



Talent risk management in the New Generation of Academics Programme within a South African university

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DECLARATION

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ABSTRACT

South African Higher Education Institutions face an "academic talent void" driven by an ageing professoriate and the slow pace of demographic transformation. The New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP), established by the Department of Higher Education and Training, represents the state's primary strategic intervention to address this crisis by recruiting and developing early-career academics from designated groups. Despite representing a substantial national investment of approximately R2.5 million per post over six years, the programme's talent-related risks have not been systematically examined through a comprehensive Talent Risk Management (TRM) lens.

This qualitative study adopted an interpretivist paradigm to explore how talent risks are identified, assessed, and mitigated within the nGAP across the four domains of the academic talent lifecycle: acquisition, development, retention, and succession planning. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 participants, comprising four programme administrators and seven nGAP fellows across seven institutions. Data were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis, triangulated with policy document analysis to expose the gap between national policy intent and institutional operational reality.

The study reveals the emergence of a "Two-Tier System" of academic development, where the effectiveness of risk management is fundamentally determined by institutional capacity. In well-resourced institutions, systematic governance mechanisms create a virtuous cycle of talent acceleration. Conversely, in resource-constrained, historically disadvantaged institutions, ad hoc crisis management, infrastructure deficits, and "phantom mentorship" create a vicious cycle of stagnation and attrition. Key findings include the "Asymmetric War for Talent" in acquisition, where elite universities operate in a buyer's market while rural institutions face adverse selection pressures; the "Poaching Paradox," whereby successful development increases external recruitment risk; and the "Implementation Gap," where policy protections such as reduced workload are violated at the departmental level.

The study makes three distinct contributions. Theoretically, it extends Strategic Talent Management discourse into the public sector by integrating the Resource-Based View with Social Exchange Theory. Empirically, it provides the first qualitative risk profile of the nGAP from a lived-experience perspective. In practice, it offers a "Talent Stewardship Framework" comprising strategic principles for the DHET and universities, including differentiated funding models for STEM disciplines, formalised Mentorship Service Level Agreements, and proactive "Stay Interviews" to manage retention risks. The research concludes that bridging the academic talent void requires moving from administrative grant compliance to talent stewardship, addressing not only financial inputs but

the governance of career trajectories.

Keywords: Talent Risk Management, New Generation of Academics Programme, Higher Education, South Africa, Academic Development, Retention Risk, Succession Planning

KEY TERMS

Term	Definition
Early Career Academics (ECAs)	Academics in the initial phase of their career, typically within the first six years of permanent appointment, are characterised by high developmental needs and vulnerability to attrition.
New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP)	A national South African initiative established by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) to recruit, support, and develop early-career academics through permanent posts, reduced workloads and mentorship over a six-year developmental period.
Succession Planning Risk	The probability that nGAP fellows will not successfully transition into senior academic roles due to failure of knowledge transfer or lack of career pathways.
Talent Lifecycle	The sequential stages through which talent moves within an organisation: acquisition (recruitment), development (growth), retention (stability), and succession (integration into leadership), each characterised by distinct risk profiles.
Talent Risk Management (TRM)	The systematic identification, assessment, and mitigation of threats that could prevent an organisation from securing, developing, or retaining the human capital required to achieve strategic objectives
Talent Stewardship	A strategic approach to managing the nGAP that moves beyond administrative compliance to proactive governance of career trajectories through data-driven risk identification, systematic mentorship quality assurance, and accountability mechanisms.
Two-Tier System	The empirical finding that nGAP effectiveness is bifurcated: Tier one institutions (well-resourced) create virtuous cycles of talent acceleration through systematic governance, while Tier two institutions (resource-constrained) create vicious cycles of stagnation through ad hoc management.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Full Term
CAQDAS	Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software
COSO	Committee of Sponsoring Organisations of the Treadway Commission
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
ECA(s)	Early Career Academic(s)
ERM	Enterprise Risk Management
EVP	Employee Value Proposition
HAI(s)	Historically Advantaged Institution(s)
HDI(s)	Historically Disadvantaged Institution(s)
HEI(s)	Higher Education Institution(s)
HESA	Higher Education South Africa
HoD(s)	Head(s) of Department
HR	Human Resources
HRM	Human Resource Management
IDP(s)	Individual Development Plan(s)
IPR	Interview Protocol Refinement
MVS	Maximum Variation Sampling
nGAP	New Generation of Academics Programme
NPM	New Public Management
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy
RBV	Resource-Based View
ROI	Return on Investment
RQ(s)	Research Question(s)
RTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
SLA(s)	Service Level Agreement(s)
SOP(s)	Standard Operating Procedure(s)
SSAUF	Staffing South Africa's Universities Framework
SSI	Semi-Structured Interview
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics

Abbreviation	Full Term
STM	Strategic Talent Management
Sub-RQ	Sub-Research Question
TM	Talent Management
TRM	Talent Risk Management
VRIN	Valuable, Rare, Inimitable, and Non-substitutable

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

1.1.1 Background

South African Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) operate within a complex environment marked by historical inequities, a drive for transformation, global competitiveness pressures, and the critical need to develop a sustainable academic workforce (DHET, 2015; Moosa, 2020). The New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP) was established by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) as a strategic, national initiative specifically designed to address these challenges. Its primary aim is to recruit, support, and develop early-career academics (ECAs), particularly from designated groups, thereby transforming the academic profession and ensuring future capacity within HEIs. It provides permanent posts coupled with a structured 6-year development pathway, including reduced initial workloads, mentorship, funding for postgraduate studies, and support for research and international mobility (DHET, 2017; Hlengwa, 2019; Moosa, 2020).

Talent Risk Management (TRM) - the systematic identification, assessment, and mitigation of threats to the talent pipeline and its effectiveness - is crucial (Schreuder & Noorman, 2019). Talent Management (TM) literature emphasised the importance of attracting, developing, and retaining key individuals crucial for organisational success (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020). Within HEIs, academic talent is the core asset, driving teaching, research, innovation, and community engagement (Musakuro & De Klerk, 2021). A significant challenge is the impending retirement of a large cohort of established academics and the insufficient pipeline of new, diverse scholars entering the system (HESA, 2011; DHET, 2015), a phenomenon reflecting a global trend in higher education (Gappa, Austin, & Trice, 2007).

While nGAP is fundamentally a talent development initiative, its success hinges on effectively managing inherent risks throughout the talent life-cycle. Applying a TRM lens is therefore essential not only for understanding potential pitfalls but also for ensuring the programme's effectiveness, optimising resource allocation, and maximising the return on the significant national investment aimed at achieving critical transformation and capacity-building goals.

1.1.2 Research Problem

The nGAP represents a significant national investment aimed at transforming the South African academic landscape and ensuring the long-term sustainability of HEIs. The success of this programme hinges on its ability to manage the academic talent pipeline it sought to create effectively; from attracting suitable candidates to ensuring their successful development, retention, and eventual integration into senior academic roles (DHET, 2017; Moosa, 2020).

Despite its strategic importance, there is a paucity of research specifically examining the risks associated with the talent management aspects embedded within the nGAP framework. Potential risks in talent acquisition (e.g., attracting insufficient numbers or unsuitable candidates), retention (e.g., nGAP fellows leaving prematurely), development (e.g., inadequate mentorship or skills growth), and succession planning (e.g., lack of clear pathways post-nGAP) could significantly undermine the programme's objectives (Govender, 2024; Marozva et al., 2024; Refuncion, 2024). Early observations suggest challenges related to workload management, institutional culture, mentorship quality, and resource constraints exist within the programme (Hlengwa, 2019; Maluleka, 2024; Hlatshwayo & Majosi, 2024). However, these have not been systematically framed or analysed through a comprehensive TRM perspective, focusing on identification, assessment, and mitigation across the talent life-cycle within nGAP.

Without a clear understanding of these talent risks and the effectiveness of current or potential mitigation strategies, DHET and participating HEIs could struggle to optimise the programme, ensure a return on investment, and achieve the critical goal of cultivating the next generation of diverse South African academics. The study aimed to move from administrative compliance with funding guidelines to strategic governance of the academic talent pipeline, exploring the talent risk management aspects of nGAP through the perspectives of those directly involved in its administration and participation.

1.1.3 Research Questions

1.1.3.1 Main Research Question

How are talent risks identified, assessed, and mitigated within the New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP) concerning the acquisition, retention, development, and succession planning of academic talent?

1.1.3.2 Sub-Research Questions

- ❖ What are the key perceived talent acquisition risks associated with the nGAP, and how are they assessed and mitigated by programme administrators and HEIs?

- ❖ What are the primary talent retention risks faced by nGAP participants and the programme, and what strategies are used for their assessment and mitigation?
- ❖ What talent development risks (e.g., related to skills gaps, mentorship, research output, teaching competence) are identified, and how are these risks assessed and managed?
- ❖ What are the risks associated with succession planning for nGAP fellows beyond the programme's initial six years, and how are these addressed or mitigated?
- ❖ How effective are the current risk mitigation strategies as perceived by nGAP administrators and participants, and what are the primary gaps in the current TRM approach?

1.1.4 Research Questions

1.1.4.1 Primary Research Objective

The primary objective of this study is to explore the talent risk management aspects of the nGAP, focusing on identification, assessment, and mitigation strategies related to academic talent development.

1.1.4.2 Secondary Research Objectives

- ❖ To identify the key risks associated with talent acquisition within the nGAP framework from the perspective of administrators and participants.
- ❖ To identify and explore the perceived critical risks impacting talent retention of nGAP fellows during and potentially after the programme.
- ❖ To explore the risks related to the development (including mentorship, skills acquisition, and performance) of nGAP academics.
- ❖ To examine the risks concerning the succession planning and long-term career integration of nGAP fellows within HEIs.
- ❖ To analyse the strategies currently employed to mitigate identified talent risks within nGAP and explore the perceptions of administrators and participants regarding their effectiveness.

1.1.5 Demarcation of the Study

To ensure the research was focused and manageable, the study's scope was demarcated by the following boundaries. These choices represented the study's "delimitations" - the necessary boundaries set by the researcher to define the scope of the inquiry and ensure a deep, rather than broad, investigation of the central phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Rudestam & Newton,

2015).

- ❖ **Conceptual Demarcation:** This study was strictly framed within a Talent Risk Management (TRM) perspective. It focused specifically on risks related to the talent lifecycle stages of acquisition, development, retention, and succession planning. It did not provide a comprehensive evaluation of all aspects of the nGAP, including its funding models, financial return on investment (ROI), and broader policy impact on the Higher Education sector.
- ❖ **Population Demarcation:** The research population was limited to two specific groups: nGAP programme administrators and current or recent nGAP participants (ECAs). The study did not include the perspectives of other stakeholders, such as Heads of Department not directly involved in nGAP administration or non-nGAP early-career academics.
- ❖ **Geographical Demarcation:** The study is confined to the South African Higher Education sector, as the nGAP is a national programme unique to this context. No claims are made about applicability outside of South Africa.
- ❖ **Methodological Demarcation:** This was a qualitative exploration of selected institutions and was not intended as a national statistical evaluation. The study focused on exploring the perceptions and experiences of participants. It aimed to generate in-depth insights rather than statistically generalizable data. It did not quantify risk prevalence or measure retention rates statistically across the entire nGAP cohort.

1.1.6 Potential Contributions and Significance

1.1.6.1 Academic

This study contributes empirically to the literature on Talent Risk Management, particularly in the under-researched context of public-sector HE talent development programmes in a developing country. It bridges TM, TRM, and academic development literature. By applying a novel theoretical lens (TRM) to an important empirical case (nGAP), this research made a distinct theoretical contribution by refining how talent risk was understood in non-corporate, public-good contexts (Whetten, 1989).

1.1.6.2 Practical/Managerial

The findings provide valuable insights for the DHET and participating universities on the specific talent risks within nGAP and the effectiveness of current management strategies. In doing so, the research aims to generate actionable knowledge that supported evidence-based management and policymaking (Rousseau, 2006). Recommendations could inform policy adjustments and practical

improvements to enhance programme design, implementation, and monitoring.

1.1.6.3 Societal

By potentially strengthening the nGAP programme through better risk management, the research could indirectly contribute to South Africa's broader goals of HE transformation, equity, and the development of sustainable academic capacity for the future. This aligned with the growing imperative for academic research to demonstrate a clear societal impact by contributing to public policy goals and enhancing social equity (Bornmann, 2013).

1.2 LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

1.2.1 Introduction

This chapter establishes the theoretical context for exploring TRM within the nGAP. It reviews key literature streams, starting with the broad principles of TM, then narrowing the focus to the unique context of TM within Higher Education (HE) and the nGAP programme as a specific intervention. Finally, it introduced TRM as a critical lens for analysis. The review culminates in the development of a conceptual framework that governs this study, thereby identifying the specific research gap it addresses.

