations in the workplace. Therefore, these dualistic worlds need to meet each other and as such do we propose a work integrated learning framework for the South African transport industry.

Literature Review

Talent Management

The field of talent management has been subjected to intense scrutiny and critique since its inception by McKenzie consulting in the 1990's (Collings & Melahi, 2009). Many scholars and practitioners are of the opinion that the practice of talent management is "old wine in new bottles" and merely replacing traditional human resource management practices. Dries and colleagues (Dries, 2013) alluded to the lack of theoretical basis for talent management which in turn challenges the empirical validity and usability of the concept. Furthermore, the application of talent management practices are compromised due to the lack of definition and consensus on the concept of "talent" in the workplace (Lubinda, Barkhuizen & Schutte, 2017). Scholars and practitioners who have an understanding of what talent entails are in conflict as to whether talent should be inclusively applied for the entire workforce or for only a selected elitist group (Iles, Preece & Chuai, 2010; Preece, Iles & Chuai, 2011). Consequently, the discipline of talent management still remains full of ambiguities, vagueness and open for intense criticism.

Talent Intelligent Gratributes

A great deal of research has been devoted towards identifying the critical employability skills and attributes of graduates. The majority of research placed a lot of emphasis on “soft” employability skills such as communication, problem solving, interpersonal skills, team work and professionalism (see Williams, 2015) whilst others also highlighted the importance of “hard” skills such as technical skills (Raftopoulos, Coetzee & Visser, 2009).

The concept of intelligence is mainly used to advance existing societal agendas. Talent forms the antithesis of this discussion, questioning and often opposing societal agendas, as well as proposing new ones. Intelligence forms the synthesis of this discussion, balancing the old with the new. Moreover, in the new world of work managers recognize the need to create an understanding towards an intelligent talented workforce to achieve both stability and change within a societal context. However, the common proposition is that the skills developing intelligence, typically lead people to be rewarded in terms of whatever the reward structure of a society is. South Africa has a diverse society and as such what is considered intelligent in one place may not be in another, as cultural psychologists have appreciated in their studies of intelligence (see Serpell, 2000). Additionally, talent intelligent people are rewarded because they are adaptable to multiple environments.

Therefore we identified multiple “intelligences” which we believe are essential for a balanced future talented workforce. These include Emotional Intelligence (EQ), Business Intelligence (BQ), Cultural Intelligence (CQ), Social Intelligence (SQ) and Digital Intelligence (DQ). A brief description of the identified intelligences and its applicability to graduate employability are discussed next.

Emotional Intelligence (EQ)

Emotional intelligence refers to an individual’s ability to perceive emotions accurately and regulate their emotions to enhance the emotional and intellectual growth needed for success in the workplace (see Jones, 2008). Numerous researchers found that emotional intelligence is a significant predictor of graduates’ employability scores (see Jameson, Carthy, McGuinness & McSweeney, 2016). The study by Jameson et al. (2016) further established that EQ enables graduates to develop the required career skills by employers and increased their employability and work success. Dacre Pool (2011) found that graduates’ emotional intelligence can be improved through training strategies which will assist them in understanding their emotional functioning in the workplace.

Business Intelligence (BQ)

According to Andrews and Higson (2008) “hard” business knowledge and skills are essential for graduate employability. In this study graduates were of the opinion that education and acquired skills in marketing, finance, organisational behaviour, human resource management and general business knowledge contributed mostly to their understanding of the business environment. Other studies highlighted the importance of having business writing skills and business acumen (Ntsizwane, Barkhuizen & Swanepoel, 2013).

Cultural Intelligence (CQ)

Cultural intelligence has been defined in various ways but basically refers to a person’s ability to perform effectively in culturally diverse situations (Ng, Schweitzer & Lyons, 2010). Ongoing globalisation and the diversification of South African workplaces

necessitate a future workforce to think global but act local. Nel, Nel, Adams and De Beer (2017) maintain that a failure to understand and adjust to people from different cultures can result in inappropriate language and behaviour. Generation Y employees in particular tend to seek equality, fairness and tolerance in the workplace (Ng et al., 2010). A study by Chen (2015) showed that cultural intelligence enhanced the employability of indigenous college students.

