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Talent Management in Agricultural Higher Education System in Iran: Based on Grounded Theory

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Abstract

This study provides a framework and definition to the notion of talent management process and describes how it fits the human resources architecture of agricultural higher education system in Iran. This qualitative study was conducted using semi-structured interviews for data collection and systematic grounded theory methods for data analysis. For this study, we selected and interviewed 15 experts of agricultural extension and education and human resources management by snowball sampling. Furthermore, we transcribed and analyzed the interviews and literature using the MAXQDA software. Using the systematic Grounded Theory Method, our findings suggest that equal treatment with talents and other staff was the main concern of the experts. Based on the results, organizational factors and human factors were involved to resolve this concern. In addition, with regard to the contextual and individual factors, the talent management process can play an important role in improving workforce and the organizational performance in agricultural higher education system.

Keywords:

Agricultural education, Grounded Theory, Human resources architecture, Talent management

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INTRODUCTION

Unfortunately, agricultural higher education system (AHES) in Iran is faced with many challenges. Increasing number of students who pursue careers in agriculture and unemployment rates among agricultural graduated students have caused an ongoing debate about whether agricultural higher educational strategies have been aligned with the needs of the labor market (Abbasi *et al.*, 2015). AHES is responsible for supplying the skilled man power required to improve the performance of the agricultural sector, but previous research results indicate that Iranian higher education system and especially in the agricultural sector had not been successful to manage talents (Abbasi, 2010).

In recent years, talent management (TM) has seen increased attention from both managerial practice and academic research (Claussen *et al.*, 2014; Tarique and Schuler, 2010) and studies have investigated not only the filling of top-management positions, but also the staffing of key positions at lower hierarchical levels (Claussen *et al.*, 2014; Collings and Mellahi, 2009). TM focuses broadly on developing high potential employees for future leadership positions across an organization. Furthermore, TM occurs at multiple levels of the organization and does not limit its scope to senior management positions, a common misperception made by many (Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Riccio, 2010). The importance of TM to higher education is starting to attract more interest from human resource (HR) practitioners who are looking at the implications of high turnover rates and poor fit within current positions (Ashraf and Joarder, 2009; Lorange, 2003; Riccio, 2010). Despite a significant degree of academic and practitioner interest, the topic of TM remains underdeveloped. A key limitation is the fact that TM lacks a consistent definition and clear conceptual boundaries (Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Collings *et al.*, 2015).

Sims and Gay (2006) defined TM as facilitating the development and career progress of highly talented and skilled individuals in the organization, using formalized procedures, resources, policies, and processes. The TM process focuses on developing employees and leaders for the future

of the organization. This definition will be used as a comparison to the models developed by the colleges and universities that are represented in this research study.

Human capital is considered by most to be the driver of successful organizations. While most may acknowledge this, few institutions in higher education have established formal programming to support existing talent (Riccio, 2010). In fact, very few studies have been published addressing the TM strategies within colleges and universities:

Lorange (2003) confirmed the limited amount of research related to TM in higher education in which he suggested that few institutions embrace formal developmental programs and leave the growth opportunities to chance instead of relying on a systematic and focused process. Lynch (2007) suggested that colleges and universities fall short of business and industry in developing their own talent. He also stated that most institutions perform well in developing their students, but fail to assist their managerial staff in their own skill development. Clunies (2007) suggested that higher education has historically been slow to adopt many corporate management processes. Finally, Heuer (2003) believed the concept of TM in higher education is an area that continues to remain largely unexplored.

Based on Verhaegen (2005) results, factors of crucial importance for recruitment and retention were identified both from the deans' and from the faculty's perspective. Perception gaps occurred between deans and faculty, as well as satisfaction gaps on important factors: this led to the identification of interesting policy problems and opportunities. Segmentation of the sample facilitated the demonstration of differences in perception between groups of faculty according to gender, age and rank, and between groups of schools according to legal structure, orientation, enrollment, and accreditation status.

Krauss (2007) studied succession planning and talent management to draw recommendations to reduce workforce attrition and prepare for an aging population. According to the results of this study, the recommendations to his target organization were implementing a structured succession plan, which distin-

guished the importance of establishing ownership of the succession plan and aligning the internal culture with external branding. These recommendations included identifying, assessing and developing high potential talents in the organization.