1.2.2 The Strategic Importance of Talent Management

Talent Management refers to the systematic and strategic processes an organisation uses to attract, identify, develop, engage, retain, and deploy individuals deemed valuable for achieving its objectives (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). The "war for talent" concept (Chambers et al., 1998) emphasises that in a knowledge-based economy, human capital is a primary source of competitive advantage, making effective TM a strategic imperative (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020).

1.2.3 The Unique Context of TM in Higher Education

While foundational TM models from the corporate sector provide a useful lens, their direct application to Higher Education (HE) is problematic. Scholars argue that the academic 'war for talent' is complicated by factors less prevalent in business, such as pressures on research output, academic freedom, and significant compensation disparities with the private sector (Musakuro & De Klerk, 2021; Thunnissen et al., 2013). Specifically, within the South African context, Theron et al. (2014) and Lesenyeho et al. (2018) emphasise challenges such as retaining academics facing diverse pressures (workload, work-life balance) and ensuring effective succession planning for an ageing workforce. Effective TM in HE thus requires a strategic approach sensitive to the specific needs and motivations of academics (Musakuro, 2022).

1.2.4 The nGAP Programme as a National TM Intervention

The GAP is a direct, large-scale TM intervention by the South African government designed to address these systemic challenges. It focuses on cultivating future academic generations, particularly from under-represented black and female groups (DHET, 2015). By providing structured support over six years, including permanent posts, reduced workloads, funding, and mentorship. It serves as a critical talent acquisition and development pipeline (DHET, 2017; Hlengwa, 2019). Early research on its implementation highlighted both successes and challenges, such as inconsistent mentoring quality and tensions between teaching and research demands, which inherently represented talent risks (Hlengwa, 2019; Maluleka, 2024; Moosa, 2020).

1.2.5 From Talent Management to Talent Risk Management

If nGAP is a significant national investment in talent, then failing to manage the risks to that investment was a critical oversight. This study argued for a pivot from a standard TM perspective to that of TRM. TRM does not operate in a vacuum but is a critical component of an institution's broader Enterprise Risk Management (ERM) framework. Authoritative global standards, such as the framework from the Committee of Sponsoring Organisations of the Treadway Commission (COSO, 2017), mandate integrating risk management with strategy and performance, explicitly recognising human capital as a significant source of strategic risk.

This strategic view is mirrored within management theory. Scholars like Boudreau and Ramstad (2005) argue for 'talentship,' a framework demanding that talent decisions be made with the same analytical rigour as financial investments, including a careful assessment of risk and return. Together, these perspectives frame TRM not just as an HR function, but as a strategic imperative for protecting organisational value. TRM is therefore the specific discipline that focuses on threats that could impact the availability, quality, and deployment of critical talent (Vaiman et al., 2012). It involves identifying potential talent-related problems, assessing their likelihood and impact, and developing strategies to mitigate them across the entire talent lifecycle (Scullion et al., 2010).

1.2.6 A Conceptual Framework for Analysing nGAP Risks

To systematically explore the challenges within the nGAP, this study adopted a TRM perspective. This perspective provided a structured approach to identifying, assessing, and mitigating risks to the talent pipeline that the nGAP represents. The conceptual framework for this study integrated the core lifecycle stages of TM with the principles of TRM. It posited that talent risks within the nGAP were not monolithic but manifested differently across four key stages. These stages, adapted from the literature (e.g., Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Vaiman et al., 2012), governed the data collection and analysis:

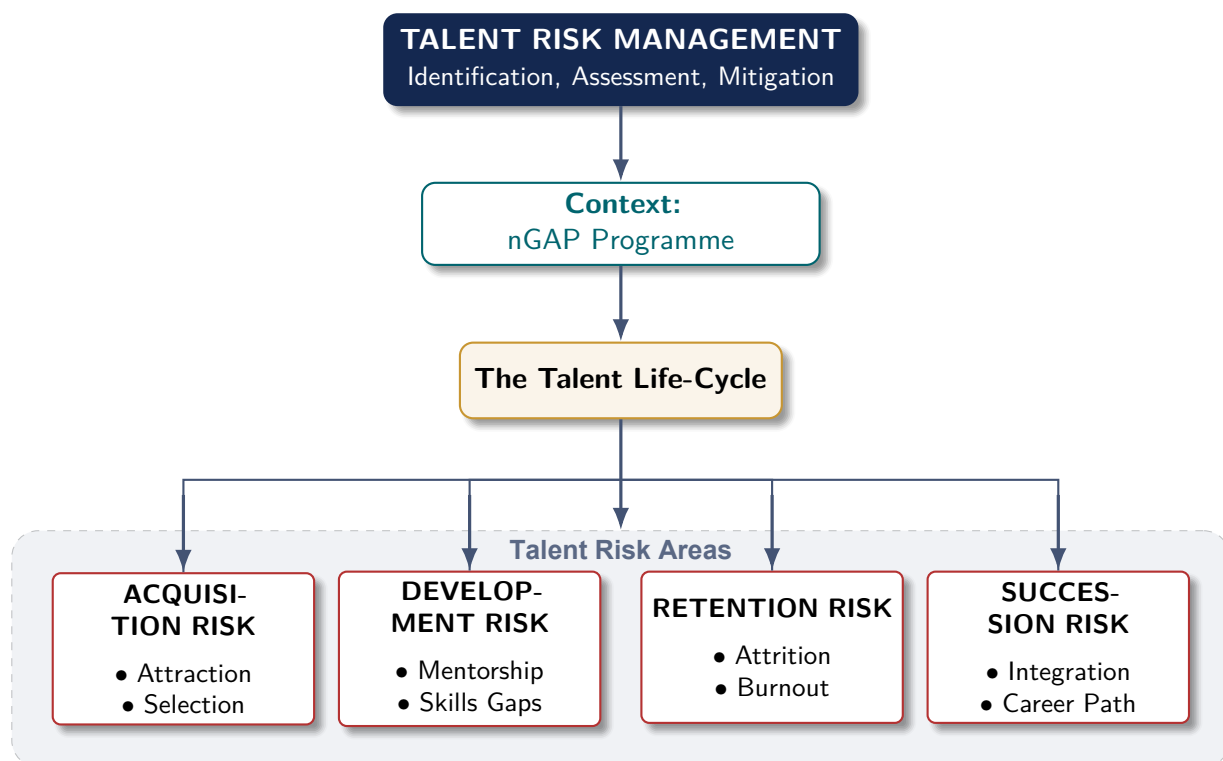


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Analysing Talent Risk in the nGAP

- ❖ **Talent Acquisition Risk:** Examining the risks associated with attracting and selecting the right candidates for the nGAP.
- ❖ **Talent Development Risk:** Examining risks related to the core development pathway, including mentorship quality, skills growth, and research output. This domain explicitly addresses the variability in mentorship effectiveness and the material infrastructure required for development.
- ❖ **Talent Retention Risk:** Examining risks that could lead to nGAP fellows leaving the programme prematurely or leaving academia post-programme, including factors such as dissatisfaction and burnout (Lackritz, 2004).
- ❖ **Succession Planning Risk:** Examining the risks associated with the long-term integration of nGAP fellows into senior academic roles post-programme.

This framework was visualised as follows:

This framework was used to structure the semi-structured interviews and to code the resulting data, ensuring that the analysis was focused on answering the research questions through a consistent theoretical lens.

1.2.7 Synthesis and Identified Research Gap

The preceding literature review represented a synthesis of knowledge, a process essential for developing evidence-informed management insights and identifying precise areas for new inquiry (Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003). The literature confirmed the importance of TM in HE and outlined the structure and initial experiences within nGAP. However, this synthesis revealed a clear gap in research that explicitly adopted a TRM lens to analyse the nGAP. While challenges (risks) were mentioned in nGAP evaluations, they had not been systematically identified, assessed, and analysed as talent risks across the core TM areas (acquisition, retention, development, succession). This study aimed to fill this gap by providing a focused exploration of TRM within this critical national programme.

1.3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1.3.1 Research Paradigm and Approach

- ❖ **Research Paradigm:** This study adopted an interpretivist paradigm. This paradigm was appropriate as the study sought to understand the subjective experiences, perceptions, and meanings that nGAP administrators and participants attributed to talent risks and management strategies within their specific contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018).
- ❖ **Research Approach:** A qualitative research approach was employed. This approach was suitable for exploring complex social phenomena, gaining in-depth insights, and understanding context-specific issues, such as the nuances of talent risk within a unique programme like nGAP (Musakuro, 2022).

1.3.2 Research Strategy

Qualitative Exploratory and Descriptive Design. This design was suitable for exploring under-researched phenomena, such as TRM within nGAP, and for describing the perspectives and experiences of those involved. Given the relative lack of research specifically on TRM within nGAP, an exploratory approach was suitable to uncover key themes, perspectives, and practices (Saunders et al., 2015).

1.3.3 Sampling Strategy

This study employed a purposive sampling strategy, a hallmark of rigorous qualitative research. Unlike quantitative research that seeks statistical representativeness through random sampling, purposive sampling involves the deliberate selection of "information-rich cases" (Patton, 2015). The core principle is that individuals were chosen because they have direct knowledge of and specific

experience with the phenomenon under investigation; in this case, the talent risks within the nGAP. As argued by leading methodologists, this approach is the most logical and effective way to gain a deep, nuanced understanding of a complex social program from the perspective of those most directly affected (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015).

To achieve a comprehensive and multifaceted understanding, a specific type of purposive sampling known as maximum variation sampling was utilised (Patton, 2015). This strategy does not aim to build a sample that mirrors the general population, but rather to intentionally capture a broad spectrum of perspectives and contexts. This allows the researcher to identify central themes that cut across different experiences while also illuminating the unique variations.

The sample was therefore drawn from two distinct, information-rich groups:

- ❖ **Administrators:** An estimated 3-4 individuals with oversight responsibility for the nGAP. This group was critical for understanding the strategic, policy-level, and implementation-related risks.
- ❖ **Participants:** An estimated 6-10 current or recent nGAP participants (ECAs) were recruited. This group provided the invaluable first-hand, "lived experience" perspective on talent acquisition, development, and retention risks. The selection within this group purposefully sought diversity across key characteristics to ensure the sample reflected a maximum variation of experiences.

1.3.3.1 Justification for Collecting Participant Demographic Data

The justification for collecting detailed participant characteristics was grounded in the qualitative research strategy of maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2015). This form of purposeful sampling was not intended to achieve statistical generalizability, but to intentionally seek a diverse range of participants to capture the full spectrum of experiences with talent risk within the nGAP. The objective, as described by Patton (2015), was to identify central themes that cut across varied cases while also illuminating the unique patterns that emerged from different participant contexts.

This approach was fundamental to the study's interpretivist paradigm, which asserted that meaning was constructed within, and could not be separated from, an individual's specific social and institutional context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, characteristics such as race, gender and discipline were not just demographic variables; they were critical analytical lenses through which to understand the multifaceted nature of talent risk.

- ❖ **Race and Gender:** The nGAP was explicitly created to address the historical under-representation of black and female academics. Understanding their specific perceptions of risk was central to evaluating the nGAP's core objective.

- ❖ **Discipline:** A participant in a high-demand field might face different retention risks compared to one in the Humanities, allowing for the exploration of discipline-specific talent risks.
- ❖ **Year in the Programme:** Talent risks evolved. An early-stage participant might face risks in onboarding, while a late-stage participant might face risks in succession planning. This variable was essential for analysing risks across the talent lifecycle.

1.3.3.2 The Principle of Thematic Saturation

The proposed sample sizes were estimates. The final sample size was determined by the principle of thematic saturation (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saunders et al., 2018). This principle, with its conceptual roots in grounded theory's "theoretical saturation" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), marked the point at which additional data collection yielded no new themes or insights relevant to the research questions (Patton, 2015). To achieve this, an iterative approach was employed. Data analysis commenced after the first few interviews and ran concurrently with further data collection. As argued by Saunders et al. (2018), this concurrent process was critical, as it allowed the researcher to make an informed, interpretive judgement about when saturation had been reached. Data collection ceased when new interviews consistently yielded no new conceptual information regarding talent risks.

1.3.4 Data Collection

A multi-method qualitative approach was employed, centred on semi-structured interviews and supported by document analysis for triangulation.

