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Talent management in English universities during the coronavirus pandemic

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Abstract

This article reports a longitudinal study exploring talent management, through narratives provided by a group of managers of doctoral programmes in eight UK universities during the 2020 coronavirus outbreak. These managers were also academics, researchers and doctoral supervisors and their perspectives were gathered before and during "lockdown," and then into the subsequent confused period of semi-lockdown / second lockdown, as cases of Coronavirus increased again in late 2020. Changing socio-economic circumstances, together with the added pressures of family responsibilities, impacted on participants' perceptions of changing roles and relationships during the pandemic. Over 12 months, six semi-structured online interviews (each lasting between 50 and 120 minutes) were conducted, using available platforms, with intervening emails. The narratives showed both formal and informal "talent management methods" and emphasized the need to use both to attract and retain international students.

KEYWORDS
coronavirus, doctoral work, talent management, the United Kingdom, universities

1 | INTRODUCTION

In the context of an intensifying international competition for "talent," national governments have focused efforts on their higher education systems to attract and grow talent to gain competitive advantage (Beechler & Woodward, 2009; Li & Lowe, 2016). As part of government efforts to achieve economic growth, a range of new policy measures for universities have emerged out of the connection between university research, increased innovation and competitive advantage. In the United Kingdom, for instance, various governmental policies and reports have identified links between national economic well-being and the innovation and research attributed to universities (EPSRC, 2010; ESRC, 2017; Hillman, 2020; Holland, Liadze, Rienzo, & Wilkinson, 2013; Valero & Van Reenen, 2019).

Such government policies have driven audit and performance activity, resulting in new university structures, styles, and drivers (Hicks, 2012; Horta & Santos, 2020). This drive has impacted on many aspects of university research and practice; both in terms of how research is supported, and the way in which it is thought to be enacted (Henkel, 2005; Hicks, 2012; Kiley, 2011). Concurrently, a "perfect storm" of issues including a demographic downturn, increased global competition and bad publicity around governmental immigration barriers for international students produced difficult economic times for UK universities (e.g. Guardian, 2018; Times Higher, 2019), underlining the need to gain and retain talent.

In universities, the term "talent" requires definition. As in other organizations, "talent" relates to employees; however, in universities, it also includes students, particularly doctoral students: these are the "human assets" key to research achievements (Tiwari &

Shrivastava, 2013). Responding to higher education policies and targets, universities have increased their numbers of doctoral students across subject disciplines, recruiting vigorously overseas, with potential issues in sustaining the quality of supervision and related administrative processes. Doctoral students pursue research to deliver new knowledge. This new knowledge contributes to the standing and profile of universities as well as supporting innovation and new businesses through intellectual property owned by the institution (HESA, 2021). The supervisors guiding the work of these students, therefore, have an important part in achieving university aims. They and their students arguably represent the talent needing management, given the investments made by universities in competing globally to recruit the "right staff" (Loomes, Owens, and McCarthy (2019) and the right students (Ernst & Young, 2018).

Talent management (TM) has often focused on multinational corporations (Moeller, Maley, Harvey, & Dabic, 2016) SMEs Dabić, Ortiz-De-Urbina-Criado, & Romero-Martínez, 2011) supply chain contents (González-Loureiro, Dabić, & Puig, 2014) rather than other contexts (Wang & Liu, 2016) so this study brings new perspectives, supporting the development of "*a broader, more balanced approach to talent management that will help in studying and implementing talent management across different contexts*" (Thunnissen, 2013, 335). Collings (2014) argued for TM to be studied across different kinds of contexts and environments, recognizing the role of multiple stakeholders in the TM system and its operations. Similarly, Sparrow and Makram (2015) argue that there is much to be learned about TM from other contexts where processes may operate differently through different talent practices, to meet the strategies of MNCs, public sector organizations, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and not-for-profits. Similarly, Gallardo-Gallardo, Thunnissen, and Scullion (2020) point to a lack of research in different contexts and in non-Western cultures.

This research responds to the call for TM to be studied in different organizational contexts by applying it to a university context. We focus on the impacts on individual talent of the context of extraordinary change in 2020 on the TM systems, by examining the TM systems and processes around doctoral research through the perspective of those administering them. The purpose of this article is to (1) review the TM literature using "university" as a context, (2) apply a TM approach to gain a system related to doctoral work in higher education, and (3) articulate a set of clarify the meaning of both talent and TM relevant contingencies that inform the successful implementation of a TM process into university systems. The question that accompanies these objectives is as follows: How did this TM system to recruit, guide and retain international talent respond to the coronavirus? How did the university deal with the talent working within these systems?