Social Intelligence (SQ)

Lau (2016) refers to social intelligence as the set of abilities and skills that individuals use to manage social situations and maintain relationships. Goleman (2007) is of the opinion that social intelligence is the new science of human relationships. A study by Meijs, Cillessen, Scholte, Segers and Spijkerman (2010) showed that social intelligence is an important predictor of whether college graduates will be included and accepted in their peer groups. Eshgi, Arofzad and Hosain's (2013) definition of social intelligence also opens up the opportunity for graduates to interact with other generations in the workplace. In addition, Eshgi et al. (2013) believe that social intelligence enables individuals to accomplish relevant objectives in specific social settings. According to Ng et al. (2010) generation Y prefers building close and social relationships with co-workers and supervisors.

Digital intelligence (DQ)

Increases in the use of technology and digital content are changing the way in which people are interacting with one another in the workplace. Currently there is a significant lack of digital skills in South African organisations especially with the vast numbers of millennials that are entering (Tullett, 2015). Although generation Y employees are believed to be technologically enhanced, higher education institutions tend to focus too much on preparing graduates with traditional work skills whilst neglecting the much needed digital skills required for the new world of work. A study by Pop and Barkhuizen (2010) showed that more than 80% of the mentors who participated in a WIL programme believed that technical (IT) skills training contributed to the employability of graduate interns.

Combined, we believe that the above intelligences can contribute towards graduates becoming more talent intelligent in their career from first employment to retirement. We define a talent intelligent and employable student as a person who have the potential for talent and can make a valuable contribution towards the success of an organization. Furthermore we concur with Goff (2008) that a talented graduate is a person who possesses the right combination of inborn abilities, complemented by the knowledge, skills, attitudes (competence) and experience required to perform in a given situation. We also advocate that a talent intelligent graduate should demonstrate the willingness and self-belief to be successful in a given occupation (Barkhuizen & Schutte, 2015).

Talent Management of Graduates

Research to date shows a considerable lack of inclusion of graduate talent as part of an organisation's talent management strategies (McCracken, Currie and Harrison, 2016). We believe that talent management is an integrated process that should be aligned with the business strategy of an organisation (Barkhuizen, 2015). The talent strategy should include a compelling talent value proposition that will enable organisations to manage the complete talent life cycle of a talented employee starting with recruitment and ultimately retention (Saurombe, 2017).

Schutte and Barkhuizen (2016) developed a talent life cycle that can be applied in the workplace to guide the careers of graduates. The life cycle consist of the following components: Talent Mind-set, Preparation for Talent, Talent Branding, Talent Mapping and Acquisition, Talent development, Talent Performance and Recognition and Talent retention. These seven steps Talent Life cycle can be regarded as an essential enabler for organisations to truly value graduate talent. A brief discussion of each of the components are presented below.

Talent Mind-set

The talent mind-set of an organisation is a critical success factor that can enhance its capability to drive its strategic objectives. In particular leadership mind-sets are key imperatives for successful talent management and should have a deep conviction that talent is key to business success (Barkhuizen, Welby-Cooke, Schutte & Stanz, 2014). According to Guerci and Solari (2012) the reciprocity between business leadership and talent management is an important driver for the attraction, development and retention of talented employees. Han, Chung, Oh, Woo and Hitchcock (2014) found that mentorship opportunities from the employer assisted interns to reach their personal and professional goals during the early stages of their careers. Bolton-King (2016) established that mentorship is a significant enhancer of graduate employability.

