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Talent in international business defined

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Introduction

Globalization of business creates an increasingly complex, dynamic and challenging business environment. As the world becomes more interconnected, technology is advancing, and competition is rising, companies are looking for talent who possess the competencies to handle such complex demands. More sophisticated competencies are sought after such as creativity, adaptivity and the ability to make savvy decisions in times of uncertainty (Chambers, Foulon, Handfield-Jones, Hankin, S. M., & Michaels, 1998). According to Axelrod, Handfield-Jones, & Welsh, (2001) talented workers can help companies to keep their competitive advantage and also raise revenue and profits considerably. Globally, however, there is a talent shortage and businesses are looking for talent with the right competencies who can create such a competitive advantage for businesses (Allen, Bryant, & Vardaman, 2010; Beechler & Woodward, 2009; Bhanugopan, Wang, Lockhart, & Farrell, 2017; Dalayga, Mohkber, & Rashid, 2017; Shavinina, 2008; Ready & Conger, 2007; Silzer & Church, 2009; Tarique & Schuler, 2010).

Higher education responded to this need for talent with the development of Honours Programmes (HP's), designed to educate talented students who are able and willing to do more than the regular programme offers (Wolfensberger, 2012). However, what competencies these HP's need to focus on is still unclear. A competency framework, also called profile, specifically related to talent competencies is necessary to inform the curriculum of HP's to be able to formulate learning outcomes specifically related to talent, which can improve alignment between the professional field and education.

Competencies are described in frameworks and are helpful in identifying which competencies are needed from the professional field (Vereniging Hogescholen, 2011, 2018). Despite many efforts in international business (IB) to describe competency frameworks to give direction to education, literature expresses that graduates still fail to meet the professional demands and alignment between the professional field and education is not achieved (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Jackson, 2009; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005; Oraison, Konjarski, & Howe, 2019; Osmani, Weerakkody, Hindi, & Eldabi, 2018; Washer, 2007; Wilton, 2008).

Lack of alignment often exists between the demands of the professional field and what graduates have learned (Azevedo, Apfelthaler, & Hurst, 2012,

Osmani, Weerakkody, Hindi, Al-Esmail, Eldabi, Kapoor, & Irani, 2015; Wilton, 2008), so implementation of a competency framework in education is not without challenges and is not always successful. This may be caused by varying interpretations or perceptions of competency frameworks between professionals, educators and students. According to Sternberg (2013) educators often misperceive what employers want and this contributes to lack of alignment. Dragoo and Barrows (2016) stress the need to use common language when implementing competency based education to improve alignment. A study by Renting Dornan, Gans, Borleffs, Cohen-Schotanus, & Jaarsma (2015) in medical education, found that how mentors perceive the competency frameworks may be influenced by their knowledge, experience and interpretations and their interpretations may not be in line with how it was intended by the professional field. Also in HP's, where students self-direct their learning, students' interpretation of a competency framework may not be in line with how it was intended by professionals. According to Fullan & Langworthy (2014), how students use and interpret a competency framework is not always as intended and more clarity is needed.

Perceptions on a competency framework for a talented international business professional can also vary internationally and this may also influence implementation in educational programmes. Insights into international perspectives on the competency profile for talent will help to better understand how to implement and use it in HP's.

This thesis contributes to the knowledge and insights regarding the competencies describing a highly talented international business professional – here managers and leaders – according to professionals themselves, resulting in a competency framework or profile related to talent. In addition, international perspectives on the competencies of talented international business professionals are obtained, which will contribute to better alignment of HP's in international business education with expectations from the field.

Secondly, after implementation of the competency framework for highly talented international business professionals, honours students' perceptions and how they work with and interpret the competencies will be studied. This offers insights into whether the competencies are interpreted as these were intended by the professional field. Differences can be identified and help to better fine-tune the HP's and bridge the gap between education and the profession.

