

University of Groningen

Talent in international business defined

van Heugten, Petra

DOI:
[10.33612/diss.109927889](https://doi.org/10.33612/diss.109927889)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2020

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
van Heugten, P. (2020). *Talent in international business defined: implications and applications for honours education*. [Thesis fully internal (DIV), University of Groningen]. Rijksuniversiteit Groningen. <https://doi.org/10.33612/diss.109927889>

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CHAPTER 6

General Discussion

Background

Two societal developments have inspired this research project: First, in the field of international business, there is a shortfall in satisfying the global demand for talent, but what characterises talent needed clarification, especially for educational- and development purposes.

Second, society increasingly realizes the importance of educating talent in special programmes, honours programmes (HP's) in higher education to prepare talented students for the demands of the workplace. However, alignment between what the professional field requires from graduates and what graduates have to offer is not always achieved.

The aim of this thesis was therefore to contribute to understanding what characterises highly talented international business professionals (HTIBP) and to gain insights into how students use and interpret the HTIBP competency framework in practice. This contributes to understanding what the competencies of a highly talented international professional are and whether the competencies are interpreted by students as these were intended by the professional field to better prepare graduates to meet the talent demands of the workplace.

The following research questions were answered:

1. What characterises talented international business professionals?
2. What are IB honours students' perspectives on the HTIBP competency profile, and how have they perceived using the profile in their education?

This thesis contributes to the IB talent literature with the development of an evidence-based competency framework specifically related to talent, the HTIBP profile, described in chapter 2. In addition, in chapter 3, we explored if the HTIBP, as described by international business professionals in the Netherlands, was regarded as distinguishing for talent internationally. Chapters 4 and 5 is where theory meets practice, the HTIBP competency framework is implemented in an HP for IB, and it is described how students perceived the HTIBP and how they worked with it.

How is talent characterised in international business

The first question of this thesis was: how is talent characterised in international business?

We have contributed with the clarification of what characterises talent in international business with the development of a competency profile for talent, the HTIBP, established in collaboration with the professional field, and which was not yet described before (Figure 1).

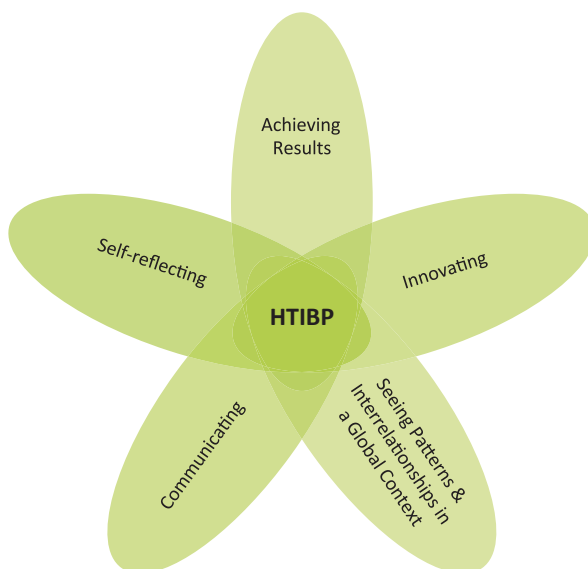


Figure 1: The HTIBP competency profile

The HTIBP has five domains: (1) achieving results; (2) communicating; (3) innovating; (4) self-reflecting and (5) seeing patterns and interrelationships in a global context, with 16 associated behaviours. The HTIBP competency framework is concise and shows mostly generic competencies for development of talent. Until now, it was unclear whether to address generic- or specific skills in company talent management programmes (Garavan, Carbery, & Rock 2012), and our research contributes to this understanding. When comparing the HTIBP to existing management and leadership competency frameworks, certain overlap exists, however, the HTIBP contains only competencies related to talent and other competency frameworks may contain competencies that the HTIBP

does not. We contribute to the literature with a competency framework only for talent, distinguishing essential from non-essential competencies, addressing a relevant point in the literature (Osland, Bird, Mendenhall, & Osland, 2006).

The HTIBP was established empirically with international business professionals in the Netherlands. When exploring how IB professionals from the regions East Asia and Western Europe perceived the HTIBP profile, we found a degree of consensus on the domains ‘communicating’, ‘achieving results’, and ‘seeing patterns and interrelationships in a global context of the profile’, and that internationally these domains were perceived as distinguishing for talent. However, perceptions on the specific behaviours related to the talent competencies varied substantially from country to country. These findings link to previous literature stating that context is important for adapting how to behave (Morrison, 2000; Osland et al., 2006).