Preparation for Talent

According to Collings and Melahi (2009) organisations should focus on developing a talent pool of high potential and high performing employees to fulfil key roles in organisations. This involves a process of talent forecasting on the available demand and supply of the future graduate talent needs for the organisation. Work integrated learning programmes should therefore focus on preparing a future generation of “fit-for-purpose” graduates that can contribute to the success of the organisation.

Talent Branding

The importance of a compelling organisational brand to attract talented employees are well documented (Lesenyeho, 2017; Saurombe, 2017). A study by Terjesen, Vinnicombe and Freeman (2007) showed that organisational attributes such as investment in the training and development of employees, a caring work environment, opportunities for long-term career progression and work variety were important for graduates in selecting their future employer of choice. Similar results were observed in a study by Barkhuizen (2014) among generation Y employees in terms of training and development and career progress opportunities. The participants in this study furthermore considered pay and benefits and work-life balance as important factors in their preferred employer decisions.

Talent Acquisition and Mapping

Organisations need to ensure that the hiring process of graduates is efficient, effective and focus on the hiring of quality graduates. A report by PricewaterhouseCoopers indicated that the attraction of the best millennial employees is critical for the future of employers (PWC, 2011). Hurst and Good (2009) emphasised the importance of effective recruitment strategies that will ensure the smooth transition of graduates from higher education to the workplace. According to Faour and Heinze (2013) organisations can use social media creatively to highlight their organisational culture in such a way to attract Generation Y as a future employees. Huybers (2011) found that organisations should focus on aspects such as the company’s core values (i.e. honesty and integrity), respect

for Generation Y, and support for diversity and encouragement for advancement in its advertisements to attract potential talented Generation Y employees.

Talent development

The importance of talent development and career progression for Generation Y employees are well documented (Barkhuizen, 2014; Terjesen et al., 2015). Unlike previous generations, Generation Y employees prefer to work in an environment where they can fast track their career progress. WIL programmes can assist graduates to have more direction on their career development and manage their own careers (Van Schalkwyk, Niyimbanira & Surujlal, 2012).

Performance Management and Recognition

According to Srivastava (2013) performance management policies of HR departments are necessary to support Generation Y employees. Gilbert (2011) found that performance management is the most important driver of the work engagement of millennials. A report by Forbes indicated that millennials prefer immediate feedback on their performance and immediate recognition or a promotion (Kiisel, 2012).

