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Talent in international business defined

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CHAPTERS



Summary

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Higher international business (IB) education has a responsibility to prepare graduates to be ready to enter the professional field and competency frameworks are used for educational programme design and alignment with expectations from the professional field. In IB there is an increasing demand for talent and special programmes in higher education are developed, so called honours programmes (HP's) to educate talented students. However, there is not yet a clear dedicated competency framework that describes the competencies for talented IB professionals. In this context, this thesis first concentrated on what competencies characterise talent in IB, for implementation in honours education.

Despite competency frameworks informing educational programmes, problems with alignment between what the professional field expects from graduates and what graduates have to offer exist. Therefore, the second main topic of this thesis concerns how honours students perceive and work with the talent competencies during their honours programme.

Chapter 1 describes the growing importance of competencies and competency frameworks in international business (IB) for development and educational purposes, and the challenges that are presented when looking for a competency framework related specifically to talent.

The growing demand for talent in international business is recognised in society, and special programmes, honours programmes (HP's) in higher education, are designed to prepare talented students for the demands of the workplace. Which competencies HP's ought to concentrate on when educating talent in order to align with the demands of the professional field is not yet clear. This raises the question of what characterises talent, which is not an easy concept to define and varies according to the profession.

Competency frameworks are an important tool to inform higher education programmes and despite much effort to improve alignment between education and the professional field, it is not yet optimal and the graduates are not always work-ready. This may be because the right competencies are not developed or because the competencies were not perceived as intended by the professional field. How honours students perceive and use competencies in practice may

differ from how these are intended. Identifying differences can help to better fine-tune the HP's and to further improve alignment between intended learning and learning in action.

The need to enhance our understanding of what competencies characterise talent in IB for implementation in HP's, and to understand how students perceive and work with these competencies to further improve alignment with the professional field leads to the following two central research questions of this thesis:

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?

Chapter 2 describes a qualitative multi-method study to develop and validate a competency framework specifically related to talent. Focus groups with 16 IB professionals were conducted, and the findings of these interviews were the basis of the conceptual framework. A Delphi procedure with a panel of 22 IB professionals with an active career of at least 10 years in a leadership role in a professional setting, was used to validate the conceptual framework. The framework consists of 16 items, also called behaviours, organised into five domains: Achieving Results, Communicating, Innovating, Seeing patterns and interrelationships in a global context and Self-reflecting. The 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 IB professionals. The competency framework, referred to as the HTIBP competency framework or profile, provides an empirical basis to guide the contents of higher education honours programmes. Educating honours students to be able to use the spectrum of the five competencies of the competency framework in professional practice, is an important challenge for higher education HP's.

We further explored the HTIBP competency framework (profile) by investigating international perspectives on the competencies of talented IB professionals in **Chapter 3**. In a quantitative study with 183 participants from East Asia and Western Europe, we explored if there was international consensus on the domains and items (behaviours) of the profile of highly talented international business professionals. The results illustrated that there is consensus on three domains of the HTIBP profile: Achieving results, Communicating, and Seeing

patterns and interrelationships in a global context. We also found that every country or region emphasizes certain behaviours more than others and this contributes to the realisation that students must develop being adaptable to the various contexts. According to our results, we recommend HPs in IB higher education to focus on educating graduates within the spectrum of the HTIBP competency profile, while also considering the specific cultural context or setting. With this study we contribute to an international discussion about the characteristics pertaining to talent in IB.

The HTIBP competency framework (profile) was used to develop the IB honours programme curriculum at the Hanze, UAS, and this enabled us to gain insights into students' perspectives on the HTIBP profile and how students have perceived using it. In **chapters 4 and 5**, we describe honours students' perspectives on the HTIBP profile, and additionally, if they regard the domains and behaviours relevant and meaningful. As honours students construe their own learning outcomes, based on the HTIBP competency framework (or profile), we researched, in chapter 5, whether students construe the competency framework (profile) in alignment with how it is intended by the professional field.

Chapter 4, describes an explorative qualitative study using a survey and structured interviews.

First, a survey was held among 41 honours students from years two and four. We asked the survey participants whether the competencies and, in a separate question, the associated behaviours in the HTIBP competency profile, or framework are 'essential' for highly talented business professionals. To better understand the survey results and to add information about students' perceptions on the relevance and meaningfulness of the HTIBP profile and how they perceived using the profile in their learning, additional structured interviews were held among 12 honours students, not survey participants.