The study started before the coronavirus was widely identified and continued through "lockdown" and afterward, with impacts across universities during 2020. In the United Kingdom and in relation to work, lockdown instructed working from home from 23 March 2020, with an easing of some restrictions from August. From September, participants in the study continued to work from home due to universities switching to online teaching and the increase in cases of the virus, with a second lockdown following this rise.

The original aim was to understand how talent was managed during stressful economic times and in the context of considerable governmental policy shifts, by exploring the perceptions of those managing doctoral talent. The timing of the study meant that the context changed, providing insights into the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic on how talent was managed in these universities. To provide a background for the study, the next section reviews relevant literature on TM and its application to university doctoral journeys.

2 | TALENT MANAGEMENT

This study takes a novel perspective in positioning universities within the context of TM. Universities have to address their performance targets according to governmental and funder needs. Given that TM can effectively impact organizational performance (Cascio & Boudreau, 2016; Lewis, 2014; Perrin, 2005), it offers a way for universities to support their continued survival and growth. Universities face global competition in recruiting talent internationally, whether this relates to finding the "right employee" or recruiting the "right quality" and numbers of students.

The challenges involved in gaining and sustaining competitive advantage are continuing issues for universities, therefore exploring how TM works within higher education usefully responds to the call for research to understand TM in different contexts, particularly given its impact in private sector companies (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Farndale et al., 2010; Joyce & Slocum, 2012; Tafti, et al, 2017). Despite this, TM has received surprisingly little critical academic scrutiny in terms of theoretical development or basic definitions (Al Ariss et al, 2014; Chen et al., 2021; Iles et al, 2010; Preece et al., 2013).

The precise definition of TM is problematic (Al Ariss et al, 2014), reflecting an ongoing debate over the definition of talent itself, both in the literature and in practice (Beamond et al, 2016; Dabić et al., 2021; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013; Iles et al., 2010; Preece et al., 2013). The word "talent" is a relative term (Iles et al., 2010); those seen as talented have "more to offer" in terms of knowledge, skills, experience, or personal qualities, than others (Adamsen, 2016). Talent may also be applied as an *exclusive* or *inclusive* concept (Iles et al., 2010), meaning that talent can be representative of a few selected individuals or used more broadly across an organization (Meyers & Woerkom, 2014; Sparrow, 2019). Given that the role of universities has traditionally been to discover new knowledge not only through academic and doctoral study but also to support and teach prospective talent (Clarke, Hyde, & Drennan, 2013; Gunasekara, 2006), human and intellectual capital are the talent areas of relevance.

Although there is limited consensus about the definition of TM, it is generally understood to describe those strategic actions which organizations formulate and perform to attract, develop, and retain critical human resources (Dabic, Maley, Moeller, & Vlačić, 2021; Stahl et al., 2007). Collings and Mellahi (2009, 304) further stress the systematic identification of key positions that differentially contribute to

the organization's sustainable competitive advantage, and "the development of a differentiated human resource architecture to facilitate filling these positions with component incumbents, and to ensure their continued commitment to the organization."

Despite this generalized overview of what TM does, there is no one form of best practice for organizations to follow to do the same (Schuler, 2015). TM varies according to the needs of context, time, and place that affect the individual organization (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020; Thunnissen, Boselie, & Fruytier, 2013). Therefore, given the contextual nature of TM, it is problematic for organizations to mimic other organizations' TM strategies: the way it is enacted within the organization must be consistent with its core strategy, task environment, culture and range of opportunities (Joyce & Slocum, 2012; Stahl et al., 2012).

This further emphasizes the need to position TM within its organizational context, in terms of time and location rather than being a uniform solution; in universities, persistent change has led to new practices to attract and retain talent, with varying success (Ernst & Young, 2018; Li & Lowe, 2016; Loomes et al., 2019). TM is also traditionally under the remit of human resources (Nijs et al., 2014). This is understandable given that talent has been linked to human and intellectual capital, suggesting the resource-based view of the organization (Dries, 2013; Calabrò et al., 2021) where human capital is seen as crucial for sustained competitive advantage (Aguinis & O'Boyle, 2014).