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Competencies in international business

In International business, pertaining to management and leadership, competencies have already been researched since McClelland's publication (1973), in which he called for measuring competencies rather than just intelligence, leading to the description of many competency-based leadership frameworks.

Competency frameworks are used in competency-based education to guide the curriculum in such a way that it prepares graduates for the demands of the work field. However, implementation of competency frameworks in education is challenging as they appear not to be the clear blueprint education is hoping for. Inconsistent and changing competency terminology hinders understanding as to their exact meaning, resulting in lack of consensus (Bücker & Poutsma, 2010; Levy, Beechler, Taylor & Boyacigiller, 2007; Mendenhall, Reiche, Bird & Osland, 2012). Examples of this are found in relation to globalization and global management competencies. An early descriptive study by Adler and Bartholomew (1992), for example, describe the transnational manager rather than an international manager and that the transnational manager is skillful at working with people from many cultures simultaneously and have a broader range of skills compared to an international manager. In a similar train of thought, Rhinesmith (1992, 1993) describes the Global Mindset meaning: "seeing the world from a broad perspective, looking for unexpected trends and opportunities to achieve objectives" (Rhinesmith, 1993, p.24). Later studies refer to cultural intelligence (CQ) (Earley & Ang, 2003), described as a set of skills to manage effectively in culturally diverse settings and to show the capability to interpret behavior and show a level of adaptability (Van Dyne, Ang, & Livermore, 2010). The terms are related and overlap in the meaning they convey, which at the same time mystifies rather than clarifies the concepts. When competency frameworks are developed and implemented in training programmes and in IB education, it is important that the language used is the same, which is currently a problem (Dragoo, 2016; Jackson, 2014).

Besides lack of conceptual clarity or uniformity, another point of criticism in relation to competency frameworks is that they contain too many competencies to all master (Conger & Ready, 2004; Wu & Lee, 2007). An example framework containing many competencies, is Boyatzis' (1982) management competency model containing five clusters: goal and action management; leadership; human resource; directing subordinates; focus on others. Each cluster was subdivided

into 19 generic competencies.

Another example is Rhinesmith (1996) who describes a global leader who needs a global mindset including: having a drive for a broader picture, balance contradictions, engage process, flow with change, value diversity and learn globally. Besides this, another cluster is described containing the skills: managing competition, managing complexity, managing alignment, managing change, managing teams, and managing learning, each unpacked in more specific competencies.

More competency frameworks containing many competencies pertaining to management and leadership followed, along with review studies attempting to systematize existing competency frameworks (Boyatzis, 2008; Jokinen, 2005). Clemmer (2012) argues that in business, trying to train and improve too many competencies is not conducive to success. To help facilitate adoption in education, it is important to work with a concise yet comprehensive competency framework.

As we face a complex changing economy, with continuing globalization and new technologies, new kinds of managerial skills and more sophisticated talents are needed (Ashton & Morton, 2005; Guthridge, Komm, & Lawson, 2008; Stahl, Björkman, Farndale, Morris, Paauwe, Stiles, & Wright, 2012), but what competencies pertain to talent is not yet described. Many competencies have been identified as being necessary for international business professionals, but they have not been described specifically pertaining to talent only.

In addition, many existing competency frameworks are often not empirically derived and more empirical research is needed to test the validity (Bücker & Poutsma, 2010; Suutari, 2002).

While the plethora and diversity regarding competencies and competency frameworks show their relevance and importance, it seems that they are not concise, uniform and clear and not specifically related to talent only. This, in combination with the competency frameworks being unsupported by empirical evidence (Suutari, 2002), highlights the necessity of an empirically derived competency framework pertaining to talent only in international business (Silzer & Church, 2009).

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In order for students in HP's in international business to formulate clear learning outcomes related to a comprehensive, concise competency framework for talent, it requires the development of such an empirically derived framework, to which we contribute in this thesis.

Higher education institutions need to educate talented students in HP's, to meet the current demands for talent in the professional field (Wolfensberger, 2015). This raises the question of what characterises talent, which is not an easy concept to define and varies according to the profession.