In 2009, Cheryl recommended some strategies for implementing deliberate and systemic succession plans in the academic environment via a research in higher education institutes. These strategies include “securing executive champions; aligning the succession plan to institutional culture, mission, vision and goals; taking an approach not unlike strategic planning; carefully constructing communication plans to embrace talent development without inferring entitlement; and a continuous evaluation of both the people and processes involved in succession planning”.

The staff must do the background work facilitating, coordinating, but not leading. A well-developed cadre of effective succession programs is essential for a TM system and, HR strategy and TM strategy should be integrated (Festing and Schafer, 2014; Rothwell, 2010).

Universities and educational centers are key elements for developing HR in any community (Ashraf and Joarder, 2009; Verhaegen, 2005). Developing a comprehensive HR-planning framework that corresponds to a variety of HR-related issues have seldom been observed in existing project management literature (Armestrong, 2008; Festing and Schafer, 2014; Pournader *et al.*, 2014). Despite evidence of human capital practices that will sustain leadership in business sectors, most administrations in higher education do not have a comprehensive TM model as a strategic objective (Ricchio, 2010). Several authors share similar views on how TM must be incorporated to establish and maintain a strong assembly of HR across an organization position (Collings *et al.*, 2015; Pournader *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, the main question is: “how talent management can increase the productivity of agricultural higher education system?”

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design

The qualitative research method of the grounded

theory is particularly useful when little is known about the area of inquiry. The reason for choosing a Systematic Grounded Theory for this study was that the phenomenon of TM and HR architecture in educational systems is very ambiguous and complex (Dries, 2013; Ricchio, 2010). Researchers have stated that grounded theory is suitable to study the complex and hidden phenomena. A grounded theory design is a systematic, qualitative procedure used to generate a theory that explains, at a broad conceptual level, a process, an action, or an interaction about a substantive topic. In grounded theory research, this theory is a “process” theory; it explains an educational process of events, activities, actions, and interactions that occur over time (Creswell, 2012; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). A systematic design in grounded theory emphasizes the use of data analysis steps of open, axial, and selective coding, and the development of a logic paradigm or a visual picture of the theory generated (Creswell, 2012).

Data collection

Grounded theorists proceed through systematic procedures of collecting data, identifying categories (used synonymously with themes), connecting these categories, and forming a theory that explains the process (Corbin and Strauss, 2008).

The procedures for developing grounded theory include primarily collecting interview data, developing and relating categories (or themes) of information, and composing a figure or visual model that portrays the general explanation (Creswell, 2012).

Once the initial participants had been identified, semi-structured and open-ended interviews were conducted to collect data. After getting permission and ensuring the satisfaction of interviewees to participate in the study, an appointment was set and normally, each of the interviews lasted between 30 to 60 minutes depending on the space-time respondents. After the definition and purpose of the study was explained to interviewees, questions were raised respectively:

- How should managers deal with talented staff?

- Which factors are the attraction and retention of talents influenced by?
- How does this process happen?
- If the needs of talented staff are well supplied, what changes will happen in the performance?

Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim for data analysis and after precisely reading each interview transcript and its interim analysis, planning for conducting the next interview was made. We analyzed the data line by line in order to identify units of meaning and code them into categories and subcategories by using the open coding technique. On the other hand, the concepts of literature were used for labeling and classification of open codes to axial codes. All data were processed using Microsoft Word 2013 and MAXQDA 10 in order to arrange the coding process (Anonymous, 2010). MAXQDA is a powerful tool for text analysis that can be used for Grounded Theory-oriented “code and retrieve” analysis as well as for more sophisticated text analysis (Creswell, 2012).