1.3.4.1 Recruitment Strategy

A clear, multi-stage contact process was followed, designed to respect institutional protocols while ensuring participant recruitment was voluntary and non-coercive, in line with established methodological and ethical guidelines (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

1. **Initial Approach via Gatekeepers:** The researcher made a formal approach via email to institutional "gatekeepers," such as nGAP coordinators. This email introduced the study, attached the ethics approval, and requested permission to forward invitations to potential participants. This step recognised the formal authority of institutional gatekeepers in granting access to the research field (Creswell & Poth, 2018).
2. **The Formal Invitation to Participate:** Gatekeepers were asked to forward a standardised "Invitation Pack" to potential participants. This pack contained a Participant Information Sheet and an invitation to contact the researcher directly. This two-step process ensured that respondents initiated contact, making their participation explicitly voluntary and mitigating any potential for

coercion from the gatekeeper.

3. **Scheduling and Pre-Interview Communication:** When a respondent expressed interest, the researcher replied to answer questions and coordinate an interview. The Information Sheet and Consent Form were attached again for their records.
4. **Conducting the Semi-Structured Interviews:** Interviews were conducted online via Zoom or Microsoft Teams. At the start, the researcher reiterated the study's purpose, obtained informed consent, and asked for permission to audio-record the session.
5. **Post-Interview Follow-Up:** A thank-you email was sent to the respondent after the interview.

1.3.4.2 Development and Piloting of Interview Guides

In line with best practices for developing rigorous qualitative research instruments (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Patton, 2015), two separate but aligned semi-structured interview guides were developed (for Administrators and Participants). The guides were piloted with 1-2 individuals who fit the profile but were not part of the main sample to refine clarity and flow.

1.3.4.3 Document Analysis for Triangulation

To enhance credibility through methodological triangulation (Patton, 2015), interview data were triangulated with analyses of public-facing policy documents related to the nGAP. This use of documents as a non-interactive data source served to corroborate, contextualise, and identify points of divergence with the perspectives gathered from interviews (Bowen, 2009). The documents for analysis included:

- ❖ The DHET's "Standard operating procedures for the new generation of academics programme (nGAP)" (DHET, 2017).
- ❖ The "Staffing South Africa's universities framework" (DHET, 2015).

1.3.5 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the transcribed interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involved:

- ❖ Familiarisation with the data (reading transcripts repeatedly).
- ❖ Generating initial codes (identifying key concepts related to risks).
- ❖ Searching for themes (grouping codes related to the TRM lifecycle stages).
- ❖ Reviewing themes (checking if themes worked across the data set).

- ❖ Defining and naming themes (developing clear definitions for each theme).
- ❖ Producing the report (writing the analysis, using vivid participant quotes).

To facilitate this process and ensure analytical rigour, ATLAS.ti was the primary software tool used for data management and analysis. As argued by leading methodologists in the field (e.g., Frieze, 2019), the use of Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) was specifically chosen to help systematically manage the large volume of text data. It was used to assist in the coding process and to maintain a clear audit trail of the analytical decisions made. Crucially, in line with best practice (Frieze, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018), the software was treated as a tool for enhancing analytical proximity to the data, while the interpretive work of generating codes, developing themes, and constructing the final analysis remained the core responsibility of the researcher.

1.3.6 Rigour and Trustworthiness

To ensure the rigour of this study, its trustworthiness was established by adhering to the foundational criteria developed for qualitative research by Lincoln and Guba (1985). This framework addressed four key aspects of research quality:

- ❖ **Credibility** was enhanced through clear description of methodology, triangulation of data sources (interviews and documents), and peer debriefing during analysis.
- ❖ **Transferability** was supported by thick descriptions of the nGAP context and participant characteristics.
- ❖ **Dependability** was ensured via an audit trail of the research process.
- ❖ **Confirmability** was addressed through researcher reflexivity.

1.3.7 Ethical Considerations

The researcher was fully committed to upholding the highest ethical standards. This commitment was guided by established best practices for qualitative inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The following measures were implemented to protect the rights and welfare of all participants.

1. **Formal Ethical Approval:** Prior to any participant recruitment, full ethical clearance was sought from the North-West University Research Ethics Committee.
2. **Informed Consent:** A comprehensive informed consent process was followed. Each potential participant received a Participant Information Sheet detailing the purpose, voluntary nature, and confidentiality measures of the study. A separate Consent Form required a signature (or digital

affirmation) before the interview proceeded.

3. **Voluntary Participation and Avoidance of Coercion:** It was explicitly stated in all communications that participation was entirely voluntary. To mitigate any risk of coercion, administrators who assisted in identifying potential participants were only asked to forward a neutral invitation; they were not informed who agreed to participate.
4. **Confidentiality and Anonymity:** All participants were assigned a pseudonym. All identifying information (names, universities) was removed from transcripts. To manage the risk of "jigsaw identification," findings were reported in an aggregated and thematic manner.
5. **Secure Data Management:** Audio recordings were stored in encrypted files on a password-protected computer and permanently deleted after accurate transcription. Anonymised transcripts were securely stored for the period required by the university's ethics policy before being destroyed.
6. **Power Relations and Researcher Reflexivity:** The researcher acknowledged that power was a significant element in this study.
 - ❖ **Power Between Participant Groups:** The power imbalance between administrators and ECAs was managed by ensuring absolute anonymity and confidentiality, so ECAs felt safe to provide honest perspectives.
 - ❖ **Researcher Positionality:** The researcher was a former nGAP participant and current Senior Lecturer. This insider status presented both strengths (rapport, context) and risks (bias). To manage this, a process of continuous reflexivity was implemented through:
 - ❖ **Reflexive Journaling:** To document personal reactions and challenge assumptions during the research process.
 - ❖ **Peer Debriefing:** Regular discussions with the research supervisor were used to challenge emerging themes and identify potential blind spots, ensuring the analysis was grounded in the participants' data.

1.3.8 Limitations of the Research

Findings were based on participant perceptions and might be subject to recall bias. Due to the qualitative approach and purposive sampling, generalizability to all HEIs or nGAP fellows was limited. The decision to include a diverse sample from different university types to achieve richness rather than conduct a full comparative study was a necessary delimitation due to the project's time

constraints.

1.4 RESEARCH PLAN

1.4.1 Timeline

Table 1: Research Timeline (Gantt Chart)

Phase	Month 1	Month 2	Month 3	Month 4	Month 5	Month 6
Proposal Finalisation	X					
Ethics Application	X	X				
Participant Recruitment		X	X			
Data Collection (Interviews)			X	X		
Data Transcription			X	X	X	
Data Analysis			X	X	X	X
Draft Write-up					X	X
Finalisation & Submission						X

1.5 OUTLINE OF THE DISSERTATION

The dissertation was structured in five chapters.

1.5.1 Chapter One: Introduction

This chapter provided background on South African HEIs and the nGAP programme, introduced the concept of talent risk management, clearly stated the research problem, and outlined the research aim, objectives, and the questions guiding the study.

1.5.2 Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter critically reviewed relevant literature on strategic talent management, talent management specifically within higher education, talent risk management frameworks and processes, and the specific context, objectives, and documented experiences of the nGAP programme. It culminated in the development of a conceptual framework guiding the study.

1.5.3 Chapter Three: Research Methodology

This chapter detailed the research philosophy (interpretivism), approach (qualitative), and design (exploratory and descriptive). It elaborated on the target population, sampling strategy, data collection methods (semi-structured interviews, potential document analysis), and the thematic data analysis plan. It also thoroughly addressed issues of trustworthiness, rigour (including researcher reflexivity), ethical considerations, and limitations.

1.5.4 Chapter Four: Discussion of Findings

This chapter presented the empirical findings derived from the data analysis. The findings were logically structured, interpreted in relation to the literature review and the conceptual framework developed in Chapter 2. It discussed the key talent risks identified, current risk management practices, their perceived effectiveness, and the alignment (or divergence) with established TRM principles and relevant HE literature. Implications of the findings were explored.

1.5.5 Chapter Five: Conclusion and Recommendations

The final chapter summarised the entire study, reiterating the main findings and their significance. It highlighted the study's key contributions to knowledge and practice. Actionable recommendations were offered, potentially tailored for different stakeholders (e.g., DHET, HEI leadership, nGAP coordinators/mentors). The study's limitations were explicitly acknowledged, and suggestions for specific avenues for future research stemming from the findings were provided.

1.6 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This introductory chapter established the strategic context and rationale for investigating Talent Risk Management within the New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP). It positioned the study within the urgent reality of South Africa's "academic talent void"; a crisis driven by an ageing professoriate and insufficient transformation rates. While the nGAP represents a substantial national investment to address this challenge, the chapter identified a critical research gap: the lack of a systematic analysis of the talent-related risks that threaten the programme's effectiveness.

The chapter articulated the main research question and five sub-questions targeting the four domains of the academic talent lifecycle: acquisition, development, retention, and succession planning. It introduced a novel Talent Risk Management (TRM) perspective, arguing that the programme's success hinges not only on funding allocation but also on the rigorous governance of risks throughout this lifecycle. The conceptual framework presented provides the analytical scaffold for the empirical investigation, moving the focus beyond administrative grant compliance to strategic talent stewardship.

Having established the "what" and "why" of this inquiry, Chapter Two provides the theoretical architecture; critically reviewing the literature on Strategic Talent Management, the unique context of South African Higher Education, and the principles of risk governance necessary to understand how talent risks materialise and can be mitigated within the nGAP.

Chapter two will describe the study's literature review.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. INTRODUCTION

The sustainability of South African Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) rests fundamentally on a single, volatile asset: academic talent. In an environment characterised by the "war for talent," universities face the dual pressure of retaining established scholars while simultaneously cultivating a diverse new generation of academics (Chambers et al., 1998:44). The New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP) represents a decisive, state-led intervention to secure this pipeline against the erosion of an ageing professoriate and slow transformation rates. However, the mere provision of funding and permanent posts does not automatically guarantee the successful cultivation of academic timber; it requires the rigorous management of inherent talent risks throughout the scholar's lifecycle.

This chapter establishes the theoretical architecture for exploring Talent Risk Management (TRM) within the nGAP. It argues that to fully comprehend the challenges facing this national programme, one must move beyond the standard, often optimistic, rhetoric of "talent development" and adopt the more critical, diagnostic lens of "talent risk." To achieve this, the chapter follows a structured logic that moves from specific research inquiries to broader theoretical foundations, culminating in a synthesised conceptual framework.

Section 2.2 serves as the analytical engine of the review, systematically addressing each of the study's Research Questions (RQs). It identifies key risk themes within the literature concerning the acquisition, retention, development, and succession planning of academic talent, as well as the effectiveness of current mitigation strategies. Having established these specific risk domains, the chapter then broadens its scope to provide the necessary theoretical and contextual depth. Section 2.3 anchors the study in Strategic Talent Management theory, specifically drawing on the Resource-Based View (RBV) to justify talent as a source of competitive advantage. Section 2.4 interrogates the unique context of South African higher education, analysing how historical inequities and transformation imperatives shape talent management.

Section 2.5 provides a detailed examination of the nGAP itself, contrasting its policy intent with documented implementation realities. Section 2.6 deepens the theoretical argument by integrating TRM with Enterprise Risk Management (ERM) principles. Finally, Section 2.7 synthesises these diverse literature streams into a Conceptual Framework for analysing nGAP risks. This framework

integrates the talent lifecycle with risk management principles, providing the theoretical scaffold that guides the empirical investigation outlined in Chapter Three.

2.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND LITERATURE ANALYSIS

This section serves as the analytical engine of the literature review, systematically anchoring the study's research questions in the existing body of knowledge. Rather than providing a general overview of talent management, this section interrogates the specific literature streams relevant to each of the five sub-research questions. By mapping the "risk universe" identified in the scholarship, ranging from the "academic talent void" to the complexities of transformation, this analysis establishes the theoretical necessity for investigating TRM within the nGAP.

2.2.1 Overview of Research Questions

The study is guided by one main research question and five sub-research questions, structured to mirror the academic talent lifecycle.

Main Research Question: *How are talent risks identified, assessed, and mitigated within the New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP) concerning the acquisition, retention, development, and succession planning of academic talent?*

To unpack this central inquiry, the following sub-research questions (Sub-RQs) target specific risk domains:

1. **Sub-RQ1:** What are the key perceived talent acquisition risks associated with the nGAP, and how are they assessed and mitigated by programme administrators and HEIs?
2. **Sub-RQ2:** What are the primary talent retention risks faced by nGAP participants and the programme, and what strategies are used for their assessment and mitigation?
3. **Sub-RQ3:** What talent development risks (e.g., related to skills gaps, mentorship, research output, teaching competence) are identified, and how are these risks assessed and managed?
4. **Sub-RQ4:** What are the risks associated with succession planning for nGAP fellows beyond the programme's initial six years, and how are these addressed or mitigated?
5. **Sub-RQ5:** How effective are the current risk mitigation strategies as perceived by nGAP administrators and participants, and what are the primary gaps in the current TRM approach?