Human capital is viewed as key for universities in retaining their reputation and improving performance. Loomes et al. (2019, 142) observe that given the way universities are funded and the impacts and pressures of globalization, "universities are now in direct competition for rankings, students and academic staff" (Ernst & Young, 2018; Fullan & Scott, 2009). Furthermore, Ernst and Young (2018) specify difficulties in keeping existing university business models for attracting students, given changes in the nature of work, increasing global competition, and the rise of continuous learning and of digital technologies. Universities also invest heavily in attracting the "right calibre" of student, especially for higher awards. Although talent gaps exist (Calo, 2008; Guthridge et al., 2008), universities employ agencies and recruiters to attract a global pool of talented candidates (Slowey & Schütze, 2012; Honoré & Ganco, 2020). This demonstrates the relevance of applying "TM" to universities and suggests the need to understand how talent is recruited and how it is retained—both of which formed part of data collection.

2.1 | Talent management systems related to doctoral work in higher education

In studying university TM, we focus on doctoral study, given the emphasis on research for university status and outcomes. This includes both those managing and delivering these awards together with the doctoral students themselves. The doctoral journey has been described as a process by which an individual gains membership of an "academic community"; the academic community is both embedded in and sustained by long-established systems, structures, values, and behaviours which convey how things are done, as the individual progresses through their career journey before, during and after the doctoral supervision process (Halse & Malfroy, 2010; Lee, 2008). New pressures for universities have arisen as a result of a series of ongoing governmental policy changes and these have impacted on university life and academic work (Clarke et al., 2013; Martin, Lord, & Warren-Smith, 2020). These changes, together with heightened competition and an increase in new technologies, may mean that staff, processes and structures struggle to evolve quickly enough (Martin & Ibbotson, 2019). Doctoral processes are based on beliefs about traditional knowledge transfer, where skills and knowledge are imparted from the master to the apprentice over time, a model at odds with a "workload model" culture (Bastalich, 2017; Lee, 2008).

From an organizational perspective, given the growth of targets for doctoral recruitment and completion, supervision is an important delivery method to achieve such targets (Shibayama, 2019). In the context of increasing numbers in higher awards, the nature of the supervisor- student relationship has shifted (Halse and Malfroy (2010) yet the importance of effective supervision is consistently emphasized (Wisker, 2012). Doctoral work is often led university-wide with the oversight of a central senior figure and led locally by a faculty senior academic. It is supported by local and central administrators. The academic supervisors play a critical role in doctoral education such that "good" doctoral supervision is seen as "crucial to successful research education programs" (Halse & Malfroy, 2010, 79), and expressly related to the widening of participation in higher degrees (Read, Archer, & Leathwood, 2003).

Indeed, good supervision is seen as "the key to both quality and efficiency in higher degree research" with results (awards at doctoral level, duration of study, numbers of those leaving) attributed to good or bad supervision rather than other factors, and despite the impacts and pressures of increased massification of higher-level awards (Bastalich, 2017). The importance of the "good supervision process" is pertinent in the otherwise "ill-defined and ambiguous" conduct of doctoral study, with a lack of clarity about what is expected and what academic life entails compared to students' earlier experience of learning – the "good supervisor" is, therefore, the lynchpin in a confusing landscape (Cornwall et al. (2019).

The core questions in this longitudinal qualitative study were: How did this TM system to recruit, guide and retain international talent respond to the coronavirus? How did universities manage the talent working within these systems? The study anticipated 12 months of typical operation, however the period encompassed the coronavirus pandemic, with attendant government actions to address infection levels (national lockdown, geographic local "tiers" with different conditions for work and home, easing of restrictions). Mapping change over the course of the study, eight managers based in different UK universities shared their definitions of talent and TM related to both employees and doctoral students and their perspectives on themselves as talent in this year-long study, reflecting on their university's TM, on their role and the value placed on it by their institution.

TABLE 1 Participants in the study

	HE type/ size	Personal details	Family caring duties		Discipline	Role
			Initially	During lockdown		
Andy	Research intensive—large	50-59 Male	No	Yes	Business and Management	Associate dean for research; director of a large research centre
Bill	Research intensive—Small	40-49 Male	No	Yes	Arts and Humanities	Director of a large research Centre; chair faculty research ethics committee, research methods module leadership
Colin	Research intensive—small	40-49 Male	No	Yes	Business	Director of a large research Centre, director of doctoral programmes, occasional lectures
Dilani	Post 1992 Teaching focus – large	40-49 Female	Shared	No	Business and Management	Director of doctoral Programmes, course director for two masters courses.
Emilia	Post 1992 Teaching focus = large	30-39 Female	Shared	Yes	Business and Management	Teaching, course director, masters programme director, deputy chair of the faculty income generation and ethics committee, member of University Quality and Assessment Group
Fiona	Research intensive—medium	30-39 Female	Shared	Yes	Business and law	Associate dean for enterprise; masters dissertations coordinator, impact coordinator. Research group membership
George	Research intensive—medium	40-49 Male	No	Yes	Business	Associate dean, director of a large cross-institutional research group, deputy chair university research ethics committee
Hamil	Post-1992 Teaching focus—medium	40-49 Male	No	Yes	Arts and Humanities	Associate dean, director of faculty student recruitment; course module leader x 2