Participant selection

Interviewees were selected using snowball sampling in which the researcher asks participants to suggest further experts to participate in the study. This practice is repeated until the saturation point is achieved. After 15 interviews, the researchers concluded that no new finding would emerge and definitions and concepts were clarified to an acceptable level. Therefore, the study sample included 15 experts in the field of management and agricultural extension and education selected from University of Tehran, Mazandaran University, Tarbiat Modares University, Esfahan University, Shiraz University, Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, and Ministry of Cooperatives, Labour and Social Welfare. Descriptive results of the studied sample indicated that most of them (n= 12) had a PhD degree, in terms of gender, 13 participants were men and 2 were women, and the age of the participants ranged from 34 to 58, with an average age of 44. The demographic data of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table1: Description of participants (n = 15)

Inter-viewee	Organization	Specialty	Academic Degree	Gender
1		Agricultural Extension and Education	PhD	Male
2		Agricultural Extension and Education	PhD	Male
3		Management and Tourism	PhD	Male
4	Tehran University	Agricultural Entrepreneurship management	PhD	Male
5		Agricultural Management and development	PhD	Male
6		Human resource Management	PhD	Male
7		Management Policy	PhD	Male
8	Ministry of Science, Research and Technology	Management and Educational Planning	MA	Female
9	Mazandaran University	Management and Business Administration	PhD	Male
10			MSc	Female
11	Tarbiat Modares University	Deploy and manage systems	PhD	Male
12	Esfahan University	Agricultural Extension and Education	PhD	Male
13	Shiraz University	Cultural management	PhD	Male
14	Ministry of Cooperatives, Labour and Social Welfare	Agricultural Extension and Education	MA	Male
15		Business Management Entrepreneurship education (agricultural extension)	PhD	Male

RESULTS

According to Systematic Grounded Theory procedure allied with [Strauss and Corbin \(1998\)](#) and [Corbin and Strauss \(2008\)](#), results were di-

vided into six different broad categories, which are described in the next table (Table 2):

Phenomenon - Human Resource Architecture
At first, it is necessary to identify human re-

Table 2: Coding categories of talent management for agricultural higher education system

Broad Categories	Sub-category	Properties	Dimensioned	Examples
Phenomenon	Human Resource Architecture	Type Basis	Dual-core Distinctive Talent Management	Single core Same HRM
		Focus	Fair	Unfair
Causal conditions	Human Resource Factor	Compensation Package	Appropriate	Inappropriate
		Person Organization Fit	Distinctive	Same
Intervening	Organizational Factor	Career Opportunities	Favorite	Unfavorable
		Teaching and Research Climate	Dynamic	Static
Context	Talent Pool	Working Environment	Flexible	Inflexible
		Leadership Behavior	Strong and friendly	Weak and unfriendly
Strategies	Design of talent management system	Teamwork Relationship	Rich	Poor
		Organizational Culture and Policy	Young	Old
Consequences	Organizational Performance	Age	Top	Down
		Academic Degree	Wide	Small
Strategies	Workforce Performance	Type of University	Deep	Superficial
		Talent definition	Capital	Staff
Consequences	Organizational Performance	Viewpoint of HR	Internal	External
		Supply Source	Stability	Brain drain
Strategies	Workforce Performance	Elusiveness	Strategy-driven	Short-term
		A Strategic perspective	Align	Arithmetic
Consequences	Organizational Performance	Orientation	Precise and valid	Imprecise and invalid
		Identifying and Attracting	Quick and periodic	Slow and non-periodic
Strategies	Workforce Performance	Selecting and Recruitment	Efficient and effective	Inefficient and ineffective
		Developing and Improving	Strong and powerful	Weak and disabled
Consequences	Organizational Performance	Retention and Succession	Efficient	Inefficient
		Research productivity	Active	Passive
Consequences	Organizational Performance	Extra-role behavior	Motivated	Without passion
		Work motivation	Satisfied	Dissatisfied
Consequences	Organizational Performance	Satisfaction	Progressive and sustainable	Non-progressive and unstable
		Sustainable competitive advantage	Committed	Uncommitted
Consequences	Organizational Performance	Organizational commitment	Developed	Undeveloped
		Organizational development	Talented and expert	Ordinary and non-expert
Consequences	Organizational Performance	Fostering future leaders		

source architecture of agricultural higher education system. According to interviewees quoted (Interviewee 3 and 15), dealing with talented employees should be distinguished from other. Interviewee 3 started his speech with a question:

“The main question is why a strong and talented faculty member should be evaluated and compared with others? When the facilities, rewards, and compensation system are same for all members in the organization, stronger and people that are more talented will be discouraged. These people exhibit higher research performance than others and will have a significant impact on improving organizational performance. So not only the hours of presence and teaching at the university cannot be a good standard for the evaluation of faculty members, but also may have a negative effect on their performance.” Interviewee 3.