The logic of this structure is sequential: it traces the trajectory of the nGAP scholar from entry (acquisition) through growth (development) and stabilisation (retention) to long-term integration (suc-

cession), while simultaneously evaluating the efficacy of the management interventions employed at each stage.

2.2.2 Main Research Question: Talent Risk Management in nGAP

The main research question necessitates a shift in analytical focus from traditional "TM" to "TRM". Whilst standard TM focuses on the optimisation of human capital to achieve strategic goals (Collings & Mellahi, 2009:304), TRM explicitly addresses the uncertainty and volatility associated with the supply, demand, and continuity of that talent. Vaiman, Scullion, and Collings (2012:925) argue that decision-making in TM is frequently flawed by bias and inadequate risk assessment, necessitating a more scientific approach.

In the context of the nGAP, TRM involves the systematic identification, assessment, and mitigation of threats that could derail the programme's objectives. The literature suggests that these risks are not just operational (e.g., administrative delays) but strategic. Meyer, Roodt, and Robbins (2011:3) define HR risk as factors involving people, culture, or governance that create uncertainty in the business environment. Applied to the nGAP, the main research question investigates how Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) govern these uncertainties. It probes whether institutions have moved beyond reactive administration to proactive risk governance, as recommended by the King III and IV reports on corporate governance, which elevate the management of human capital risk to a board-level responsibility (Meyer et al., 2011:11).

The literature indicates that failing to manage these risks holistically threatens the return on the significant national investment in the nGAP. Consequently, the main research question integrates the four domains of the talent lifecycle: Acquisition, Retention, Development, and Succession, which are explored individually below.

2.2.3 Sub-RQ1: Talent Acquisition Risks in nGAP

Sub-RQ1 investigates the risks associated with attracting and selecting suitable candidates for the nGAP. The literature identifies acquisition as a high-risk domain due to the "war for talent" and the specific structural constraints of the South African higher education sector.

Supply-demand mismatch and the "War for Talent": The primary acquisition risk identified in the literature is the "academic talent void" (Theron, Barkhuizen & Du Plessis, 2014:1). South African HEIs face a critical shortage of qualified academics, particularly from designated groups, driven by an ageing professoriate and an insufficient production of doctoral graduates. HESA (2011:6) highlighted that the pipeline of new scholars is too narrow to meet the sector's expansion needs. This creates a "supply risk" for the nGAP: the risk that universities cannot find candidates who meet

the programme's specific eligibility criteria (equity candidates, 40 years or younger, committed to academia) within the available pool.

Adverse selection and "Bad Fit" acquisition risk also encompass "adverse selection," where candidates are appointed based on potential but lack the resilience or fit for the academic environment. Musakuro and De Klerk (2021:5) note that recruitment challenges in HEIs often stem from a misalignment between the institution's value proposition and the candidate's expectations. The risk of "bad fit" is exacerbated in the nGAP context because candidates are often recruited with a master's degree rather than a PhD. This introduces significant uncertainty regarding their capability to complete a doctoral qualification within the programme's tight six-year timeframe.

Employer branding and transformation, furthermore, Lesenyeho, Barkhuizen, and Schutte (2018:4) argue that the ability to attract talent is heavily dependent on the institution's employer brand. Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDIs) often face greater acquisition risks than Historically Advantaged Institutions (HAIs) due to resource disparities and location. Additionally, the imperative for transformation introduces a tension between the speed of recruitment and the availability of equity candidates, potentially leading to vacant posts or "compromise hires" if risk is not managed through robust talent-scouting and pipeline-development strategies (DHET, 2015:7).

2.2.4 Sub-RQ2: Talent Retention Risks in nGAP

Sub-RQ2 explores the threats to retaining nGAP scholars once they have been appointed. The literature frames retention not just as the absence of turnover, but as the maintenance of the psychological contract between the scholar and the institution.

The "Leaky Pipeline" and dysfunctional turnover. Pienaar and Bester (2008:32) characterise the early career phase of academia as highly volatile, with significant attrition rates creating a "leaky pipeline." Retention risk in the nGAP is defined by "dysfunctional turnover"; the loss of high-potential employees in whom the state has invested heavily (Ohlmer, Dries & Dysvik, 2019:125). The literature suggests that if nGAP scholars exit the programme prematurely (e.g., after obtaining their PhD but before serving their contract), the return on investment is negated.

Workload and role conflict. A primary driver of retention risk is role overload. While the nGAP policy stipulates a reduced teaching load (20% in the first three years) to facilitate research, institutional realities often contradict this. Hlengwa (2019:11) and Moosa (2020:78) found that nGAP scholars frequently face pressure to take on the full teaching and administrative load due to staff shortages in their departments. This breach of the programme's "protected time" promise constitutes a violation of the psychological contract, leading to burnout and withdrawal behaviours (lack of engagement),

which are precursors to resignation.

Institutional culture and alienation. For black women academics specifically, retention risks are compounded by institutional culture. Biljohn, Marange, Le Roux, and Schroeder (2024:4) highlight that early-career black women often experience marginalisation and a lack of collegial support in historically white institutional cultures. This "environmental risk" creates a sense of isolation. If the nGAP scholar feels like an "equity hire" rather than a valued colleague, the risk of attrition increases significantly. Managing retention risk, therefore, requires addressing not only the contractual terms but also the scholar's socio-cultural integration into the academic community.

2.2.5 Sub-RQ3: Talent Development Risks in nGAP

Sub-RQ3 examines risks related to the growth of the scholar's human capital. The nGAP is fundamentally a developmental intervention; therefore, failure to develop constitutes a critical programme failure.

The Mentorship "Black Box" Mentorship is the cornerstone of the nGAP developmental model (DHET, 2015:11). However, the literature identifies significant risks regarding mentorship quality. Hlengwa (2019:7) notes that mentorship in South African HEIs is often ad hoc and unstructured. The risk is that mentorship becomes a "black box"; assumed to be happening but ineffective in practice. If mentors are untrained, overloaded, or culturally insensitive, the mentorship relationship can become toxic or negligent, stalling the scholar's development.

Research vs. teaching tensions and development risks also manifest in the tension between research and teaching competencies. The nGAP emphasizes doctoral completion (research), yet scholars must also develop as pedagogues. Moosa (2020:81) warns that the pressure to publish can lead to the neglect of teaching development. Conversely, excessive teaching loads prevent research output. The risk lies in producing "lopsided" academics who are either researchers with poor teaching skills or teachers with no research profile, neither of whom is sustainable in the modern university economy.

Time Compression Diseconomies Theoretically, development risk is linked to "time compression diseconomies" (Dierickx & Cool, 1989:1506). The nGAP attempts to accelerate academic development within a six-year window. However, the accumulation of academic stock (knowledge, networks, and publication records) is path-dependent and cannot be easily rushed. The risk is that the programme imposes unrealistic developmental timelines that ignore a scholar's natural maturation, leading to "fast science" (superficial output) or failure to meet promotion criteria.

2.2.6 Sub-RQ4: Succession Planning Risks for nGAP Fellows

Sub-RQ4 investigates the long-term integration of nGAP scholars into the academic workforce. Succession planning is the mechanism by which the "talent void" left by retiring academics is filled (Theron et al., 2014:2).

The "Dead End" risk is a critical risk identified in the literature is the lack of clear career pathways post-nGAP. While the posts are permanent, their funding structure shifts from the state to the university after year six. Musakuro and De Klerk (2021:10) identify the absence of formal succession planning as a systemic weakness in South African HEIs. If universities fail to budget for the absorption of nGAP costs, or if senior posts are not vacated as planned, nGAP scholars may face a "dead end," leading to retention crises at the very moment they become fully productive.

Knowledge Transfer Failure Succession is not just about filling a vacancy; it is about transferring institutional memory and tacit knowledge. The departure of the "ageing professoriate" represents a massive loss of intellectual capital (HESA, 2011:13). Succession risk arises if there is no structured mechanism for nGAP scholars to absorb this tacit knowledge (e.g., grant writing, network management) from senior mentors before they retire. If succession is treated purely as a replacement rather than a knowledge-transfer strategy, the institution loses capacity even if the post is filled.

Transformation Sustainability Finally, succession planning is the primary vehicle for sustainable transformation. The nGAP aims to change the academy's demographic profile. A key risk is "revolving door" succession, where Black academics are appointed but set up to fail due to lack of support, leading to their exit and the rehiring of established (often white, retired) academics to plug the gap. This cycle negates the transformation objectives of the succession plan.

2.2.7 Sub-RQ5: Effectiveness of Risk Mitigation Strategies

Sub-RQ5 evaluates how effectively the current strategies mitigate the risks identified above. The literature points to a gap between policy intent and operational reality.

Policy-Practice Gap: While the nGAP provides robust structural mitigation strategies (funding, reduced workload, mentorship), their effectiveness varies across institutions. Hlengwa (2019:12) observes that "implementation fidelity" is a significant challenge. Where departments ignore the 20% workload limit, the mitigation strategy fails. The literature suggests that the primary gap in the current approach is the lack of monitoring and enforcement of these mitigation clauses at the departmental level.

Regarding the lack of Integrated TRM Frameworks, Musakuro (2022:2) argues that South African

universities generally lack integrated talent management frameworks. Risk management is often siloed in finance or audit departments, while talent management sits in HR. This disconnect means that talent risks are often managed reactively (after a resignation) rather than proactively. The effectiveness of mitigation is compromised because it is not embedded in a comprehensive Enterprise Risk Management (ERM) system that views talent failure as a strategic business risk.

2.2.8 Synthesis Across Research Questions

The analysis of the research questions reveals several cross-cutting themes. First, institutional variation is a significant risk factor; the nGAP is a national policy applied in vastly different institutional contexts (HAIs vs. HDIs), leading to uneven risk exposure. Second, mentorship quality emerges as a linchpin; it is the primary mitigation strategy for development and retention risks, yet it remains the most variable and least quality-controlled element. Third, financial sustainability poses a latent threat to succession planning, as the shift from state to institutional funding creates long-term uncertainty.

Crucially, the literature highlights a disconnect between the *design* of the nGAP (which is risk-aware) and its *implementation* (where risks often crystallise). The interdependence of the lifecycle stages is evident: acquisition failures lead to development struggles; development failures lead to retention crises; and retention failures collapse the succession pipeline.

Having introduced the research questions and identified the key risk themes emerging from the literature, the following sections provide the detailed theoretical and contextual analysis necessary to deepen this understanding. Section 2.3 anchors these risks in the theory of Strategic Talent Management, while Sections 2.4 and 2.5 contextualise them within the South African higher education landscape and the nGAP specifically.

2.3 THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF TALENT MANAGEMENT

To effectively analyse the risks inherent in the nGAP, one must first situate the programme within the broader theoretical landscape of Strategic Talent Management (STM). Talent management has evolved from a peripheral personnel administration function into a critical strategic imperative, driven by the recognition that human capital is the primary differentiator in a knowledge economy. This section interrogates the theoretical underpinnings of STM, moving beyond the definitions of talent to explore *why* its mismanagement constitutes a critical strategic risk. It anchors the study in the Resource-Based View (RBV) of the firm, expands this through the lens of Asset Stock Accumulation, and critically juxtaposes these economic theories with Institutional Theory to explain the behaviours of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

2.3.1 Defining Strategic Talent Management

The concept of "talent management" remains contested, often used interchangeably with human resource management (HRM), yet distinct in its strategic focus. While traditional HRM focuses on the management of all employees, STM is fundamentally about differentiation. Collings and Mellahi (2009:304) provide the seminal definition adopted by this study, describing STM as the systematic identification of key positions that differentially contribute to the organisation's sustainable competitive advantage, and the development of a talent pool of high-potential incumbents to fill these roles.

This definition highlights two critical pivots relevant to the nGAP. First, it shifts the focus from "A-players" (talented individuals) to "A-positions" (strategic roles). In the context of South African higher education, the academic post is the "A-position"; the core unit of production for research and teaching. Second, it emphasizes the development of a "talent pool" rather than just ad-hoc recruitment. The nGAP is, by definition, a talent pool strategy designed to secure the sustainability of the academic enterprise. Consequently, the failure to manage this pool is not just an HR operational failure; it is a strategic failure that threatens the institution's core mission.

2.3.2 Deepening the Resource-Based View: Causal Ambiguity and Path Dependence

While the VRIN framework provides a baseline for understanding the value of academic talent, a superficial application of the Resource-Based View (RBV) fails to capture the complexity of the academic production function. It is insufficient to state that talent is "valuable." One must interrogate the mechanisms that sustain this value against erosion. Here, the specific concepts of *time compression diseconomies* and *causal ambiguity* become paramount (Dierickx & Cool, 1989:1506). This relationship is visualised in Figure 2.