TABLE 2 Stages of coronavirus measures in England in 2020/ interview times

Interview timing	Interview type	Stages during 2020
January	Face to face at locations to suit respondents	Pre-awareness of coronavirus, rising numbers elsewhere. Travel unrestricted overseas and inbound
March	Teams / Zoom / Skype	To combat increasingly high UK infection and death rates from coronavirus, the United Kingdom entered lockdown on March 23, places of work closed, no travel or interaction with others was allowed and universities began to teach more comprehensively online than ever before. Schools and childcare closed. Travel restricted locally and internationally.
May	Teams / Zoom / Skype	
July	Teams / Zoom / Skype	Imposition of stricter rules on areas with higher infection rates. Easing of some regulations was announced from August 1, with measures such as the Eat Out Help Out scheme to encourage visits to restaurants during august. Mixed travel rules.
September	Teams / Zoom / Skype	To combat large increases in numbers of deaths and higher infection rates, a form of lockdown began, which varied by geographical area, each region placed in one of four tiers with different restrictions, including around two thirds of the country still having schools and childcare closed.
November /December	Teams / Zoom / Skype	Despite the short easing of restrictions to allow Christmas to be celebrated, there were increasingly high death rates from coronavirus and high infection rates, stricter geographic measures were announced (national lockdown again came into force on January 4, with places of work closed including schools. Travel limited.

3 | METHODOLOGY

This study aimed understand how international talent was attracted and managed during stressful socio-economic times in universities. This was carried out through an explorative phenomenological approach using qualitative methods, here by capturing narratives through repeated semi-structured interviews (Harsch & Festing, 2020). Given the importance of context to talent and TM, an interpretive, inductive route was selected for data analysis to allow nuances to emerge in this under-

TABLE 3 Summarizing talent and talent management™ during 2020

Stages	Talent is	How does TM work for those seen as talent?	Formal versus informal
Pre-coronavirus awareness and lockdown	New staff we have identified ($n = 8$) Existing staff ($n = 5$) Doctoral students ($n = 3$)	New staff—informal and proactive methods/existing systems Existing staff—existing university systems Students—university systems	Emphasis on formal processes in entry and retention of talent Informal processes linked mainly to entry points where profs are contacted via other means (social media, etc.) and coach students to achieve formal entry
Lockdown	New staff we have identified ($n = 4$) Existing staff ($n = 6$) Doctoral students ($n = 5$)	Existing staff—existing university systems Students—supervisors, faculty/university systems	Formal processes "doubled in time and ineffectiveness" during this time, seen as extra monitoring systems; IT systems sometimes failing at key points in delivery of teaching, KT and research Informal processes vital to retain talent—to support, encourage and motivate staff and students
Post lockdown	New staff we have identified ($n = 2$) Existing staff ($n = 8$) Doctoral students ($n = 8$)	New staff—possibly existing systems ($n = 5$) Existing staff—managers, colleagues ($n = 7$) Doctoral students—supervisors	Formal processes still seen as onerous, with these managers still exerting informal approaches to balance those unhappy with the systems added during lockdown.

researched aspect of TM (Abeuova & Muratbekova-Touron, 2019).

3.1 | Sample

The study involved a purposive sample of eight academic managers based in different English universities. As suggested by Etikan et al. (2016, 2), purposive samples are useful in identifying and selecting "information-rich cases for the most proper utilization of available resources" through finding individuals or groups "that are proficient and well-informed" about the subject being studied (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Those selected were anticipated to have the appropriate knowledge and experience, the willingness to participate, and also the ability to do so. This study focused on TM related to doctoral awards. Therefore, the researchers identified and approached a group of 20 managers in doctoral leadership roles in Business Schools across the United Kingdom to participate, of whom 8 committed to take part throughout the 12 months. Written consent was obtained. An overview of the sample is shown in Table 1 with both personal and work data with all respondent details anonymized.

All participants had children (and in one case, grandchildren) although at the beginning of the study, this was not seen as relevant by participants—this changed as Coronavirus measures were implemented and schools and nurseries were closed. There was an equal male and female split within the sample, and the range of roles within the universities varied across gender lines. In this group, the male participants described their roles as managing research and led research groups; the women had committee and faculty roles in addition to being established research leaders.