In addition, another respondent spoke about the importance of HR distinctive evaluation: *“... In any way, equal reward and evaluation is not suitable; competence of employees should be the basis for their evaluation”.* Interviewee 15.

Casual Conditions- Human Resource Factor and Organizational Factor

In this section, we review categories of conditions that affect the phenomenon of human resource architecture. According to interviews and previous literature, a set of human and organizational factors are involved in all management process:

“Most managerial processes are influenced by numerous human and organizational factors. We cannot measure a specific process without considering the other internal and external conditions. Likewise, the talent management process is influenced by many factors such as the salaries and bonuses, welfare facilities, work environment, advancement opportunities, higher education policies, management and other coworkers' behaviors, etc.” Interviewee 1.

Another interviewee said: *“In my opinion, the most important factor in the implementation of talent management is putting each person in his place. In other words, selecting the best person to perform a task and their job should be in accordance with his potential and compe-*

tence.” Interviewee 8.

One of the respondents also emphasized: *“No managerial process happens in a closed system. A range of lateral factors affects all managerial processes. These factors can be related to the inside or outside of the organization environment and human resources behavior.” Interviewee 14.*

Intervening- Individual factors

Intervening factors means general contextual conditions that influence talent management system. Since the scope of this research is faculty members of agricultural university, interviewees mentioned that personal factors could affect their performance:

“... Except for diligence and activities rate, other factors indirectly affect the performance of faculty members. For example, older faculty members certainly have higher research productivity; on the other hand, younger professors are more energetic and enthusiastic. Therefore, faculty members should be compared on the basis of age, academic degree, type and size of university, and the number of students.” Interviewee 6.

Context- Talent Implications, Talent Pool and Strategies Aligning:

Many specific conditions may influence the strategies. In this regard, participants stated some noteworthy points. One of the interviewees pointed the need for TM conceptualization and said:

“It seems that, first of all it is required to present a definition of the nature of talent. What is talent and who is responsible for talent management? ... Currently, it is better to reengineer human resources strategy in higher education. In the first phase, human resource management strategies should be revised and corrected, and then, talent management strategies should be developed as a complement to this section.” Interviewee 9.

According to the interviewee's opinions, one of the important points was managerial incompetence and inconsistency of higher education policies in training and employment of elites. The interviewee held that:

“We need to better understand our capabilities. We have enough available financial, organizational and human resources and expertise. Unfortunately,

we have faced waste of financial resources, unemployment and brain drain due to the lack of sound management.” **Interviewee 11.**

Strategies - Design of talent management system:

As a main part of the research, we looked for the specific actions or interactions resulting from the phenomenon of human resource architecture. In this respect, interviewee noted that:

“Talent management is a new concept, but this process has many similarities with common human resource management. Talents, like other employees, need to pass all steps include attracting, recruiting, training, and supporting. However, ordinary employees may hold all these steps for talented employees differently. One of the important items that completed the management cycle is a succession-planning process. Unfortunately, in our country it has been neglected. Therefore, with the retirement of active employees, organizations are faced with a problem.” **Interviewee 10.**

Also related to TM strategies, one interviewee noted:

“Planning for talent management is beyond identifying and attracting intelligent employees. Maintenance and retention of good employees are harder than their recruitment.