When exploring HP students perspectives on the HTIBP profile, consensus on all the domains of the HTIBP profile was found but not on two behaviours; ‘entrepreneurship’ and ‘innovation’. Especially when it concerns the behaviours of the talent domains of the HTIBP, varying perspectives from both IB professionals in individual countries as well as from HP students is found.

Varying perspectives on the behaviours of the HTIBP talent domains may relate to lack of alignment between education and the professional (Azevedo, Apfelthaler, & Hurst, 2012; Osmani, Weerakkody, Hindi, Al-Esmail, Eldabi, Kapoor, & Irani, 2015; Wilton, 2008). Behaviours regarded as important in one context, may not be regarded as important in another, and this means that alignment may be achieved in one setting and not in another. Our research findings imply that it is important to understand the context in which you act and then to adapt the behaviour accordingly. Reeves & Deimler (2011) describe the ability to adapt as to “read, decode and act on external signals of change” in a dynamic world (p. 137) and it is regarded as a competitive advantage for IB. According to Robles (2012) adaptability is an important 21st century skill in today’s highly competitive and globalized world. The ability to decode and (re) act accordingly, can help to improve alignment with expectations from the IB professional field. Earley and Peterson, (2004) explain the need for students who are highly adaptable in different situations and our research confirms this.

The HTIBP competency framework for talent is the base for talent definition in international business. The five domains of the framework can be used to give direction as to what competencies distinguish talent. With varying perspectives on the associated behaviours to the talent domains, it is challenging to come up with one single competency framework containing behaviours that universally align with the expectations of the IB professional field. Rather than trying to capture all behaviours relevant for talent, it is important to possess the adaptability skills to attune to the local context and adapt the possible behaviours accordingly, and the HTIBP framework can be implemented flexibly to guide this process.

The HTIBP competency profile, or framework, resulting from our first research question, was translated to practice in the design of the HP in the IB undergraduate programme IB at the Hanze University, the Netherlands and is described in Appendix 3. Besides the HP curriculum being based on the HTIBP framework, HP students use the competency framework to self-direct their own learning, in line with the social constructivist view on learning (Beck & Kosnik, 2006), which is embraced in HP's. The honours pedagogy component 'offering freedom' gives students a degree of freedom to make informed choices on areas they wish to explore (Kingma, Heijne-Penninga & Wolfensberger, 2018; Wolfensberger, 2012). During the first and second semester of year two of the HP, for example, students do various projects and interdisciplinary tasks in areas students wish to explore, and are linked to the domains and behaviours of the HTIBP. Students are given freedom to construe their own learning in those areas, and to formulate their own learning outcomes based on the competencies of the HTIBP. The teacher is a facilitator of this process. The contents of the HP can be very diverse, depending on the various projects the students choose to work on. However, the focus is on shaping highly talented international business professionals, in alignment with the expectations from talent in IB, is the central goal of the HP (Appendix 3).

How honours students worked with and perceived the HTIBP in practice, and whether this is in alignment with business professionals, will be discussed in the next section.

The HTIBP profile in honours education

The second research question of this thesis was: What are IB honours students' perspectives on the HTIBP competency profile, and how have they perceived using the profile in their education?

In chapter 5 of this thesis, we describe how honours students construe the HTIBP competency framework into learning outcomes and whether their interpretations of the HTIBP align with how it was intended by the professional field. Results showed that alignment was largely missing and that students construed the competencies of the HTIBP profile mostly differently from how they were intended, and in addition, added new competencies to the HTIBP profile that were not presented by the HTIBP but seemed mostly inspired by pedagogy.

Our findings contribute to understanding the alignment problem described in literature: alignment between the professional field and education is often not achieved (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Azevedo, Apfelthaler, & Hurst, 2012; Jackson, 2009; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005; Osmani et al., 2015; Washer, 2007; Wilton, 2008). It is suggested that differences in interpretations of competency frameworks between educators and the professional field, may contribute to lack of alignment (Dragoo & Barrows, 2016; Fullan & Langworthy, 2014; Renting Dornan, Gans, Borleffs, Cohen-Schotanus, & Jaarsma, 2015; Sternberg, 2013). Often, how competencies are interpreted, is described from the perspective of the professional field and educators, but not from students' perspectives (Dragoo & Barrows, 2016). We have researched this from an HP student perspective and confirm that in a social constructivist setting, in which honours students are offered the freedom to design their learning outcomes, student interpretations of the competency framework also differ from how they are intended by professionals.