Talent

In the literature the term excellence is often equated with the terms talent and giftedness, and these terms are already described in ancient history. The meaning attached to talent changed over time, which may contribute to the variety of descriptions and interpretations. The term *talent* originates from the Greek word tálenton, and represented units of weight or sums of money. This was in effect the same in those days as the weight of precious metals such as silver and gold also represented a sum of money. Later, talent became a unit of currency, a coin, which was valuable and worth much money (Tansley, 2011). Possessing a talent was rather special and solely for the rich. The value of one talent was typically enough to pay a common worker for 20 years.

In the late middle ages, the meaning attached to talent shifted from economic- to human capital and talent was more associated with a special gift, only offered by the divine to very few people (Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, & González-Cruz, 2013; Tansley, 2011). This change in meaning attached to talent is at the roots of the view that talent is an innate gift and only possessed by few people (Thunnissen, Boselie, & Fruytier, 2013). The interpretation that talent is a gift of god diluted over the centuries and around the nineteenth century, talent was more connected to a person's aptitude and abilities and particularly to the demonstration of such abilities (Gallardo et al., 2013; Tansley, 2011).

In educational psychology, this is in line with theories on giftedness e.g. Gagné (2004, P. 11) describes gifts as "the possession and use of outstanding natural abilities, to a degree that places a person at least among the top 10% of age peers" and talent as "the outstanding mastery of systematically developed abilities, called competencies (knowledge and skills), in at least one field of human activity to a degree that places a person at least among the top 10% of

age peers who are or have been active in that field". In his theory of deliberate practice and expertise, Ericsson (1996) states that the term excellence implies superiority in performance above that required to be an expert. Sternberg refers to giftedness as expertise in development (Sternberg, 2003).

Development of gifts implies the necessity of a context in which to develop gifts to talent and typical contexts are as sports, music or science and also in relation to the work field. The context in which we explore talent further is international business (IB).

Talent and international business

In the context of international business, talent is often described using four dimensions (Thunnissen et al., 2013). These are the subject- and object dimension, and the inclusive- and exclusive dimension. The first, subject dimension, describes talent as people that are difficult to replace and scarce. The second dimension, object dimension, describes talent as characteristics of people such as skills knowledge and abilities, referred to as competencies. In addition to the subject- and object dimension, sometimes companies adhere to an inclusive definition of talent versus an exclusive definition. An inclusive definition of talent implies that everyone in the workforce has some talent, so it is not reserved for only a few, and it is important for companies to recognize where the area of talent lies in each worker (Buckingham & Vosburgh, 2001). However, main criticism of the inclusive approach was that it ignored to differentiate contributions of workers, which can make them feel unappreciated and reduce motivation (Dries, 2013).

In contrast, in an exclusive definition to talent, talented people are regarded as difficult to replace (Garavan, Carbery, & Rock, 2012; Ulrich, & Smallwood, 2011), implying that talent is indeed reserved for a few, the high potential, and is used to differentiate a select group of the workforce who rank top. Such high potentials are also referred to as high performers, star- or A-players who demonstrate exceptional ability (Pepermans, Vloeberghs, & Perkisas, 2003). There is a global shortage of this select group of potential high performers in IB, and, on a global scale, corporations are head hunting to find such talent (Beechler & Woodward, 2009; Silzer & Church, 2009; Tarique & Schuler, 2010). In this thesis we adhere to the exclusive and object definition to talent: a select group of potentially high performers or talented individuals, with certain and exceptional skills knowledge and abilities, here competencies, who have the potential to excel.

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One way of preparing and shaping talented students is by special educational offerings to develop specific competencies related to talent and this is done in honours programmes.