These people have more expectations. If their needs are not fulfilled, they may be attracted to other organizations or lose their performance.” **Interviewee 7.**

Consequences- Workforce performance and organizational performance

Finally, interviewees indicate outcomes of adopting TM strategies. The experts and previous research results cited several consequences; the following interviewees’ opinions in this respect are provided:

“All efforts of human resource management are to improve performance. In most organizations and companies, just financial performance is concerned. However, in universities, performance has another concept. Educational institutions should seek to enhance the performance of researches and specialist training. Also the results of researches in agricultural universities should be in accordance with the demands and needs of farmers.” **Interviewee 2.**

“Nowadays, organizational performance is measured with factors such as employee satisfaction and the audience, commitment, the continuous improvement of quality, quantity of products, etc.” **Interviewee 12.**

“In the meantime, there’s a reciprocal relationship between talent management process and the external factors. Talent management process is under the influence of environmental and organizational factors and also affects them.” **Interviewee 4.**

DISCUSSION

This study seeks to build a conceptual model of TM in agricultural higher education, in which the concept and process of TM as well as its

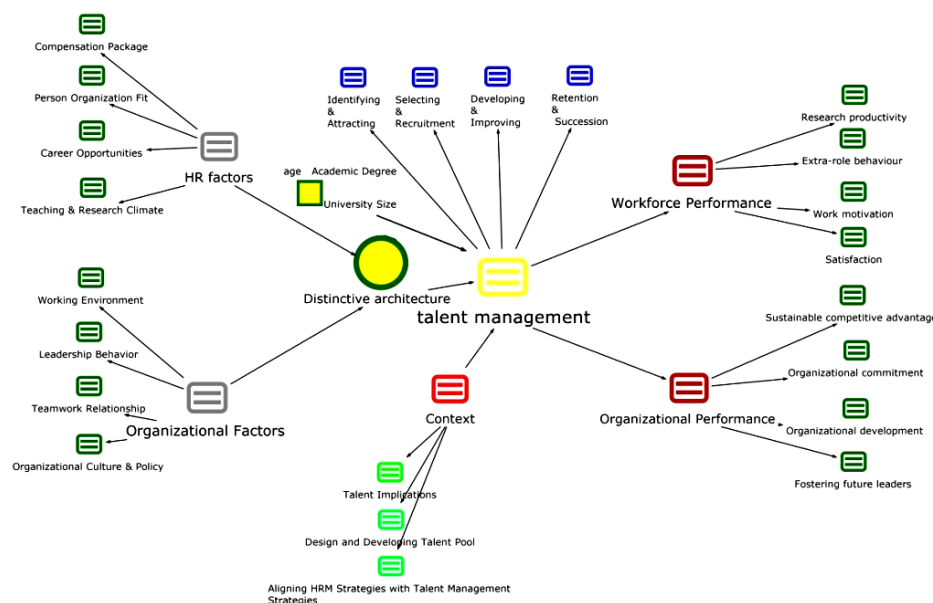


Figure 1: Output diagram of systematic grounded theory procedure in MAXQDA

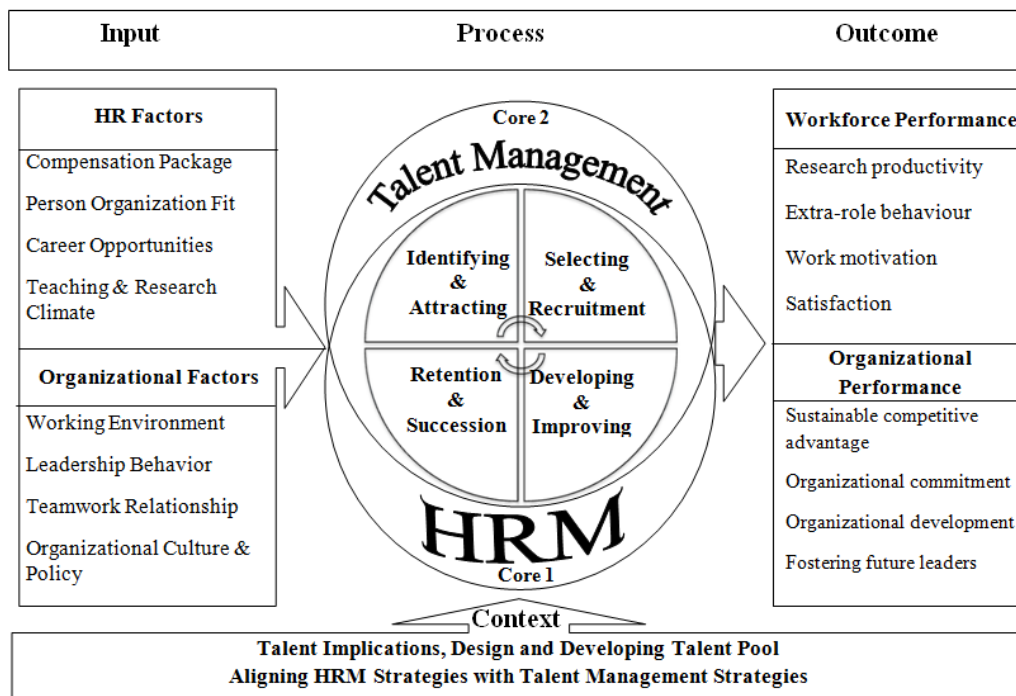


Figure 2: Dual core human resource architecture of agricultural higher education system

inputs and outcomes are discussed. The proposed model is intended to depict the main factors that affect the process of TM within the AHES and the impact of TM strategies on organizational and workforce outcomes, as well as factors influencing its continuous outcomes. Data analysis was carried out using [Strauss and Corbin's \(2008\)](#) mode of analysis through systematic method, performing three levels of open, axial, and selective coding.

In the first phase, open coding, initial categories of information were formed about the phenomenon intended to be studied by segmenting information. We based categories on the collected data including interviews, literatures, and memos.

Table 2 presents the coding for participants' viewpoints about enhancing TM process in agricultural higher education system. We organized their presentation of open coding included broad categories, category's properties, dimensioned examples, and followed the systematic procedures of [Strauss and Corbin \(1998\)](#) and [Creswell \(2012\)](#).

After six broad Categories, the major features of this table are the 10-labeled categories. In addition, properties are subcategories in grounded theory of open codes that serve to provide more details about each category. Each property, in turn, is dimensioning in grounded theory. A di-

mensioned property means that the researcher views the property on a continuum and locates, in the data, examples representing extremes on this continuum.