As can be seen from Table 1, participants came from universities with different ages and focus, both from older research-intensive universities and newer institutions with more of a teaching focus. The universities in which they worked varied in size from 38,000 to 12,000 students but all are known internationally and have large numbers of international students. They all invest significantly in recruitment measures across the world to attract international students in sufficient numbers and of appropriate quality to meet university strategic aims.

3.2 | Data collection

As changes in higher education were expected throughout 2020, due to both Brexit and to governmental policies, a longitudinal approach was undertaken, with interviews every 2 months over a 12-month period, to see how perceptions of talent and its management were impacted. Evidently, these were overtaken by the effects of the coronavirus pandemic and the attempts by government and institutions to address these. Data were collected through a series of interviews, initially face-to-face and then during the various lockdowns preventing travel, through video platforms such as Teams, Skype, and Zoom to suit the respondent. The sessions were recorded for subsequent transcription. Table 2 shows when interviews occurred with some of the context related to coronavirus; this is necessarily summarized briefly (See timeline-lockdown-social (instituteforgovernment.org.uk for more details of work related conditions at the different stages). The resulting data were explored through repeated reading to allow themes to emerge around TM, how processes evolved over the year and the impacts of these changes, using the key themes of

recruitment and retention from the literature and also allowing new themes to emerge.

4 | DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Themes from the literature were raised by the participants themselves. They knew the study focused on TM and its application and so had thought about the concept before the first interviews, discussing recruitment processes and their effectiveness in getting "the right people" to work in the university (Dilani) or "the right sort of students" at doctoral level with a clear need "to keep good people" (Hamil). Participants described their experiences and their perceptions of how contexts and expectations changed, including how they had dealt with situations and people. By the third interview, participants shifted their focus to reflect on how their roles and priorities had changed in a rapidly worsening situation, due to the pressure felt from home, work, and community contexts. The easing of lockdown did not ease uncertainty in the context of what they felt to be a chaotic start to the new terms in universities across the United Kingdom. Those able to access childcare once September came, then began what they felt was an unmanageable backlog while trying to cope with new work. The results are discussed in three sections: The participant definitions of talent and TM together with formal and informal TM; the recruitment of new researchers, employees and students; the retention of staff.

4.1 | Defining talent and both formal and informal talent management

The first step was to clarify the meanings of talent and TM. As can be seen in Table 3, the definition of talent suggested by participants altered subtly over the year. Before lockdown, new staff (particularly staff approached and courted to apply for roles) were identified as very important while existing staff and students figured less in discussions. Here new/ potential staff were seen as needing proactive contact, whereas existing staff and doctoral students were less important to participants and they felt that these two groups were talent managed by internal systems. This changed over the period of study, with lockdown and post-lockdown phases both focussing instead on existing staff and doctoral students seen as important and needing specific support. There was a transition from formal to informal support for talent. To support existing staff and students, consistent and continuing contact was required through longer and more frequent online meetings, plus follow-up on welfare and well-being issues with them and the university.

For all participants, talent was special; a mixture of desired-for qualities and needed careful discovery. Their definition of talent mirrored most closely Thunnissen and Arensbergen, (Thunnissen & Van Arensbergen, 2015, 195) since it was "a bundle of interrelated components of outstanding abilities, interpersonal characteristics, and excellent performance." Given that participants' outstanding knowledge or skills would be embodied and demonstrated in "excellent performance"—this in turn would demonstrate talent. Talent was often specific to a role or

subject area. Although most roles were significant in moving the research and leadership agenda forward (Loomes et al., 2019), other talent was seen as valuable but sourced to meet specific circumstances. This was in relation to subcontracting or contracting in for activities, such as the operation of large research projects, with short term contract and work online included. This corroborates suggestions that more work will be completed by workers not directly employed by the organization in future (Cascio & Boudreau, 2016).

How this talent was managed often led to discussions of strategies for recruitment and retention, which were seen as critical to managing organizational talent, reflecting TM definitions emphasizing strategic actions which organizations perform to attract, develop, and retain critical human resources (Stahl et al., 2007). For five of the eight participants; however, this was very much about structures and processes, which were firmly situated within organizational or local cultures in the university, as suggested by Messmer, (2006). Participants felt that the systems would only work if the university valued the talent and were seen to do so, citing a recent case in another university, Colin commented.

it takes a lot of effort to secure a topflight professor, if you're going to then stick him in a cubicle and ignore his ideas, you might as well not bother as he has the track record to go somewhere else. Quickly.