Time compression diseconomies suggest that "crashing" a development programme, attempting to achieve in three years what historically took ten, yields diminishing returns. In the context of the nGAP, this theoretical constraint is critical. The accumulation of academic "asset stock" (research profile, teaching pedagogy, and networks) is strictly path-dependent. A scholar cannot simply "buy" a publication record; they must accumulate it through a historical trajectory of trial, error, peer review, and refinement. Therefore, the risk is not just that nGAP scholars develop slowly, but that the programme's fixed timelines attempt to defy the laws of asset accumulation, forcing a "fast science" approach that compromises the depth of the scholar's intellectual capital (Wright et al., 2001:710).

Furthermore, *causal ambiguity* protects the institution's competitive advantage but complicates the

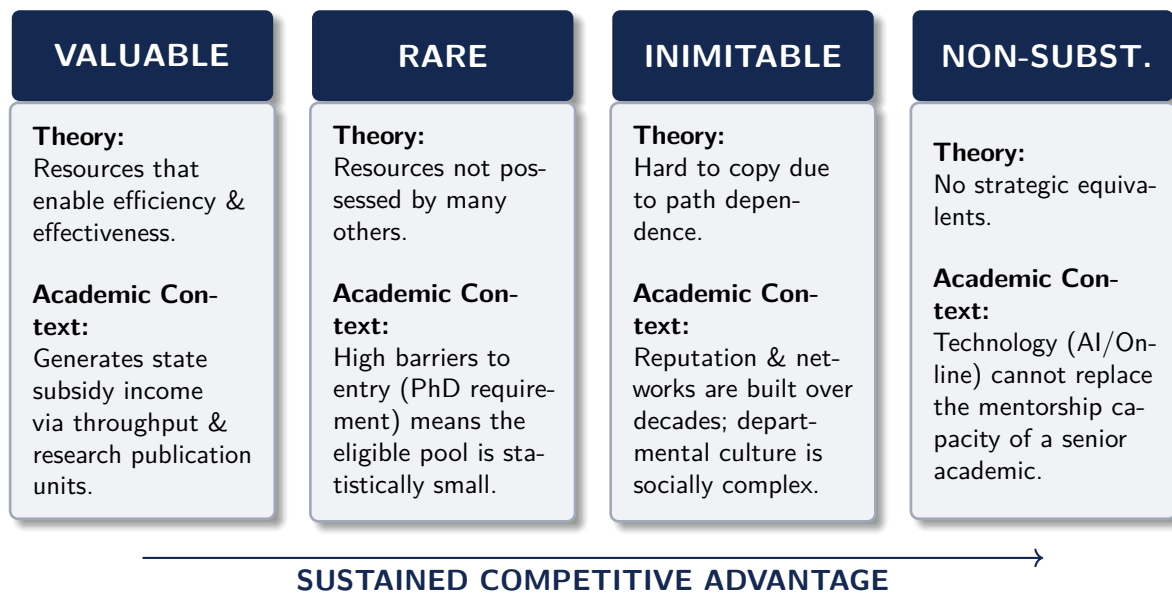


Figure 2: The Resource-Based View (VRIN) Applied to Academic Talent

development of new talent (Barney, 1991:109). In high-performing academic departments, the link between inputs (resources) and outputs (research impact) is often opaque. It is embedded in tacit knowledge, hallway conversations, and unwritten cultural norms. For an nGAP scholar entering this environment, particularly one from a historically marginalised background, this ambiguity presents a barrier to entry. They can see *what* the senior professors achieve, but the social complexity of *how* they achieve it remains obscured. If the institution fails to codify this tacit knowledge, the nGAP scholar faces a "black box" of performance expectations, increasing the risk of failure not due to a lack of talent but to the inimitability of the department's success formula.

2.3.3 Institutional Theory: The Isomorphism of Talent Management

While the RBV explains *why* talent is valuable, it fails to explain why universities often adopt identical, yet ineffective, talent management practices. To understand this, the study draws on Institutional Theory, specifically the concept of *isomorphism* (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). South African universities operate within a highly regulated institutional field, pressured by the state (DHET) to transform, and by global rankings to perform.

Institutional Theory posits that organisations adopt practices not necessarily because they are efficient, but to gain legitimacy. This manifests as *mimetic isomorphism*, where universities mimic the talent management practices of the corporate sector, adopting language such as "human capital," "performance metrics," and "talent pipelines" without adapting these concepts to the academic context (Thunnissen et al., 2013). The risk here is symbolic compliance. Universities may implement the nGAP to satisfy the state's transformation mandate (coercive isomorphism) and adopt corporate-style mentorship forms to appear rigorously managed (mimetic isomorphism), yet

fail to change the underlying cultural exclusionary mechanisms.

This theoretical lens is vital for TRM. It suggests that a significant risk to the nGAP is that it becomes a compliance exercise; a "numbers game" to satisfy equity targets; rather than a genuine pedagogical intervention. If the talent management practices are just ceremonial rituals adopted to gain legitimacy, they will fail to protect the talent asset, leading to what is termed "decoupling," where the formal policy (nGAP support) creates a facade that hides the actual lack of support on the ground.

2.3.4 The "War for Talent": Scarcity and Strategic Competition

The practical application of these theories occurs within the context of the "War for Talent." Coined by McKinsey & Company (Chambers et al., 1998:44), this paradigm asserts that in a knowledge economy, talent is the scarcest resource. In the South African Higher Education landscape, this war is asymmetric. Universities are not only competing against each other for a small pool of Black academics but are also competing against the private sector and government, which often offer significantly higher remuneration packages (Musakuro & De Klerk, 2021:2).

This scarcity creates a specific Acquisition Risk (Sub-RQ1). The intense competition for Black South African academics can lead to a "bidding war" that inflates salaries without necessarily ensuring retention. Furthermore, the "war" mindset can lead to the commodification of equity candidates, who are poached between institutions to meet targets, disrupting their developmental trajectories. This creates a retention risk where nGAP scholars are "hunted" before they have fully matured as academics, leading to career instability.

Michaels, Handfield-Jones, and Axelrod (2001) argue that winning the war for talent requires a compelling Employee Value Proposition (EVP). However, if the university sector cannot compete on financial capital (salary), it must compete on *intellectual capital* and *psychological capital* (autonomy, purpose, and development). The nGAP is essentially a government-subsidised EVP designed to make the academic profession attractive. The failure of this EVP to materialise in practice (e.g., through heavy workloads or poor mentorship) constitutes a strategic risk because it disarms the university in the war for talent.

2.3.5 From "Talent" to "Talentship": The Decision Science

Finally, to move from theory to management practice, the study draws on Boudreau and Ramstad's (2005:129) concept of "Talentship." They argue that HR must evolve into a decision science similar to Finance or Marketing. Just as Finance manages capital risk, HR must manage talent risk through rigorous segmentation and measurement.

Boudreau and Ramstad distinguish between "pivotal talent pools" (where improved quality has the greatest impact on strategic success) and the general workforce. In the context of South African HEIs, nGAP scholars constitute a pivotal talent pool. They are not just replacement staff; they are the agents of transformation and the future bearers of the institution's research capacity. Therefore, the risk tolerance for this group should be distinct from the general staff body.

"Talentship" requires moving beyond standard metrics (e.g., vacancy rates) to risk-based metrics (e.g., "time to proficiency" or "loss of critical skills"). By applying this lens, the study can evaluate whether the nGAP's mitigation strategies (Sub-RQ5) are based on rigorous risk assessment or just administrative convenience. It frames the nGAP not as a welfare programme for emerging scholars, but as a strategic investment portfolio where risks must be actively managed to ensure a return on investment.

2.4 THE UNIQUE CONTEXT OF TALENT MANAGEMENT IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

While the Resource-Based View and Institutional Theory provide the universal grammar for understanding talent as a strategic asset, these theories do not operate in a vacuum. They must be operationalised within the specific, often volatile, historical reality of the organisation. In South Africa, the theoretical imperative to 'accumulate asset stock' collides with a sector defined by systemic scarcity and deep structural inequality. Therefore, before analysing the nGAP intervention itself, it is necessary to map the unique environmental pressures, the 'contextual risk landscape', in which South African universities attempt to manage academic talent.

2.4.1 The "Academic Talent Void" and the Ageing Professoriate

The primary structural risk facing South African universities is the phenomenon described by Theron, Barkhuizen, and Du Plessis (2014:1) as the "academic talent void." This concept refers to the widening schism between the demand for high-level academic skills, driven by the "massification" of higher education and doubling enrolment numbers since 1994, and the stagnating supply of qualified academics. This attrition process creates a structural deficit, illustrated as the 'Leaky Pipeline' in Figure 3.

The demographic profile of the South African academic workforce reveals a critical vulnerability. A disproportionate percentage of established academics (those holding senior lecturer, associate professor, and professor positions) are white males approaching retirement age (DHET, 2015:7). This pending exodus represents a "knowledge cliff." When these senior academics retire, the institution loses not only their headcount but their tacit knowledge, research networks, and supervisory

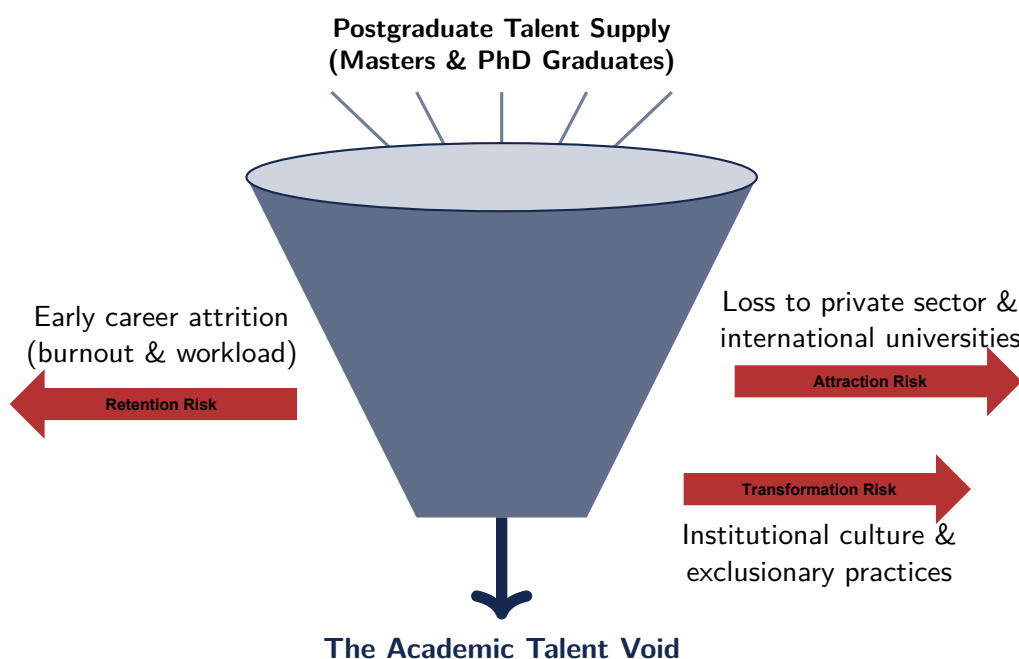


Figure 3: The "Leaky Pipeline" in South African Higher Education

capacity; assets that take decades to accumulate (HESA, 2011:13).

Simultaneously, the sector faces a "leaky pipeline" at the entry level. Pienaar and Bester (2008:32) highlight that the early career phase is characterised by high mobility and instability. Their longitudinal analysis reveals that over 21% of academics in the early career phase exit their institutions within 18 months. This high turnover prevents the accumulation of the "asset stock" required to replace the retiring cohort. Consequently, the nGAP operates within a sector defined by scarcity. This scarcity drives up the market value of equity candidates, creating intense competition between universities (and the private sector) that often destabilises retention strategies through aggressive poaching (Musakuro & De Klerk, 2021:2).

2.4.2 The Clash of Logics: New Public Management vs. The Academic Project

The environment in which the nGAP operates is defined by the ideology of New Public Management (NPM). NPM has fundamentally altered the governance of South African higher education, shifting the logic from "universities as communities of scholars" to "universities as corporate enterprises" (Webster & Mosoetsa, 2001). This shift introduces specific environmental risks that threaten the developmental objectives of the nGAP.

NPM prioritises efficiency, calculability, and auditability. It demands that academic output be quantified (publication units, pass rates, throughput metrics) and managed through performance contracts. However, the development of an early-career academic is inherently inefficient, qualitative, and nonlinear. There is a violent collision between the logic of the nGAP (which requires "protected

time,” patience, and nurturing) and the logic of the neoliberal university (which demands immediate, measurable output).