Honours programmes

Honours education originates from the USA, where it was Frank Aydellotte who established the first honours programme (HP) for talented and gifted students. He believed that there are "brilliant students who need to be offered greater independence in their work, avoiding the spoon-feeding which makes much of our college instruction of the present day of secondary-school character" (Aydelotte, 1921, p.23-24). This conviction still holds true in HP's today. The number of HP's grew exponentially in the US and in the early 21st century half of all public and private colleges and universities in the U.S.A. offer an honors programme (Achterberg 2005; Cognard-Black & Spisak, 2019).

Dutch national education increasingly realises the importance of educating (higher education) students in preparation for excellence to meet the demands of the professional field. There is a growing awareness of diversity in students' ability in higher education on graduate-, as well as undergraduate level. The Dutch Ministry of Education launched the Sirius Programme, providing government funding to also stimulate the development of HP's in higher education (Sirius, 2012). This resulted in HP's being developed in nearly all higher education programmes in the Netherlands (Wolfensberger, 2015). Also in Europe, HP's are growing and now exist in 11 European countries (Wolfensberger, 2015).

HP's are designed for students who are talented, highly motivated and committed (Wolfensberger, 2012). Honours students have the capacity to do more than required by the regular curriculum (Clark & Zubizaretta, 2008; Wolfensberger, 2012). In addition, they have the desire to learn, the drive to excel and are typically curious and creative thinkers (Scager, Akkerman, Keesen, Mainhard, Pilot, & Wubbels, 2012). Honours students have the need and preference for freedom and for autonomous learning (Wolfensberger, Van Eijl, & Pilot, 2012). As the characteristics of honours students are different from regular students, they need distinct teaching pedagogy to help these students reach their full potential (Scager et al., 2012). Wolfensberger (2012) has systematically and empirically researched that honours pedagogy is centered around three key components: community building; enhancing academic competence, and offering freedom (Wolfensberger, 2012). In an honours community, faculty and

students have close contact and there is a sense of connectedness, which has positive effects on students' well-being and also academic performance (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). The third component, offering freedom, in the honors pedagogy allows students freedom to self-direct their learning and to formulate their own learning outcomes, based on a competency framework and with educators as facilitators of this process. A competency framework related to talent helps to guide students in HP's to formulate clear learning outcomes.

Designing competency frameworks is a challenge since it is not clear what competencies define excellence or talent. How competency frameworks or profiles have been developed differs in various higher education institutions (HEI's) in the Netherlands. Some HEI's have developed a single framework for all disciplines and all HP's, based on literature review, which means that the frameworks are more generic in nature (Robbe, Heijne-Penninga, Wijkamp, & Wolfensberger, 2016) Examples are the Reflective Professional Profile, developed by Saxion University of Applied Science (UAS) and the Profile for Innovative Action, developed by Rotterdam (UAS) (Robbe et al., 2016).

Other institutions, like the Hanze (UAS) designed evidence-based competency frameworks in collaboration with the professional field, resulting in competency frameworks related to one specific profession, such as the Excellent Allied Health Care Professional (Paans, Wijkamp, Wiltens, & Wolfensberger, 2013), the Excellent Nurse (Paans, Robbe, Wijkamp, & Wolfensberger, 2017) and the Excellent Communication Professional (Fuller, Heijne-Penninga, Kamans, Van Vuuren, de Jong, & Wolfensberger (2018).

It seems that how competency frameworks for HP's have been developed differs. Some focused more on describing generic competencies (Robbe et al., 2016) and some more on profession- specific competencies (Paans et al., 2013; Paans et al., 2017; Fuller et al., 2018).

Problem definitions and research questions

In IB, high performers are in great demand, and education plays an important role in supplying graduates that are ready for the work field. HP's prepare talented students to meet the needs of the professional field by developing the competencies to show excellent performance. Which competencies to concentrate on in the HP's is unclear and this needs to be addressed.

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In addition, previous competencies research shows misalignment between how competency frameworks were interpreted by educators and students, and how they were intended by the professional field and our research concentrates on these two issues.