Dragoo & Barrows (2016) explain that the language to describe the competencies is not always the same and is thus interpreted differently. We found this to be the case with, for example, the behaviour entrepreneurship, in the HTIBP competency framework. Students were unclear whether its meaning was related to new business start-ups or to having an entrepreneurial mindset, and coming up with ideas. When exploring entrepreneurship further in the IB literature, the ambiguity about the term was also described. It may than not be surprising that the meaning of entrepreneurship is also unclear to students

when they work with it. This puts extra emphasis on using clear, understandable words and descriptions in competency frameworks to avoid such differences in interpretations (Dragoo & Barrows, 2016; Jackson, 2014). Especially when facilitating autonomous learning and offering students the freedom to design their learning outcomes, clarity is important.

According to Tymon (2013) clarity of the underlying meaning of competencies is also associated with experiencing competencies as meaningful. According to Mouratidis, Vansteenkiste, Michou, & Lens, (2013) and Reeve, (2009), communicating the relevance of learning outcomes and assignments to students will facilitate their understanding of them, and this will facilitate autonomous learning. In our student perception study on the relevance and meaningfulness attached to the competencies (chapter 4 of this thesis), we found that honours students regarded the behaviours of the competency framework that were unclear to them as not relevant and not meaningful. For example the term 'innovation' was not regarded as meaningful, and this was because students were not clear on the underlying meaning. Competencies that were clear to students were not mentioned by them as not meaningful. Our research supports the need for clarity of the meaning of competencies as it influences the meaningfulness experience for students. When students see the competencies as meaningful and relevant this influences their motivation to understand and work with them well (Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006) and this may contribute to improving alignment with how the competencies are intended by the professional field.

In addition to meaningfulness being attached to the meaning of competencies being clear, we also found that students attached meaningfulness to novelty. Novel competencies, not experienced before, were regarded as especially meaningful to students. For example, the domain self-reflecting was particularly mentioned by students as meaningful, and this was related to it being missing in the regular IB programme and was therefore new to students in the HP. By allowing the freedom and autonomy to students to direct their own learning, novelty experiences are evoked. Novelty and novelty experience are discussed in Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory (2000). This theory describes three basic innate and universal psychological needs that drive intrinsic motivation: competence, relatedness and autonomy, and that novelty and novelty seeking behaviour is associated with autonomy. A recent study by González-Cutre, Sicilia, Sierra, Ferriz, & Hagger, (2016), propose novelty to be considered as a

fourth basic psychological need to drive motivation as a basic constituent of intrinsic motivation. This recent discussion elevates the relative importance of novelty, and that novelty in fact drives motivation itself. Our study results confirm that students experienced the novel competency self-reflection as relevant and meaningful. According to Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Vansteenkiste et al., 2012, higher intrinsic motivation, in turn, increases performance and well-being.

Chapters 4 and 5 of this thesis set out to answer how the implementation of a competency framework for talent in honours programmes works out in practice. The studies point out that that when offering students in HP's the autonomy to direct their own learning, and formulate their own learning outcomes based on a competency framework, this may not be conducive to alignment with the professional field. Offering freedom leads to learning that is not necessary in alignment with what is intended, and this way assurance of learning may be jeopardized. Our research results underpin that clarity in the descriptions of the behaviours in the competency framework is of key importance when offering autonomy to students to direct their own learning. This could mean that the freedom offered may need to be adapted, and more structure and guidance may need to be implemented to ensure that the interpretations of the competency framework are the same between stakeholders. Kirschner, Sweller & Clark (2006) and Krahenbuhl, (2016) believe that students with not much experience may discover many things, but that these discoveries may be incorrect or untrue and may lead to misconceptions that are difficult to correct. Counterarguments could be that too much structure may hinder creativity or deliver students that learn to comply rather than think critically and independently (Havnes & Prøitz, 2016). For students to self-direct their learning prepares them for more 21st century skills and stimulates creativity, critical and adaptive thinking. According to Sternberg (2013) this is what employers want.

Our research study 5 showed that students mostly did not learn what was intended, and that they learned more than intended when they construed their own learning outcomes. Learning more than intended, could be an enrichment (Conlon, 2004). Students may learn things not yet present in the competency framework and this can be used to evaluate possible future renewals. Such new learning could provide input to update curriculum development (Kao & Mao, 2011). Also, offering students autonomy has shown to deliver novel learning, and this is learning that students would otherwise not have experienced. Novel

learning is regarded as meaningful and therefore motivating to students.

When implementing competency framework in HP's, alignment between intended learning and learning in action is not always guaranteed, and our research findings suggest some courses of action that may be considered in order to improve alignment, elaborated on in the practical implications of this thesis.