This structural dissonance creates a “schizophrenic” work environment for nGAP scholars. They are appointed to developmental contracts that promise reduced workloads (a 20% teaching load), yet they enter departments driven by subsidy-generation targets, where “non-producing” bodies are viewed as liabilities. The risk is not just burnout; it is role conflict. The scholar is torn between the slow scholarship required for a PhD and the fast metrics required for departmental survival. This environment actively erodes the “protected space” the nGAP policy seeks to create, turning the position into a high-pressure production role.

2.4.3 The Burden of Representation and Cultural Taxation

Beyond the structural pressures of NPM, Black nGAP scholars face specific socio-political risks rooted in the slow pace of transformation. In historically white institutions (HWIs), these scholars often face the “burden of representation.” They are frequently the only, or one of few, Black academics in a department. Consequently, they are disproportionately drafted into committees to ensure “demographic representation” and are sought out by Black students for pastoral care and mentorship (Joseph, 2012).

This phenomenon, known as *cultural taxation*, imposes a hidden workload that is unacknowledged in performance appraisals. While their white counterparts invest time in research (asset accumulation), Black nGAP scholars invest time in institutional transformation and student support (asset depletion). This creates a distinct “equity risk.” The very individuals appointed to transform the academy are overburdened by the labour of transformation itself, leaving them less time to qualify for tenure. From a TRM perspective, this is a critical system failure: the institution extracts value from the scholar’s identity (for committee representation) at the expense of the scholar’s intellectual development, ultimately increasing the likelihood of attrition or failure to meet promotion criteria.

2.4.4 The Well-being Crisis: Burnout as a Talent Risk

The combination of high workloads, NPM pressures, and cultural taxation has precipitated a well-being crisis in South African academia. A talent risk perspective requires an assessment of the sustainability of the human capital asset; current literature suggests this asset is being depleted at an unsustainable rate.

Burnout, defined as a state of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment, is prevalent. Dlamini and Dlamini (2024:2) argue that the “corporatisation” of higher education (characterised by increased student enrolments without proportional staffing

increases) has created toxic working conditions. Their narrative review indicates that academic staff face critical stress levels due to "heavy workloads, a lack of resources, and an unsatisfactory work-life balance" (Dlamini & Dlamini, 2024:1).

Crucially, burnout is not distributed evenly. Lackritz (2004:725) found that younger faculty members (the nGAP demographic) are significantly more susceptible to emotional exhaustion than their senior counterparts. This suggests a "survival bias" in the system, in which only the most resilient survive. For the nGAP, this implies that the risk of burnout is highest during the programme's developmental years, precisely when the scholar is most vulnerable. If the institution fails to provide robust psychosocial support, it risks losing the scholar not to a competitor, but to the profession entirely.

2.4.5 Institutional Capacity and Management Capability

Finally, the effectiveness of any talent management strategy relies heavily on the institution's ability to implement it. However, Musakuro and De Klerk (2021:8) present a critical view of the current state of HR practice within South African HEIs. Their research reveals systematic failures in core TM functions, particularly in performance management and succession planning.

Critically, the historical resource disparity between Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDIs) and Historically Advantaged Institutions (HAIs) fundamentally shapes institutional capacity for talent management. HDIs, historically under-resourced and located in rural or peri-urban areas, face compounded challenges: limited research infrastructure, smaller pools of senior academics to serve as mentors, and constrained budgets that make it challenging to provide competitive conditions. Conversely, HAIs typically possess well-established research facilities, extensive academic networks, and greater financial flexibility. This disparity means that talent management practices that succeed in resource-rich HAI contexts may not be transferable to resource-poor HDI contexts without significant adaptation. Applying a standardised TM framework across this heterogeneous landscape risks creating a "one-size-fits-none" policy that fails to address the specific structural constraints of under-resourced institutions.

A key finding is the lack of line manager capability. Academic Heads of Department (HoDs) are typically appointed based on their scholarly credentials (research output) rather than their people management skills. Musakuro and De Klerk (2021:8) argue that these line managers often lack the knowledge and skills to conduct performance management effectively, leading to inconsistent application of policies like the nGAP. HoDs may view the nGAP scholar just as "extra hands" to alleviate the teaching burden, rather than as a strategic asset requiring development.

This institutional incapacity creates a "Translation Risk." Even if the nGAP provides resources and policy frameworks at a national level (the design), the experience of the developing academic occurs at the departmental level (the implementation). If the local line manager lacks the capability or willingness to manage talent in line with the programme's guidelines, the national intervention fails. The disconnect between the HR department's strategic intent and the academic department's operational reality is a primary locus of talent risk.

2.5 THE NEW GENERATION OF ACADEMICS PROGRAMME (NGAP) AS A NATIONAL TALENT INTERVENTION

The precarious landscape of South African higher education, characterised by the 'knowledge cliff' of an ageing professoriate and the 'cultural taxation' of Black academics detailed in Section 2.4, necessitated a disruption of the status quo. Standard institutional recruitment drives were proving insufficient to reverse these systemic trends. Against this backdrop, the New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP) emerged not just as a funding instrument, but as the state's primary strategic countermeasure to the structural risks identified above. This section deconstructs the programme's strategic intent, its structural design, and the friction points that have emerged during its implementation.

2.5.1 Strategic Intent and Policy Origins

The genesis of the nGAP lies in the recognition that the "business as usual" approach to academic staffing was failing to deliver either the quantity or the demographic profile of academics required for a democratic South Africa. The DHET (2015:7) identified that without intervention, the retirement of the "baby boomer" academic cohort would leave universities with a critical skills deficit, threatening their ability to produce knowledge or graduate students.

The nGAP was designed with a dual mandate: expansion and transformation.

1. **Expansion:** To increase the aggregate number of permanent academic staff to cope with massified enrolment.
2. **Transformation:** To radically alter the racial and gender composition of the academy. The policy explicitly targets 80% of posts for Black South Africans (African, Coloured, and Indian) and 55% for women (DHET, 2018:6).

The programme operates on the philosophy of "growing your own timber." Rather than competing for the shallow pool of existing senior academics (a zero-sum game of poaching), the nGAP invests in high-potential predoctoral or early postdoctoral candidates, providing them with a structured

pathway to tenure. From a Talent Risk Management perspective, this is a "Build" strategy intended to mitigate the "Supply Risk" inherent in the external labour market.

2.5.2 Programme Architecture: The Six-Year Developmental Trajectory

Unlike standard academic appointments, which often assume immediate competence ("sink or swim"), the nGAP is structured around a six-year developmental lifecycle. This six-year developmental trajectory is a practical manifestation of the economic principle of Asset Stock Accumulation (discussed in Section 2.3.3). By acknowledging that academic legitimacy cannot be purchased but must be earned over time, the policy design seeks to temporarily suspend the time-compression diseconomies that often lead to early-career burnout.

The programme is divided into two distinct phases (DHET, 2017:2):

- ❖ **Phase 1 (Years 1–3): Development.** In this phase, the scholar is appointed to a permanent post but is shielded from the full rigours of academic life to focus on attaining their doctoral or master's qualification.
- ❖ **Phase 2 (Years 4–6): Induction and Early Career.** Here, the scholar gradually assumes a full academic load, transitioning from a "developing" academic to an "established" one.

This trajectory is supported by a unique funding model. The DHET covers the full cost of the post for the first three years. From year four, the costs are shared on a sliding scale, with the university assuming full financial responsibility by year seven (DHET, 2015:22). This financial architecture is designed to mitigate Acquisition Risk (by subsidizing the cost of hiring) and Succession Risk (by locking the university into a permanent commitment).

2.5.3 Key Risk Mitigation Features

The nGAP policy incorporates specific structural features designed to mitigate the risks of burnout, underdevelopment, and isolation identified in Section 2.4.

Reduced Teaching Load (The "Protected Time" Doctrine) To mitigate Development Risk, the nGAP Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) mandate that the teaching load of nGAP scholars be restricted to 20% in the first three years (DHET, 2017:12). This "protected time" is the programme's most critical resource. It is intended to create the cognitive space required for deep research and doctoral completion, countering the "fast metrics" culture of New Public Management. By contractually limiting the scholar's workload, the policy aims to shield the scholar from the "production pressure" that typically leads to attrition.

Mandated Mentorship (The Knowledge Transfer Mechanism) To mitigate the risk of Isolation and

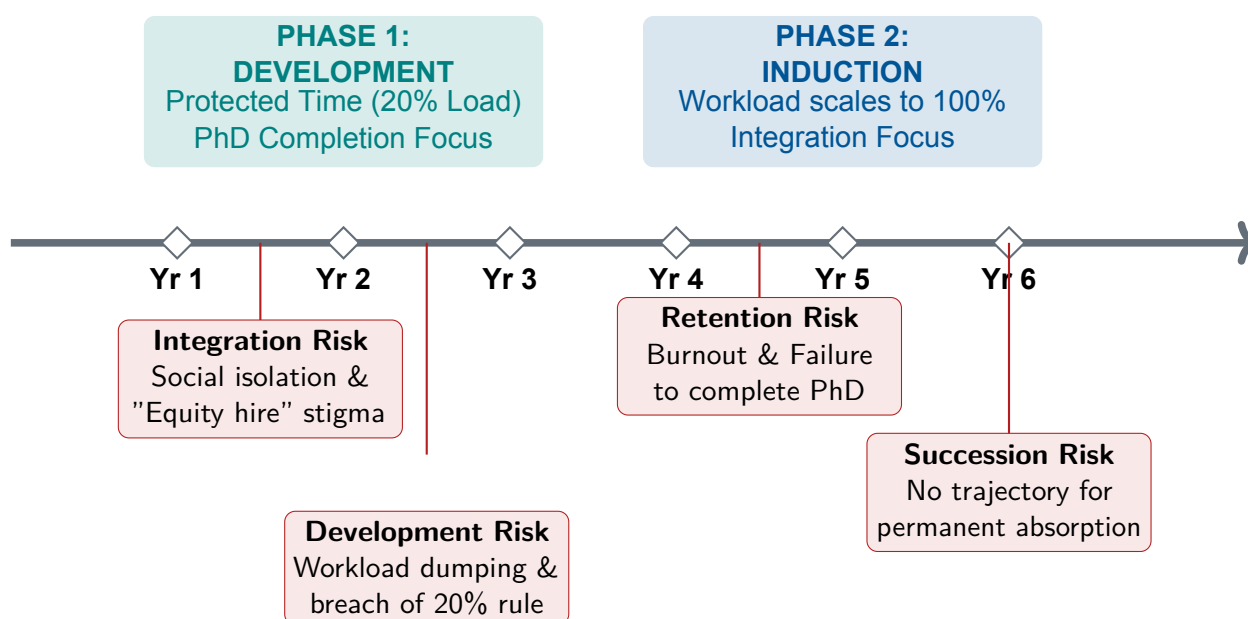


Figure 4: Risk Exposure Across the nGAP Timeline

Tacit Knowledge Loss, the programme requires that every nGAP scholar be assigned a mentor (DHET, 2017:14). The policy specifies that mentors should be experienced, senior academics; often retired professors re-engaged specifically for this purpose. This design element is crucial for transferring the "rules of the game" (grant writing, publishing strategies, institutional politics) that are not taught in formal doctoral programmes. It aims to bridge the gap between possessing a qualification and possessing academic wisdom.

Infrastructure and Mobility Funding Recognising that resource constraints often hamper research productivity (a Retention Risk), the nGAP provides ring-fenced funding for "infrastructure and equipment" (e.g., laptops, lab equipment) and "international mobility" (DHET, 2017:6). This ensures that nGAP scholars, even those at resource-poor Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDIs), have the material base required to compete globally. The various risks associated with this timeline are mapped in Figure 4.

2.5.4 Implementation Realities: Successes and Fractures

While the nGAP's policy design is robust, the literature on its implementation reveals a complex reality in which strategic intent often collides with institutional culture.

Successes: Quantitative Gains The programme has achieved significant quantitative success. By 2023, over 843 posts had been allocated across all 26 public universities (DHET, 2023:21). Completion rates for doctoral degrees among nGAP scholars significantly exceed the national average, validating the effectiveness of the "protected time" model when applied correctly. Furthermore, the equity targets have largely been met, injecting a significant cohort of Black and female academics

into the system.

Challenges: The Policy-Practice Gap. Qualitative studies reveal significant friction points where risks crystallise.