In the second phase, axial coding, we selected one open coding category, positioned it at the center of the process being explored ("Human Resource Architecture" as the core phenomenon), and then related other categories to it.

These other categories were the causal conditions ("Human Resource Factor" and "Organizational Factor" that influence the core phenomenon), strategies ("Design of Talent Management System" in response to the core phenomenon), contextual and intervening conditions ("Talent Implications, Talent Pool, Strategies Aligning" and "Individual Factors" that influence the strategies), and consequences ("Workforce Performance" and "Organizational Performance" from using the strategies). This phase involves drawing a diagram, called a coding paradigm, which portrays the interrelationships of causal conditions, strategies, contextual and intervening conditions, and consequences (Figure 1).

As shown in Figure 1, viewing this coding paradigm from left to right, we see that the HR factors and organizational factors as causal conditions influence the core phenomenon of dis-

tinctive human resource architecture. Then, the core phenomenon, the context and the intervening conditions influence the talent management strategies, and finally the strategies influence the consequences of work and organizational performance.

The third phase of coding consists of “selective coding”. In selective coding, we wrote a theory from the interrelationship of the categories in the axial coding model. At a basic level, this theory provides an abstract explanation for the process being studied in this research. Here we define TM as:

"A set of resources and strategies for attracting, recruiting, developing and succession of talents to enhance workforce and organizational performance focused on creating sustainable growth and fostering future leaders of universities and organizations."

As a result, the architecture of the human resources management process that occurs, will give us a broad view about the concepts that contribute to the formation of the TM model using the systematic grounded theory method.

The three phases show us clearly that the initial selection of trainees to training institutions is an important process. It helps us determine the success of the training provided to trainees. If the apprenticeship trainees are not interested in what follows, it will affect the overall learning system. In the agricultural sciences, talents are not only involved in research and teaching, but also in meeting the needs for information in government and agricultural service centers. Since most of the professors and graduates have to communicate with their audiences including farmers, students, experts, extension agent, etc., then, the formation of dual-core HR architecture is very helpful.

The results of this paper represent the first theoretical approach to understand how human and organizational factors affect TM in AHES and how TM process may affect organizational outcomes. However, further studies are needed to better understand how organizations can be more productive, based on their particular scenarios, through implementing TM and fostering an entrepreneurial philosophy to cope with con-

tinuously changing educational environments.