Strengths and limitations

The primary strength of this thesis lies in the multi-method approach used. Qualitative research methods – focus groups and a Delphi study – were used to design and validate the talent competency profile. In addition, international perspectives on the domains and the behaviours of the competency framework were researched using a quantitative survey across eight countries representing Western Europe and Eastern Asia. This contributed to understanding that internationally, different emphasis is placed on the behaviours associated with the talent domains, making it difficult to create one universally agreed competency framework for talent. It appears to be of crucial importance to communicate with all stakeholders about the specific interpretation of the competency profile on a regular basis. In this way an increased understanding is provided, related to talent competencies descriptions, communication and interpretation and this impacts alignment with the professional field.

An additional strength of this thesis is that student perspectives on the HTIBP competency profile have also been researched and what effect that implementation of the competency profile has on student formulated learning outcomes. Our research shows the importance of including student perspectives in future research and communication about the competency profile.

This thesis has created awareness of the importance of involving all stakeholders - practitioners, educators and also students - in the process of competency based curriculum development and implementation. The international validation of the HTIBP competency framework for talent, raised the issue that the interpretation of some of the behaviours in the HTIBP profile, may be culturally determined, emphasizing the need for adaptability in HTIBP professionals. In connection to this, the questionable validity of the South Korean dataset in our study should be mentioned. The survey results were so different from the other results in

all other countries that they could only be defined as an outlier and excluded from the analysis. The reasons for the differences need further investigation. The method of data collection in South Korea was outsourced to a local agency. It needs to be mentioned that the questionnaires, though translated into the local language, and back-translated to English, and administered by a local agency, may still have suffered from misinterpretation or cultural bias. Possible inhibitions may have prevented the participants from asking questions in relation to the questionnaire.

A repeat survey could be conducted and compared to the results of the first to test for validity. The divergence of results between South Korea and the other countries cannot be explained by cultural difference alone.

Further research encompassing a wider variety of regions and countries could provide fruitful avenues for further studies.

The study in chapter 4 of this thesis researched students' perspectives on the HTIBP competency framework and whether students regarded it as relevant and meaningful. Incorporating the results of the study in chapter 3, in the analysis of chapter 4 would have been interesting. However, as the studies were conducted concurrently, this was not possible.

The HTIBP competency framework was implemented in one IB HP programme in the Netherlands. While this gives a good indication of how the profile is used and interpreted by students, it would be valuable to extend implementation of the profile to more contexts. This would improve the transferability of our findings.

The results of the student perceptions on the HTIBP profile, showing divergence in interpretations between students and IB professionals, raises the question to what extent faculty interpretations of the competencies influences student perceptions. As focus of this thesis was to concentrate on students' perspectives, researching faculty perspectives was beyond the scope and would be interesting for future research.

Practical implications

Despite the aforementioned limitations and possible areas for future research, this thesis offers interesting insights for using a competency framework for talent in HP's with a view to further improving alignment with the professional field.

Table 1. Practical suggestions for HP design

Topic	Action	Practical suggestion
Competency framework	Establish a competency framework in line with the requirements for talent from the professional field.	Discuss and calibrate intended meaning of the competencies in the framework with all stakeholders (faculty, students and the professional field) <i>prior</i> to implementation
Intake procedure	Select HP participants for potential and willingness to participate in the HP	Use the competency framework to guide the selection procedure as suggested in Appendix 3, Table 1.
Implementation	Ensure alignment	Design a regular monitoring, control and communication process between three stakeholders: the professionals, educators and students to ensure alignment with the professional field Create a buddy system with senior students to help new students interpret the competency framework
	Explain meaningfulness and relevance of the competencies	Involve HP alumni and IB business professionals to share their perspectives
	Offer freedom and autonomy	Add an open domain to evoke novelty learning
	Use the competency framework to inform and guide	Learning outcomes formulated by students as well as final evaluations and assessments are informed by the competency framework domains and behaviours.
	Mentor support	Mentors and students frequently meet to discuss progress based on the formulated learning outcomes.

Insights into how honours students have perceived and worked with the HTIBP competency framework, as described in chapters 4 and 5, will help to direct educational practice in order to align better with the professional field and help to enhance existing HP's. In Table 1, some practical suggestions have been made in order to operationalize implementation of a competency profile for talent in an honours programme.