Each participant also shared experiences of "missed" talent, where recruitment was excessively bureaucratic and, therefore, very slow, such that the hoped-for talent went elsewhere. In four cases, this was attributed to delays in the HR systems and in two others, to decision-making by senior leaders in the faculty or centrally in the university. Similarly, stories emerged about losing talent due to signals explicitly conveyed to the individual about his or her worth, influence, or value. The common features of these stories included their own frustrations, having spent time and effort in finding "good people" only to find that the faculty or university did not live up to promises made during the "courtship" period, before talented individuals joined the institution, in terms of:

- money
- status
- resources.

These frustrations were expressed as personal slights to the participants in five cases. Promises made to them as the key recruiter were not honoured, causing them embarrassment and "wasting their time" (Emiliana). This caused them to question their own worth within the institution and their relationship with senior managers, such that they also re-evaluated themselves as "talent." The acceleration of the spread of coronavirus and associated socio-economic effects became a key thread in discussions of how their TM working practices had changed, together with their need to take on different roles to support their team members and students. This was also a reflection point for participants—how their talents were recognized and valued both within the faculty and more broadly within the university.

Having discussed participant definitions of talent and TM, findings are grouped together in terms of TM components—the strategic actions which organizations perform to attract, develop, and retain critical human resources (Stahl et al., 2007)—which were identified by participants. Therefore, the findings are discussed under the headings "recruitment" and "retention" which participants used to define how TM applied to the talent represented by staff and students involved in research.

4.2 | Recruitment of new researchers, employees, and students

At the beginning of the year, participants explained how the system worked in their organization to recruit both students and staff. During the initial stages of the pandemic, ambitions to raise research quality were high. They were supported to seek out talent in the United Kingdom and overseas, using direct approaches via social media or telephone and through head-hunters. Those attending management and leadership fora might become aware of talented people looking for their next role and suggest them to those promoting the post to be filled. This progressed informally until the recruitment process took over. The HR process, however, was lengthy. This meant that many of the proposed new talent did not have the opportunity to join the institution as recruitment ceased mid-process, largely due to high levels of uncertainty about the impacts of the pandemic and the government measures to address levels of infection.

There was a lot of nervousness with lockdown, it was all so uncertain. Down came the shutters... everything stopped, temporary contracts were terminated (Hamil)

Despite the time it had taken to identify the candidate and get them interested it all stopped... we are only just starting to discuss the likelihood of recruiting but in some cases it's too late, our top three research candidates have all moved to new roles (Emiliano)

As suggested, participants felt that the ongoing uncertainty during the pandemic and ongoing associated changes, had caused confidence levels in the senior team to fall."

Before the first lockdown we all speculated that we would have to go into lockdown ... but no one knew when or how it would work (Bill)

Of course, every couple of months the playground changed, I mean you never knew where you were, tiers, easing, lockdown (Fiona)

We are often called an entrepreneurial institution but really like any other university, we are really very cautious and slow-moving... in these difficult times this has become very obvious (Dilani)

Participants were frustrated given the difficulty of finding the "right people" and the time it had taken to get them on board, only for this to falter later. All eight felt that they were competing to get the most able people, whether they were new professors, leaders, or administrators, with competition from overseas institutions as well as from the United Kingdom, suggesting the war for talent predicted by Beechler and Woodward, (2009). With Brexit drawing negative publicity for the United Kingdom internationally, six out of the eight

participants identified European academic staff who had returned to take up posts in Europe. This signalled to them that they needed to somehow deal with the potential reputation of the United Kingdom as an inhospitable place for European academics, many of whom participants were targeting to take up posts in new research centres.

4.2.1 | Applying talent management to doctoral students

When the TM system is applied to doctoral students, the recruitment processes were very similar across institutions and were seen as formal and embedded processes. There were three or more different entry points to the route to applying for a doctorate (included sponsored or funded routes with narrow entry points based on the requirements of the subject and the funders), but the general application route relied on a series of steps are summarized below:

1. Entry point online through an application to the university or the faculty
2. Following review by the Associate Dean or Doctoral Programmes Head, these were circulated to appropriate research groups or more widely within the faculty.
3. Supervisors expressed interest in the application; if not the application was refused
4. An interview (via online platform such as Skype or Teams for international students) by two or more potential supervisors
5. Following the interview, paperwork is processed and references / fees checked by faculty and centrally
6. The central doctoral office or faculty office confirms the student place.