Research on competencies is elaborate but entails some problems of clarity, conciseness, focus and lack of empirical base. In addition, they are not specifically related to talent. In this research project, we have first concentrated on creating clarity in this area. We contribute to understanding what competencies in IB are specifically related to talent. The first of two main research question is:

1. What characterises talented international business professionals?
Researching this has resulted in the development of an evidence-based empirical competency framework specifically related to talent. In addition, international perspectives on the talent competency framework were obtained to understand if perceptions of the competencies for talent varied between countries. After gaining international perspectives, the competency framework was implemented in the HP for IB studies, and we evaluated student perspectives on it and how they worked with the profile answering the second main research question:
2. What are IB honours students' perspectives on the HTIBP competency profile, and how have they perceived using the profile in their education?

Thesis outline

In **chapter 2** we explore what competencies characterise talented international business professionals, as there is yet no agreed, compact, comprehensible and empirically established competency framework related specifically to talent in this area. The following research questions have been formulated: *What characterises talented international business professionals? How do these characteristics differ compared to competencies necessary for international business professionals as described in the literature?*

To answer the first research question, a qualitative multi-method study was conducted encompassing focus group interviews and a Delphi procedure. To answer the second research question of chapter 2, outcomes of the focus groups and the Delphi study were cross- referenced with literature on global leadership and management competencies to give insight into possible

differences and overlap with literature-based competencies for an international business professional.

In **chapter 3**, as the HTIBP profile was derived from data collected from international business professionals within the Netherlands, it was necessary to validate the HTIBP profile internationally. Most studies on competencies have been conducted from a Western perspective and how talent is perceived may differ dependent on geographic location. Chapter 3 is an exploratory study to investigate the perception of East Asian- and Western European business professionals on the HTIBP talent profile by answering the research question: What are East Asian and Western perspectives on the profile of Highly Talented International Business Professionals? An online survey was administered to 183 participants in China, Japan, South Korea as well as in Germany and the UK.

International perspectives on the talent profile, contributes to better understanding of expectations from the professional field. Better understanding this, can help to improve alignment within international business honours programmes.

Chapters 4 and **5** examine the HTIBP in an educational context. The HTIBP profile was used as a competency framework for the design of the HP, and the studies in chapters 4 and 5 explore the honours students' perspectives on the HTIPB competency profile, and how they perceived using it.

In **chapter 4,** we explore honours students' perspectives on the relevance and meaningfulness of the HTIBP competency framework, and how they perceived working with it. Experiencing meaningfulness and relevance is related to understanding the HTIBP framework. Gaining insights into students' perspectives on the HTIBP competency framework will help educators to facilitate and guide students in their learning journey. The research questions explored in this chapter are: *What are the IB honours students' perspectives on the meaningfulness and relevance of the HTIBP competency profile of highly talented international business professionals?* As well as: *How have the IB honours students perceived using the profile in their education?*

To gain insight in the students' perspectives on the HTIBP competency framework, we first explored, using a survey, whether the competencies, and in separate questions, the associated items, or behaviours if the HTIBP are

'essential' for highly talented business professionals. This survey was conducted among all year 2 and year 4 HP students of the IB undergraduate programme (N= 41). The survey results were then further explored by structured interviews to better understand the results from the survey and to add information about IB honours students' perspectives on the meaningfulness and relevance of the HTIBP competency profile of highly talented international business professionals,-- and how they perceived using the profile in their education.

The final study, **chapter 5**, examines how honours students work with the HTIBP, and how, in a social constructivist approach to learning, they construe their learning outcomes, using the HTIBP as a reference. International business education does not always align with the competencies required from the professional field and this may be due to lack of common language used by the different stakeholders. The research question answered is*: How are the learning outcomes of honours programmes of IB studies construed by students?*

All 22 HP final-year oral defences held between 2014 and 2016 were video recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. On the basis of the textual analysis of the transcribed capstone video recordings, clusters were formed, showing how students of an HP in IB construed their learning outcomes.

Understanding whether the students' interpretations of the competencies differ from how they were intended by the professional field can help bridge the gap and help educators to better prepare students to align with the professional field.

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