Student survey results show consensus on the five domains and the behaviours of the HTIBP profile, and on all but two behaviours: Entrepreneurship and Improving ideas from others. Data from interviews showed that 'entrepreneurship' and 'innovation' were perceived as not relevant and meaningful. Students indicated that the meaning behind entrepreneurship and innovation was not entirely clear to them. Unless competency frameworks are clear to students, this may

cause them not to regard them as relevant or meaningful, and this, in turn, may contribute to differing interpretations of them, or to not working with them as they were intended. This leads to students not learning what is intended and this affects alignment between expectations from the professional and education.

The final study described in **chapter 5**, concerns a qualitative study among honours students that concentrated on how honours students work with the HTIBP, and how, in a social constructivist approach to learning, they construe their learning outcomes based on the HTIBP competency framework. 22 HP final-year oral defences held between 2014 and 2016 were video recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. In the oral defence, students explained their learning journey throughout the HP in relation to the HTIBP profile, by summing how they construed their learning outcomes during the entire HP. 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. The analysis of the data revealed that students mostly describe the competencies in the HTIBP framework (profile) differently from how they were intended by the professional field. New meaning was added to existing competencies and in addition, new clusters were construed that were not in the HTIBP competency framework and seemed inspired by the honours pedagogy.

The results of this study indicate that 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 when working with the competencies. We contribute to the understanding that students' interpretations of the competencies differ from how they were intended by the professional field, and this can help educators to better prepare students to align with the professional field.

Chapter 6, the concluding chapter, starts by reviewing how each of the studies contributes to the central research questions: *What characterises talented international business professionals?* and *What are IB honours students' perspectives on the HTIBP competency profile, and how have they perceived using the profile in their education?*

Talent in IB is described in the competency framework, the profile of highly talented international business professionals (HTIBP). The HTIBP competency framework consists of five, mostly generic domains, i.e.: Achieving results; Communicating; Innovating; Self-reflecting and Seeing patterns and interrelationships in a global context, each with certain associated behaviours. In the complex, demanding and dynamic workplace, talented IB professionals possess the spectrum of the five domains, are able to see patterns and interrelationships in a global context, and show independently what needs to be learned for what purpose. International perceptions show a degree of consensus on the domains: Communicating, Achieving results, and Seeing patterns and interrelationships in a global context. Country-specific perspectives on the specific behaviours vary. The HTIBP provides a framework for and gives direction to the design of higher education talent programmes, honours programmes (HP's) and provides a basis for reflective and developmental activities on all the relevant talent competencies. It is important to prepare adaptable communicators, who are aware of a varying contexts and who are able to code switch as the specific cultural context requires.

After the practical design of the IB HP, using the HTIBP, we were able to gauge students' perspectives on the HTIBP profile, and how students perceived using the profile. Student perception on the domains and behaviours of the HTIBP profile was mostly aligned with the professional field, but not all. 'Entrepreneurship' and 'innovation' were not regarded as relevant and meaningful, and the underlying reason students indicated was lack of clarity on the underlying meaning, causing students to perceive them as not relevant and meaningful. Additionally, meaningfulness was attached to learning that was novel to students. Students explained that 'self-reflecting' offered a learning experience that they had not previously experienced and particularly found this to be meaningful, relevant and also motivating. It is important to explicate to students how the competencies are intended for students to regard them as relevant and meaningful and, in turn, to ensure students work with them as intended. This will further improve alignment with the professional field. In a social constructivist setting, students had the freedom to design their learning outcomes based on the HTIBP profile, and they construed the domains mostly not in alignment with how these were intended by the professional field. New meaning to existing domains was added, and new clusters were construed not in the competency framework. Calibration between stakeholders is important, and this may also lead to updates and novel additions to the competency

framework, currently perhaps missing. Competency frameworks are dynamic and emerge from ongoing discussions between students, faculty and the professional field, and should be revised and enriched regularly. After identifying strengths and limitation of this thesis, practical implications are identified that I think are essential conditions to be met when implementing competency frameworks in HP's to further improve alignment between education and the professional field. To conclude, this thesis ends by offering a table with practical suggestions to operationalize implementation of a competency profile for talent in an honours programme.