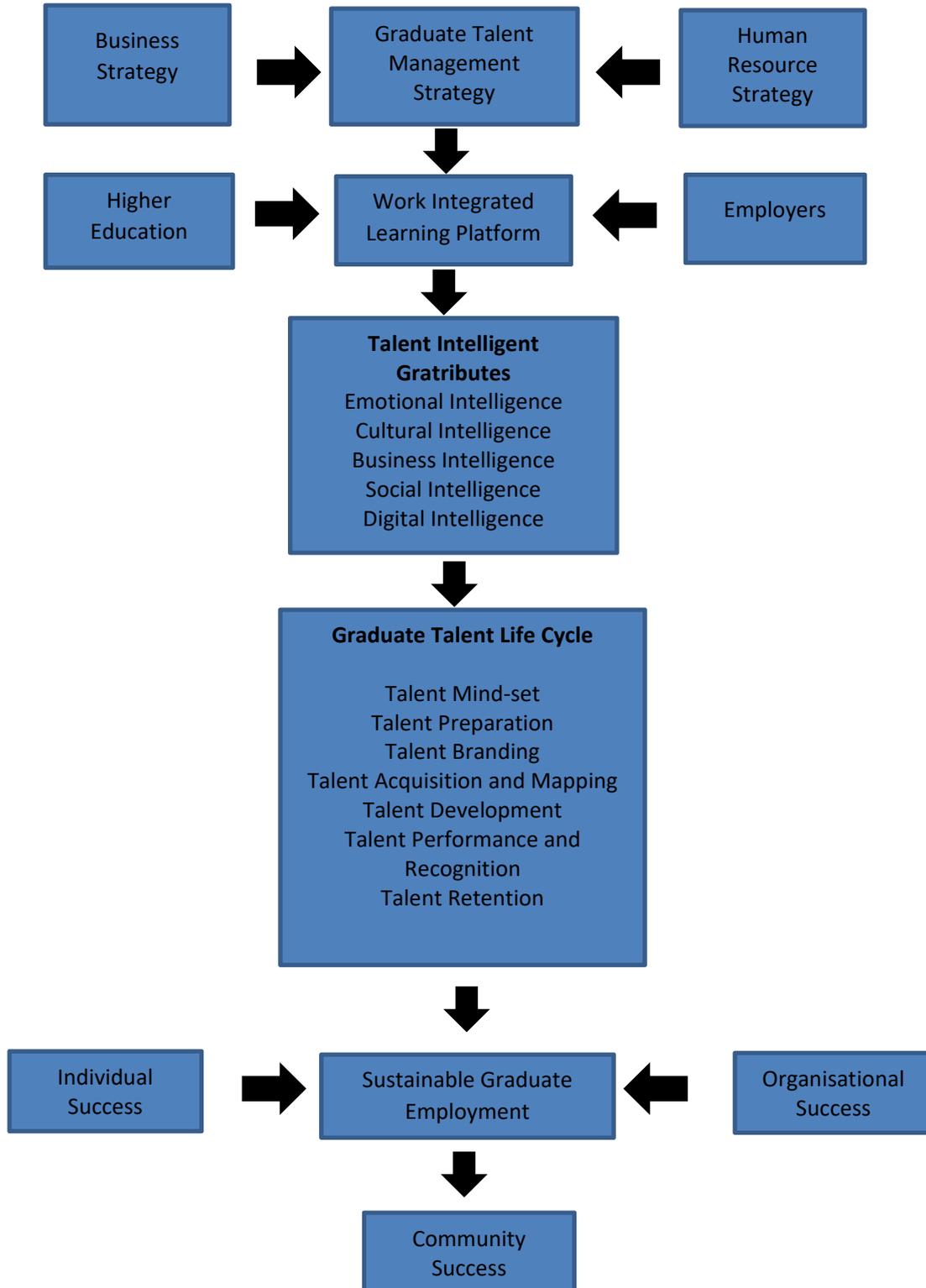
Retention

The retention of Generation Y presents a huge challenge for many organisations as these individuals are known to change jobs in a short space of time. According to Sylvester (2015) the high turnover rates of millennials are a direct consequence of organisations failing to understand the “language” of millennials. A study by Huybers (2011) showed that Generation Y regarded factors such as salary, personal recognition, flexible scheduling, career advancement and work/life balance as important in their decision to quit their jobs.

Towards a preliminary WIL Framework for the Transport Industry

The framework starts from the premise that organisations need to develop an integrated talent management strategy that aligns its human resource management strategy and business strategy. A talent management strategy is useful to detect and predict the future supply and demand of graduate talent for key positions in the organisation. Once the talent management strategy is in place, the organisation can in collaboration with relevant higher education institutions develop and implement a work integrated learning platform that will equip students with employable talent attributes such as emotional intelligence, business intelligence, cultural intelligence, social intelligence and digital intelligence. Organisations should apply the talent life cycle as part of the work integrated learning programme to ensure that the career of graduates are effectively management from recruitment and on-boarding to retention. An effectively assembled work integrated learning programme that contains the above elements can lead to sustainable graduate employment which in turn will contribute to graduate career success, organisational performance and effective services to the broader community. The framework is displayed in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Work Integrated Learning Framework for the South African Transport Industry



Source: Authors Own

Conclusion

In conclusion this research aimed to present an integrated framework that can guide the work integrated learning process of graduates in the South African transport industry from start to finish. Research on work integrated learning in the South African transport industry is still in its infancy shoes and opens up the opportunity to determine the state-of-the-art competency requirements that will ensure the sustainable employability of graduates.

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