- ❖ **Workload Creep:** Hlengwa (2019:11) and Moosa (2020:78) report widespread violations of the 20% teaching load limit. In departments facing severe staff shortages, nGAP scholars are often pressured to plug teaching gaps. This "workload creep" erodes protected research time, transforming the developmental post into a standard junior lecturer post and thereby reintroducing the risk of delayed doctoral completion and burnout.
- ❖ **Mentorship Failures:** While mentorship is mandated, its quality is variable. Hlengwa (2019:8) notes that mentorship often becomes a "tick-box" exercise. In some cases, mentors are unavailable, mismatched, or lack the pedagogical skills to mentor effectively. The "cross-cultural mentorship gap" discussed in Section 2.6 often manifests here, where senior white mentors fail to provide the psychosocial support required by Black nGAP scholars navigating hostile institutional cultures (Biljohn et al., 2024:6).
- ❖ **Institutional Culture and "Othering":** nGAP scholars often report a sense of stigmatisation. They are sometimes viewed by colleagues not as meritocratic appointees but as "affirmative action cases" or "DHET projects" (Hlatshwayo, 2020:168). This "othering" creates a hostile environment that undermines retention, regardless of the financial support provided.

Social Exchange Breakdown Drawing on Social Exchange Theory (introduced in Section 2.4.4), these implementation failures represent a breach of the psychological contract. The state promises a supportive, reduced-load environment; the university delivers a high-pressure, isolated reality. When this exchange becomes inequitable, the nGAP scholar, who is now highly qualified and mobile, is likely to exit the institution, leading to Dysfunctional Turnover (Retention Risk).

2.6 FROM TALENT MANAGEMENT TO TALENT RISK MANAGEMENT: THEORETICAL INTEGRATION

The literature reviewed thus far reveals a critical dissonance. On one hand, the nGAP is theoretically sound (aligned with RBV) and structurally robust (addressing the context of Section 2.4). On the other hand, implementation realities, such as workload creep and mentorship failure, persist. This suggests that Standard Talent Management (STM) models are insufficient for this high-stakes environment because they assume a stable operating context. To reconcile the gap between policy intent and operational reality, this study must pivot to **TRM**; a framework specifically designed to manage value under conditions of uncertainty.

2.6.1 The Strategic Rationale for TRM

TRM is defined as the systematic identification and mitigation of threats that could prevent an organisation from securing the human capital required to achieve its strategic objectives (Meyer, Roodt & Robbins, 2011:3). Unlike traditional HR administration, which focuses on compliance and process efficiency, TRM focuses on the volatility of the talent supply chain.

Cappelli (2008:77) revolutionised this thinking by applying supply chain management principles to human resources. He argues that talent management is fundamentally a problem of matching supply and demand under uncertainty. Just as a manufacturing firm faces risks of inventory shortages or supply chain disruptions, universities face the risk of an "academic pipeline break"; where the supply of qualified academics fails to meet the demand created by student enrolment growth and senior retirements.

In the context of the nGAP, TRM involves acknowledging that the programme's success is not guaranteed by funding alone. The investment of approximately R2.5 million per post over six years creates a significant financial exposure. Consequently, the "risk universe" includes the probability that recruited scholars may not complete their doctorates (Supply Failure), the risk that they may leave for the private sector (Retention Failure), or the risk that they may not be absorbed into the institution's culture (Integration Failure). Vaiman, Scullion, and Collings (2012:931) emphasise that these risks are exacerbated in emerging markets, where the scarcity of high-level skills creates fierce competition, making the "availability, quality, and deployment" of talent a material strategic risk.

2.6.2 Integrating Talent into Enterprise Risk Management (COSO Framework)

TRM cannot operate in a silo; it must be integrated into the institution's broader governance framework. The Committee of Sponsoring Organisations of the Treadway Commission (COSO) provides the global standard for Enterprise Risk Management (ERM). The COSO (2017:4) framework, *Enterprise Risk Management: Integrating with Strategy and Performance*, explicitly defines risk as "the possibility that events will occur and affect the achievement of strategy and business objectives."

Under this framework, human capital is not treated as a separate HR concern but as a core strategic component. Integrating the nGAP into an ERM framework requires defining Risk Appetite: the amount of risk an organisation is willing to accept in pursuit of value. Universities participating in the nGAP exhibit a paradoxical risk appetite. By recruiting pre-doctoral staff into permanent posts, institutions accept a high level of Acquisition Risk (betting on future potential). However, the rigid performance culture often reveals a low tolerance for the developmental lags inherent in growing

that potential. This misalignment, between the high appetite for acquiring equity candidates and the low tolerance for the time required to develop them, creates a systemic friction point where talent risks are most likely to crystallise.

Furthermore, the COSO framework suggests a "Three Lines of Accountability" model relevant to the nGAP:

- ❖ **First Line (Management):** The academic Heads of Department and mentors are the principal owners of risk. They manage the day-to-day performance and development of nGAP scholars.
- ❖ **Second Line (Support Functions):** The HR Department and nGAP coordinators provide oversight, guidance, and policy frameworks to ensure risks are being managed effectively.
- ❖ **Third Line (Assurance):** Internal audit functions and DHET oversight provide independent assurance that the programme is meeting its objectives.

2.6.3 The TRM Process: Identification, Assessment, and Mitigation

The theoretical utility of TRM lies in its structured process. Vaiman et al. (2012:929) argue that decision-making in talent management is often flawed by bounded rationality and bias. TRM counters this by imposing a rigorous methodology:

1. **Risk Identification:** Moving beyond vague concerns to specific risk categorisations. For the nGAP, this involves identifying specific triggers for failure, such as the "cross-cultural mentorship gap" or "workload creep."
2. **Risk Assessment:** Evaluating risks based on *probability* (how likely is the scholar to leave?) and *impact* (what is the cost of this loss to the transformation agenda?). This assessment prevents the institution from treating all risks equally; the loss of a Black female scholar in a scarce-skills discipline represents a higher strategic impact than other attrition events.
3. **Risk Mitigation:** Developing proactive controls. This moves beyond reactive retention (counteroffers) to proactive "shock absorbers," such as the nGAP's protected teaching time and ring-fenced research funding.

2.7 A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSING TALENT RISK IN THE NGAP

The preceding sections have traversed the theoretical landscape from the broad principles of Strategic Talent Management to the specific, high-stakes context of the New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP). This journey has established that human capital is not just an operational resource but consistent with the Resource-Based View (RBV), the primary driver of sustainable

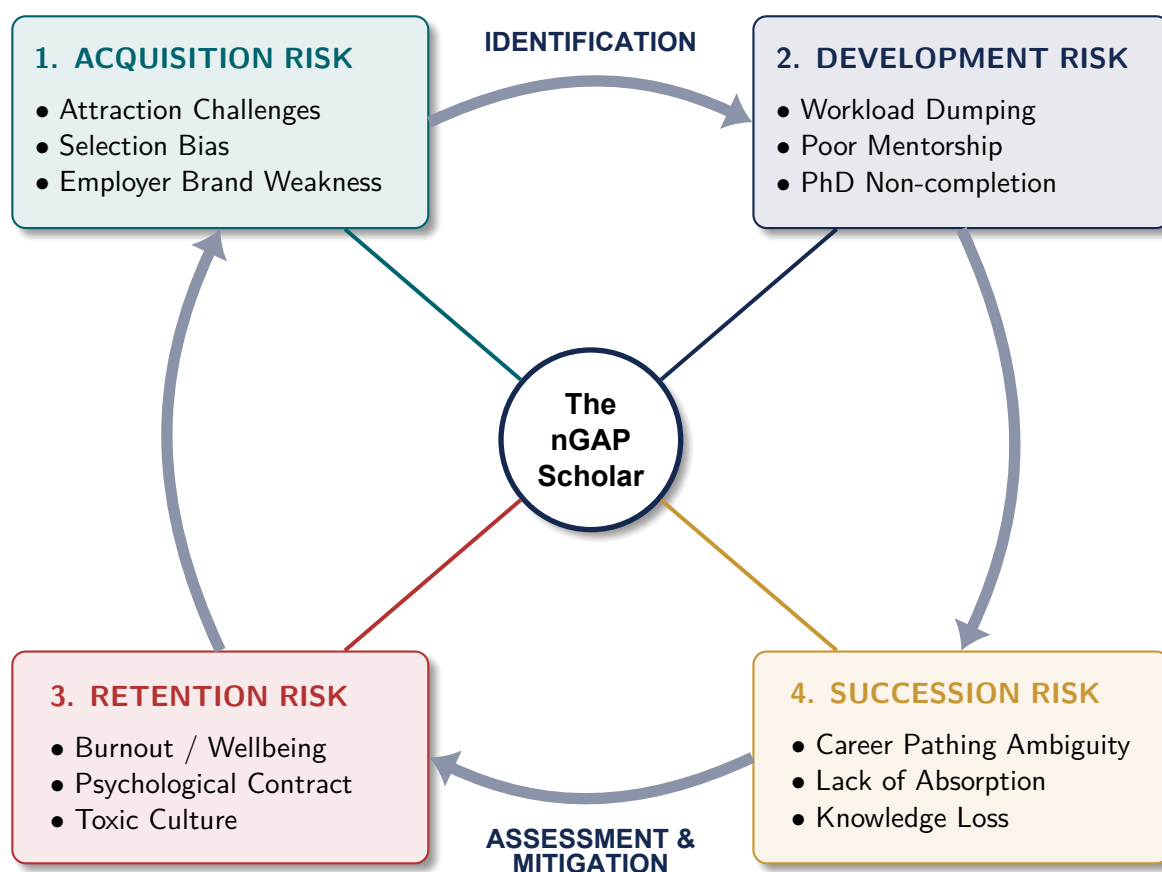


Figure 5: The Conceptual Framework for Talent Risk Management

competitive advantage and institutional longevity (Barney, 1991:105). However, the application of these principles within the South African Higher Education sector reveals a complex and volatile environment characterised by an "academic talent void" (Theron et al., 2014:1) and the ideological pressures of New Public Management (Webster & Mosoetsa, 2001:3).

To reconcile the divergent realities of policy intent and operational implementation, this study proposes a Conceptual Framework that pivots the analytical lens from a traditional "Talent Management" perspective to a "Talent Risk Management" (TRM) perspective. While traditional TM focuses on the optimisation of human capital, TRM focuses on the protection of the value invested in that capital by identifying and mitigating threats to its viability (Meyer et al., 2011:3).

This Conceptual Framework integrates the four stages of the academic talent lifecycle with the COSO (2017) principles of risk management and the theoretical insights of Social Exchange Theory and Institutional Theory. It posits that the success of the nGAP depends on effectively managing risk across four interconnected domains: Acquisition, Development, Retention, and Succession. These domains converge to form the Conceptual Framework presented in Figure 5.

2.7.1 Domain 1: Talent Acquisition Risk; The Challenge of Adverse Selection

The first domain addresses the risks associated with the entry point of the talent pipeline. In the context of the nGAP, acquisition is not just filling a vacancy; it is a strategic investment decision under conditions of high uncertainty. The framework identifies Adverse Selection as the primary risk here. Because nGAP candidates are often recruited at a pre-doctoral level, universities must assess future potential rather than a proven track record.

Drawing on the distinction between cognitive and affective trust, the framework suggests that acquisition risks crystallise when institutions over-rely on cognitive trust markers (qualifications, academic transcripts) while neglecting affective fit (resilience, cultural alignment, and values) (Akerlof, 1970:488). "Bad fit" in the nGAP context often stems from hiring a candidate who is technically qualified but lacks the "grit" required to navigate the often-hostile institutional culture of a transforming university (Musakuro & De Klerk, 2021:5). Furthermore, the "Buy vs. Build" dilemma (Cappelli, 2008:74) is central. The nGAP is a "build" strategy. The risk is that departments, accustomed to "buying" ready-made professors, lack the patience and competency to "build" talent, leading to unrealistic expectations from day one.

2.7.2 Domain 2: Talent Development Risk; The Mechanics of Mentorship

Once acquired, the talent asset must be developed. The RBV suggests that sustainable advantage is achieved through Asset Stock Accumulation (a time-dependent process that cannot be rushed) (Dierickx & Cool, 1989:1506). The nGAP policy acknowledges this through its "protected time" mechanism. However, the framework identifies a critical Development Risk rooted in the mechanics of mentorship.

Utilizing Kram's (1985) distinction, the framework posits that effective mentorship must provide both career functions (sponsorship, coaching) and psychosocial functions (acceptance, confirmation). A specific risk in the nGAP is the cross-cultural mentorship gap. If a white, male senior professor mentors a Black, female nGAP scholar, there is a risk of an empathy deficit regarding the lived experience of institutional racism or sexism. If the mentor provides technical advice but fails to validate the scholar's psychosocial reality, the mentorship relationship becomes a source of stress rather than support (Biljohn et al., 2024:4). This domain also encapsulates the risk of Time Compression Diseconomies, where the pressure to produce "fast science" (publications) erodes the deep intellectual growth required for a sustainable academic career.