An original contribution of this article is to propose an innovative relationship between inputs, process and outcomes of TM in AHES. The proposed model represents a novel conceptualization about how these constructs may be linked together to influence organizational outcomes. The human and organizational factors create the catalysts for talent management, and processes of talent management, which subsequently influences organizational outcomes. In addition, the results of this study provide a clearer definition of what HR evaluation entails in AHES. Furthermore, the results clarify the conceptual boundaries of TM for future research that would be useful in the area of measurement and the application of the TM model (Figure 2).

Below we briefly outline the four general themes of the model:

1. Context: Through an extended literature review (Cheryl, 2009; Krauss, 2007; Riccio, 2010; Rothwell, 2010; Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013) and comprehensive field study, the objective of this inquiry was to determine if a framework could be provided that would assist universities to develop or refine their own TM strategy oriented with both the institutional culture and organizational values. In this regards, the results showed that a change in the architecture of AHES is required to talent conceptualization and implications, designing and developing talent pool, and aligning HRM strategies with TM strategies.

2. Input: The requirements for higher education performance are not easily confined to a certain number of publications, a minimum level of student satisfaction, or a fixed amount of service on committees. TM, like other phenomena, has specific requirements to occur. As a prerequisite, HR and organizational factors influence on process cycle. Naming of these factors was selected based on previous studies: HR factors includes “compensation package, person organization fit, career opportunities, teaching and research climate” and organizational factors contains “working environment, leadership behavior, teamwork relationship and organizational culture and policy” (Ashraf and Joarder, 2009;

Cascio and Boudreau, 2016; Gelens *et al.*, 2013; Swailes, 2013; Verhaegen, 2005).

3. Process: The most important part of HR architecture is the process because all management activities occur at this stage. As Krauss (2007) stated “Once high potentials are selected, their development plan needs to include a job rotation program, a formal mentoring-coaching program, utilizing 360 feedback tools and receiving the appropriate reward for performance”. Therefore, we examined the human resource management process in four sections: “Identifying and Attracting”, “Selecting and Recruitment”, “Developing and Improving” and “Retention and Succession”. These management strategies are located in two different cores in our theoretical model. Thus, TM processes were developed independently of conventional human resource management cycle. In this regard, recent research results (Claussen *et al.*, 2014; Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Collings *et al.*, 2015; Dries, 2013; Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2015; Rothwell, 2010; Sparrow and Makram, 2015) indicates the importance of architecture HR changes in TM process.

4. Outcome: Interviews with experts and a review of the literature (Abbasi., 2010; Cascio and Boudreau, 2016, Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Gelens *et al.*, 2013; Krauss, 2007; Rothwell, 2010; Swailes, 2013) showed the importance of outcomes include workforce performance and organizational performance through new HR architecture has been achieved. Components such as research productivity, extra-role behavior, work motivation and satisfaction for “workforce performance” and on the other hand, sustainable competitive advantage, organizational commitment, organizational development and fostering future leaders for “organizational performance” were considered.

CONCLUSION

This paper develops a systematic conceptual model through TM in AHES and suggests that TM process within the agricultural higher education systems produces superior outcomes. This model theoretically discusses the phenomenon on distinctive architecture and human re-

source management as well as its prerequisites and outcomes. In fact, this paper and the proposed model have several implications. While the elements of the model are clearly specified, many of them represent broad constructs that operate at a high level of generality.

The goal of TM is to create a high-performance sustainable organization that meets its strategic and operational goals and objectives. The issues that arise when implementing talent policies may also be related to the role and position held by the HR department in this regard.

Reviewing the TM system in the organizations by managers and before reactively shedding staff is one of the important needs to survive and prosper in the current challenging environment. Since TM becomes a process and system, no single model or approach can be suitable for different organizations and with different situations. There are many TM models and approaches. The point is that among these models and approaches, academic managers have to find the best model, which can best fit their organizations. Those that already have a TM system in place must focus on overcoming their exclusive obstructions to a best practice system and those who do not presently invest in TM should perhaps consider its value and try to implement it. Thus, educational institutions need their own unique process; especially AHES that focuses on training specialist work force.

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