Again, there were, of course, informal practices, involved. Professors might be contacted by an international student at an academic conference or using telephone, email or social media to accept someone as a student and work with them to improve their application form before they applied. Initial inquiries came through a number of routes, but over the course of the pandemic, the numbers of inquiries increased. The participants led and managed doctoral programmes and in the first 3 months felt confident about the numbers they expected and the systems in place to encourage good levels of doctoral recruitment to support research aims. As the year progressed, however, this changed.

All participants described faltering routes to recruit, due to difficulties with travel during the pandemic and to visa delays. Potential students often contacted supervisors directly via social media as the pandemic wore on, rather than following normal routes. Some of the "top" students also contacted a number of professors and "tried them out" by a series of emails and often an online video meeting before deciding where to apply.

Unfortunately, some of our most eminent professors are not that adept with new technologies or social media so when these ... top students globally ... are contacting different professors to select one they

want to supervise them, then we probably aren't going to do very well in recruiting that talent (Andy)

4.3 | Retention

The measures to try to ensure retention of employees differed from those to retain doctoral students. These are therefore discussed in two subsections.

4.3.1 | Retaining employees

One of the key aspects of TM, as discussed earlier, is retention. Retaining talented staff is seen as a strategic imperative for many organizations to stay competitive (De Long & Davenport, 2003; Schramm, 2006). Universities are no different. The continuity of staff researching and teaching is also seen as critical to various performance measures in universities. While offering employees compensation and benefits and having a supportive work culture are ways in which talented staff may be retained (Messmer, 2006), participants felt here that they had been unable to offer that culture given the pressures of the pandemic. The universities switched to working online very quickly, without staff consultation These managers felt that they were in the difficult position of "playing catch up… not agreeing with decisions being made but having to implement them anyway and motivate others to do so" (George). This caused participants to reflect on their own commitment to the university and again, how they and other staff were valued and managed, given their roles as managers, researchers and experienced doctoral supervisors.

The technology implemented online came with many issues, as might be anticipated from the speed of its introduction and the pace of change during the year. Discussing retention and TM, Tiwari and Shrivastava, (2013) emphasize the importance of both a robust technology to enable processes, together with preparation of the workforce for change associated with working practice in these new environments. Here, however, participants had been faced with transferring all teaching and interaction online in a very short time, without the security of robust technologies in two cases and without workforce preparation in all cases. This caused practical difficulties in using various platforms and additional management responsibilities in motivating and supporting staff "not only to try out new technologies to do their job but also to use them and do so effectively" (Colin)

A further issue arose from the introduction of new systems to encourage and map the level of home working and to deal with regulations for international students. As the lockdown measures came into force and home working was mandatory, participants felt that their teams saw this as extended monitoring and evidence of further central administrative attempts to control how things were done. Participants discussed their own minor irritation about increases of "bureaucracy" and that this was exacerbated by staff complaints about new requirements during lockdown to record and measure their actions. These included new requirements for weekly management,

departmental and faculty meetings (in one case, held at 9 a.m. each Monday) with new requirements regarding the frequency of supervision meetings, the medium used and the recording of details about such meetings.

just insanity, really. I didn't want or need to talk to my team at 9 am every Monday and Friday to be sure they were doing their jobs and the same applied to the twice-weekly senior meetings… (Fiona)

the thing about large staff meetings online is that most people are on mute with their videos turned off so you end up talking with three people on the agenda as presenting items (George)

The most common practice was the new online calendar or spreadsheet to record when and how doctoral supervision occurred, which was the duty of the first supervisor to complete, which supported monitoring of international students. This was accompanied by new requirements to meet online with doctoral students every other week, whatever stage they had reached in their studies. The systems were often inflexible, as seen in the case when an international student with well-being issues met with their supervisor every week to help them come through their difficulties, but the system rejected anything but fortnightly timings. Previous studies have commented on the incompatibility of serious academic work with managerialism. Bastalich, (2017) for instance, suggests that over-regulation may be detrimental to research quality and this accords with participants' views, in dealing with unhappy teams.

Here it was not simply the extra time and effort to comply, but also the uncertainty about their own standing which caused difficulties for participants dealing with staff, who felt "demeaned by the reduction of what we do to this … book-keeping" (Hamil) rather than being seen as totally responsible and expert "masters of their disciplines" Bastalich (2017, 10). They felt that staff saw this as undermining their roles, in that if they were good at their jobs, they were already going beyond normal requirements to support students, especially international students. Another difficulty for participants was a reduction in hours for doctoral work in four cases, where slight reductions were received by supervisors as signalling lack of value in their work. Participants found that, in two cases, some of the supervisors refused new work while in one case, a supervisor explained to their students why he was limiting time with them. This led to bad publicity via social media and letters to the Vice Chancellor from the students asking what their fees were providing if not supervisor time.