Competency framework

A talent competency framework should be (developed) in line with the requirements of the professional field. The method using focus group design and Delphi study to design the competency framework, as described in chapter 2 of this thesis, can be replicated to other contexts. To ensure clarity on meaning, prior to using the competency framework for programme development, calibration sessions regarding the interpretation of the behaviours in the competency framework between the educators as well as the professional field ought to be organized. Involving students as stakeholders as well in this early stage of the process is advised. Mutual sharing of perspectives between all stakeholders can contribute to improving alignment. This should be an iterative process to check the current relevance of the competency framework with the demands of the professional field. This information can then be used to update the competency framework to ensure continuing alignment.

Intake procedure

Most HP's have an intake procedure and the talent competency framework can be used in this stage to raise awareness of the competencies that potential students will be working with in the HP.

The talent competency framework can also be used to evaluate students' potential and willingness to develop these competencies in the course of the HP. An example is the HP selection procedure of International Business studies (IB) at the Hanze University of Applied Sciences (UAS). All IB students in the last semester of their first academic year, are eligible to apply for the HP by completing an application portfolio (Appendix 3, Table 1). The application portfolio tests various competencies that are also present in the HTIBP competency framework. Evaluating does not imply that applicants must already possess all the competencies, but rather it refers to checking for potential and willingness of students to (further) develop certain areas.

Following an evaluation of the application portfolio, students may be called to interview, further exploring these competencies.

Implementation

As students use the competency framework to design their own learning outcomes, setting up a communication process to ensure alignment between the three stakeholders – the professional field, educators and students – as to the intended meaning of the domains and especially the 16 associated behaviours to the domains, is advised. Involving senior honours students, for example, could be a means of ensuring that the domains and the associated behaviours are interpreted as intended by new honours students. Setting up a buddy system would be a way to team new honours students with more senior honours students. HP alumni can be invited to share their work experience in relation to the domains and behaviours of the HTIBP competency framework to gain insights as to their actuality. Such insights can also be used to explicate the meaning of the competencies and the behaviours and can further improve alignment.

Involving the professional field, can, besides helping to explicate the meaning associated with the domains of the competency profile, also be a way to help students better understand the relevance and meaningfulness of the various domains of the competency framework, and the two purposes are connected. Perhaps inviting guest speakers, organizing workshops, company visits, interviews, or skype presentations with high performing IB professionals, are possible ways of engaging with the professional field with the aim to helping students understand the meaningfulness and relevance of the competencies.

The competency framework ought to be implemented flexibly to allow for adaptation of it to changing circumstances. A suggestion is to include an 'empty' or open domain to the competency framework to be filled in by students to cover their personal suggestions and interests in the field of IB. This is done together with their mentor. By allowing for an open domain student- and mentor perspectives can be included in the control process to check if the competency framework is up to date. Recurring suggestions and competencies not present in the competency framework can be gathered over a period of time. This empirical evidence from student- and mentor suggestions can then be checked for trends. Recurring competencies, not present in the competency framework, can be used as a base for new focus group discussions and presented to a Delphi panel for consensus, and the competency framework can be adapted and updated accordingly.

Allowing students the freedom to pursue individual interests also ensures the novelty experience rendered so very meaningful to talented students. Novelty relates to autonomy and while both are perceived as meaningful to students and stimulate students to become independent and adaptable thinkers, we found that offering autonomy is best combined with some structure and direction.

During the HP, students carry out different projects and interdisciplinary tasks in areas that students wish to develop further, and these are linked to the domains and behaviours of the HTIBP. The learning outcomes students formulate for each project or task, are linked to and based a certain domain and behaviours of the HTIBP profile. The teacher is a facilitator and mentor of this process. How students interpret the competency framework and design their learning outcomes based on it, for example, must be frequently discussed with the mentor, guiding the students so they interpret the competency framework as intended and to check students' progress. In addition, the learning outcomes students formulate can be cross-checked with the professional field, and discussed prior to working with them. At the end of the projects, tasks or learning journey, the HTIBP can also be used as a guideline for possible evaluations and assessments. An example is the final capstone presentations, described in chapter 5, given by final year HP students presenting their learning journey during the HP and relating this to the HTIBP profile.

Conclusion

In International business, the quest for talent is ongoing, and in higher education, students are prepared to align with the needs of the professional field. In this thesis we aimed to enhance our understanding of how the professional field in IB defines talent, so this can inform the curriculum of honours programmes. We have empirically designed and validated a competency framework only for talent to serve as this basis for HP. Also, we have contributed to an international discussion on how the characteristics of talent in IB are defined.

Evaluations of implementation of the competency framework in the IB honours programme, have contributed to increasing our understanding of how to improve alignment between intended learning and learning in action.

The suggestions that we have made for HP design will hopefully be an inspiration for other educators when designing an honours programme, in alignment with the needs and requirements of both honours students and professional practice.

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