In terms of TM, these measures increased administration, meeting frequency and monitoring systems, and were felt to be detrimental in that they countered informal processes that convey to research staff they are recognized and valued.

It has really damaged relationships… (Andy)

the very staff we want to keep are the ones feeling that they aren't trusted to do their job and that they aren't valued (Dilani)

During the year of coronavirus, participants became increasingly stressed by the need to be on top of their work while coping with family responsibilities. Those men who had originally not seen themselves as having caring responsibilities for their families (see Table 1) had to undertake care for the family if their partners also worked full

time and their children were necessarily at home due to schools closures during lockdown. They still had a full workload to contend. During lockdown only two of the older participants had no heavy childcare responsibilities but with easing of restrictions they took up full-time care of grandchildren to support their own children, who were similarly struggling with full-time work without childcare throughout the crisis. These extra pressures were not always recognized by the managers of participants, who applied "the same targets as in an ordinary year" (Bill) and expected the "same levels of research outputs from staff" (Fiona), whether or not they were facing caring responsibilities.

it's very noticeable, who has had time to write and submit this year … in a faculty with 23 researchers, none of the women have done so because they have had school age children at home throughout the year… we aren't recognising that and we may lose staff if they aren't given time this year (Dilani)

despite everything we have done to adapt quickly and the extra hours many staff have carried out, there is no recognition of that coming through… it is an issue as those are the most talented and well-known people… who can also find other roles elsewhere more easily (George)

The recognition of talent was very important to participants, both formally through annual reviews etc. and informally through day-to-day interactions with managers. Each explained that an important part of their role was conveying worth to their staff, working with them to alleviate issues and feeding back to senior management about their contribution. These informal processes were seen as vital to maintain commitment and to keep the most able staff and as more important to the formal processes.

4.3.2 | Retaining students

Institutions had formal processes in place to collect data annually on student attendance and their level of attainment. Annual reviews and annual research workshops were one thing but day-to-day, throughout the year, the role of supervisors in TM was recognized by all participants. Although they themselves might host occasional workshop sessions and be supervisors for doctoral students, supervisors were seen as the main route for communications and encouragement in retaining students.

We rely on supervisors really to convey how important or doctoral students are to us and to keep them happy while keeping them up to date, learning and achieving (Bill)

The supervisors are the conduit for doctoral students, their commitment to students keeps students committed to the institution (Fiona)

Their own experience of supervising student led supervisors to comment on the increased workload during the pandemic caused by pastoral care required by "students, far from home and isolated in student accommodation" often without the outside space, gardens etc, which supervisors enjoyed (Bill, George).

5 | CONCLUSION

This research discusses talent and TM through a longitudinal approach which mapped changes over a year in which the coronavirus altered every aspect of daily life, by collecting participant understanding of these terms. This provided rich insights into the unravelling of participants' understanding of what talent represented and their shifting definition of what TM might mean, with their emphasis on the informal processes and interactions which they felt shaped their teams' understanding of their worth to the institution and their feeling of recognition and well-being—essential elements in retaining key employees. Here participants expressed difficulties relating to the new and more formalized interactions with the university during lockdown. These interactions generated what were seen as negative and confusing signals to their staff about their value to the university and how the university defined talent. The uncertain conditions influenced participants' thoughts of evolving roles and relationships during the pandemic, with the added pressures of family responsibilities. This article illuminates perspectives of how talent is assessed and understood, both formally through annual assessments etc. and informally through day-to-day interactions with managers.

5.1 | Practical and theoretical implication

Successful TM can contribute to the short- and long-term goals of universities. By driving policies that enable the recruitment of overseas talent, universities are devoting their efforts to raise their profiles internationally, to satisfy long-term goals related to funding. However, goals may shift in addressing evolving socio-economic pressures, such as those caused by the coronavirus pandemic and the associated governmental actions to limit the spread of the disease, impacting perceptions of "how things worked." Therefore, the knowledge-based theory of the universities needs to move from a closed view of current assets of physical and monetary resources toward to recognize the knowledge and retention of employees implied by "knowledge dynamic capabilities."

5.2 | Limitations

The study has the positive benefits of small sample qualitative research in collecting insights into the way in which TM was impacted by coronavirus. Clearly though, it is not a large-scale study and so others may not have had these experiences during the last 12 months, hence other research might generate new and different results. Further research might also explore the impacts of university culture on TM and / or might further evaluate the informal aspects of TM, which aid retention of talent within an organization.

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