2.7.3 Domain 3: Talent Retention Risk; The Psychological Contract

The third domain focuses on the stability of the talent asset. Retention risk is the probability that an nGAP scholar will exit the institution before the return on investment (ROI) is realised. The framework distinguishes between Functional Turnover (where low performers leave, which is beneficial) and Dysfunctional Turnover (where high potentials leave). For the nGAP, voluntary attrition is almost always dysfunctional because the barriers to entry and sunk costs are high.

Theoretically, this domain is analysed through Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964). The nGAP establishes a specific reciprocity: the state provides resources in exchange for the scholar's loyalty and output. Retention risk crystallises when the institution violates this reciprocity; for example, by breaching the "protected time" clause through workload creep. When the Psychological Contract is breached, the scholar reduces their commitment to restore equity, leading to withdrawal behaviours and eventual exit (Rousseau, 1995). Furthermore, the framework incorporates the "Unfolding Model" (Lee & Mitchell, 1994) to identify specific "shocks" (e.g., discriminatory incidents, resource denial) that trigger resignation.

2.7.4 Domain 4: Succession Planning Risk; Knowledge Transfer and Transformation

The final domain addresses the scholar's long-term integration into the academic establishment. Succession planning is the mechanism by which the "academic talent void" is filled. Risk in this domain is defined as the Failure of Knowledge Transfer.

Senior academics possess immense amounts of tacit knowledge (how to navigate peer review, how to win grants, how to manage faculty politics). If an nGAP scholar completes the programme but has not absorbed this tacit knowledge, the succession has failed, even if the scholar remains employed. Furthermore, there is a risk that succession becomes "Cloning" (Institutional Isomorphism), where the department moulds the nGAP scholar into a compliant replica of the old guard to ensure "fit." This nullifies the programme's transformation mandate. Proper succession in the nGAP context requires Disruptive Succession: preparing the scholar not just to replace the retiree, but to transform the department's curriculum and research agenda. The absence of a guaranteed post-programme career path constitutes a "dead end" risk, threatening the sustainability of the entire pipeline (Musakuro & De Klerk, 2021:10).

2.7.5 The Risk Management Process

Overarching these four domains is the management process itself. Drawing on COSO (2017), the framework interrogates not only what the risks are but also how they are managed. It questions whether institutions have moved beyond Mimetic Isomorphism, adopting the language of risk

management without the substance. Effective TRM requires:

1. **Identification:** Moving beyond vague concerns to specific risk triggers (e.g., measuring "work-load creep").
2. **Assessment:** Evaluating risks based on probability and strategic impact (e.g., the high cost of losing a Black female STEM scholar).
3. **Mitigation:** Implementing proactive controls (e.g., enforcing protected time) rather than reactive counteroffers.

2.8 SUMMARY

This chapter has traversed the theoretical terrain from the general principles of Strategic Talent Management to the specific, high-stakes environment of the New Generation of Academics Programme. This journey was not just a descriptive cataloguing of sources, but a structured argument validating the necessity of a Talent Risk Management (TRM) perspective. By anchoring the study in the Resource-Based View, the analysis demonstrated that academic talent constitutes a strategic asset characterised by value, rarity, and high barriers to imitation. Consequently, the failure to secure this asset is not an operational inconvenience but a strategic threat to the sustainability of the South African higher education sector.

The systematic analysis of the research questions in Section 2.2, supported by the detailed theoretical and contextual explorations in Sections 2.3 to 2.6, revealed a fundamental tension. There is a distinct dissonance between the design of the nGAP, which respects the laws of Asset Stock Accumulation by providing protected time and resources, and the implementation environment, which is governed by the aggressive metrics of New Public Management. This clash creates a volatile risk landscape. The literature confirms that while the "war for talent" drives acquisition risks (adverse selection), it is the breach of the psychological contract (Social Exchange Theory) and the burden of cultural taxation that drive dysfunctional turnover and retention failure. Furthermore, Institutional Theory suggests that without rigorous risk governance, universities may default to "mimetic isomorphism," adopting the optics of transformation and mentorship without the substantive cultural changes required to sustain it.

The Conceptual Framework presented in Section 2.7 synthesises these insights into a coherent analytical tool. It moves beyond generic HR categories to identify specific risk triggers across the talent lifecycle: reliance on cognitive over affective trust in Acquisition; cross-cultural empathy gaps in Development; violations of reciprocity in Retention; and failures of tacit knowledge transfer in Succession. This framework provides the necessary lens to distinguish between "paper compliance"

and genuine risk mitigation.

Consequently, the literature review dictates the methodological approach required for the empirical phase of this study. Because talent risk in the nGAP is rooted in complex social exchanges, unwritten psychological contracts, and institutional culture, it cannot be adequately measured solely through quantitative metrics. It requires an exploratory, qualitative inquiry capable of excavating the lived experiences of programme administrators and scholars. Chapter 3 will therefore detail the research methodology employed to operationalise this Conceptual Framework, outlining the interpretivist approach used to explore how these theoretical risks manifest in the concrete reality of a South African university.

Chapter three will describe the research methodology for this study.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. INTRODUCTION

The central inquiry of this dissertation concerns how talent risks are identified, assessed, and mitigated within the New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP), and demands a methodological approach capable of penetrating the complex social and institutional fabrics of South African Higher Education. As established in the preceding literature review, the "academic talent void" is not just a statistical shortage of personnel; it is a systemic crisis influenced by historical inequities, institutional culture, and the subjective experiences of Early Career Academics (ECAs). Therefore, this study rejects the notion that talent risk can be fully understood through the measurement of static variables or the testing of pre-determined hypotheses. Instead, the research methodology is designed to excavate the subjective realities, lived experiences, and constructed meanings of those navigating the nGAP.

This chapter delineates the research architecture employed to operationalise the Conceptual Framework for Talent Risk Management (TRM). It moves beyond a procedural list of research activities to provide a robust philosophical and theoretical justification for the choices made. The discussion is anchored in the understanding that methodological coherence is the primary indicator of rigour in business research. Consequently, every design choice, from the overarching paradigm to the specific data collection instruments, is aligned with the complexity of the research questions posed in Chapter One.

The analysis unfolds through a structured sequence. First, the study locates itself within an interpretivist research paradigm, supported by a social constructionist epistemology. This section argues that talent risk is socially constructed through discourse and power dynamics, rather than being an objective entity awaiting discovery. Second, the chapter justifies adopting a qualitative research approach, arguing for its utility in uncovering the "human touch" and emotional labour inherent in academic development. Third, the specific research strategy, a qualitative exploratory and descriptive design, is detailed. Finally, the chapter details the sampling strategy and data collection methods used to gather empirical evidence.

3.2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

A theoretical framework functions as the optical lens through which the researcher views the world. It is not an optional additive but a fundamental structure that organises the study and clarifies the

nature of the knowledge obtained (Wells & Giacco, 2025:300). To investigate the nuanced, often silent, risks within the nGAP, this study explicitly adopts an interpretivist paradigm underpinned by social constructionism. This choice is not arbitrary; it is necessitated by the specific methodological demands of the research questions outlined in Chapter one.

3.2.1. The Methodological Nature of the Research Questions

The alignment between research questions and research philosophy is the primary determinant of study rigour. The Main Research Question asks: "How are talent risks identified, assessed, and mitigated within the nGAP?" The syntax of this question: Specifically the focus on "how": signals a need to explore processes, human agency, and institutional mechanics rather than measuring static frequencies or correlations.

A breakdown of the Sub-Research Questions (Sub-RQs) reveals why a positivist or quantitative approach would remain insufficient for this inquiry:

- ❖ Sub-RQ1 (Acquisition) and Sub-RQ2 (Retention): inquire into "perceived" risks. The concept of "risk" in a social setting is subjective; what an administrator views as a minor administrative delay, an nGAP scholar may perceive as a career-threatening breach of contract. To answer these questions, the methodology must be capable of excavating these divergent subjective realities.
- ❖ Sub-RQ3 (Development) and Sub-RQ4 (Succession): examine complex, longitudinal processes such as mentorship and career integration. These are socially complex phenomena embedded in institutional culture. A quantitative instrument could measure how many scholars have mentors, but it cannot answer the research question regarding how mentorship risks are managed when the relationship breaks down due to cultural friction.
- ❖ Sub-RQ5 (Effectiveness): seeks to evaluate the "effectiveness" of mitigation strategies. In the context of Higher Education transformation, effectiveness is not a binary variable but a socially negotiated outcome. Exploring the "gaps" in TRM requires an inductive approach that allows participants to define what success and failure look like from their lived perspective.

Consequently, the research questions demand a research design that prioritizes meaning over measurement, necessitating an interpretivist paradigm.

3.2.2 The Philosophical Stance: Interpretivism

Interpretivism posits that all knowledge is grounded in human experience and that reality is subjective, perceived through individuals' perceptions of the world (Alharahsheh, 2020, cited in Wells & Giacco,

2025:303). The central principle of this paradigm is that individuals construct knowledge based on their interpretations and experiences (Fodouop Kouam, 2024:2). Therefore, to understand talent risk, the researcher must access the subjective meanings that nGAP administrators and participants ascribe to their roles, their environments, and their future trajectories.

Ontological Position Ontologically, interpretivism asserts that there are multiple realities rather than a single objective truth. Fodouop Kouam (2024:3) notes that interpretivists challenge the positivist view of truth, emphasising instead the role of meaning in knowledge production. In the context of this study, the "reality" of the nGAP differs significantly depending on where one stands. For a university administrator, the nGAP may represent a successful policy intervention and a funding stream. For an nGAP lecturer facing workload pressures and isolation, the programme may represent a precarious and stressful psychological contract. Both realities are valid. An interpretivist ontology allows the study to explore these divergent realities without forcing them into a single, reductive "truth."

Epistemological Position Epistemologically, interpretivism assumes that the researcher and the object of study are interactive and inseparable. Knowledge is co-created. Wells and Giacco (2025:303) highlight that interpretivist researchers aim to obtain a rich amount of data from small groups to understand how individuals make sense of their personal and social worlds. This study acknowledges that the researcher's own background as an academic influence the inquiry. Rather than seeing this as a bias to be eliminated, as a positivist would (Nudzor, 2009, cited in Wells & Giacco, 2025:304), this study views this proximity as a resource that enables a deeper understanding of the participants' language and institutional context

3.2.3 Theoretical Lens: Social Constructionism

To deepen the analytical power of the interpretivist paradigm, this study integrates the principles of Social Constructionism. While interpretivism focuses on the subjective meaning of the individual, social constructionism expands the focus to how these meanings are constructed through social interaction, language, and culture (Fodouop Kouam, 2024:2).

The Construction of "Talent" and "Risk" Phillips (2023:3) argues that social constructionism analyses and challenges the ways in which society understands various aspects of reality. Applied to this study, "talent" is not treated as an innate biological trait but as a social construct. The definition of what constitutes a "risk" to that talent is similarly constructed by the dominant institutional culture. For example, a delay in PhD completion might be constructed by the institution as a "failure" (a risk), while the participant constructs it as a necessary consequence of "slow scholarship" (a developmental process). Social constructionism allows the researcher to deconstruct these terms

and examine the power dynamics that validate one definition over the other.

Agency and Narrative Furthermore, Yang and Chen (2024:1) emphasise that individuals make sense of their careers through stories. They argue that to explore the dynamic nature of career development, one must highlight how individuals construct narratives to understand the challenges faced in their careers. The nGAP participants are active agents constructing their career identities. By listening to the career narratives of ECAs, the study can identify where the "official" narrative of the nGAP (policy) diverges from the "lived" narrative (practice), revealing the friction points where talent retention risks are most likely to crystallise.

3.2.4 Research Approach: Qualitative

Consistent with the interpretivist paradigm and the requirements of the research questions, this study employs a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research involves the collection and analysis of non-numerical data and is the primary method used to understand people's beliefs, experiences, attitudes, and interactions (Pathak, 2013, cited in Wells & Giacco, 2025:299).

Justification for Rejection of Quantitative Approach A quantitative approach was considered but rejected. Quantitative research relies on the hypothetico-deductive method to verify a priori hypotheses (Park, 2020, cited in Mwita, 2022:619). While useful for measuring retention rates or demographic shifts, a quantitative survey cannot capture the process of disengagement, or the nuance of institutional culture required to answer the Sub-RQs. As Mwita (2022:621) notes, quantitative studies often fail to explain sufficiently the behaviour of respondents, as they are limited by the linear nature of the instrument. A survey might reveal that an academic is considering leaving (Retention Risk), but it cannot fully explain the complex interplay of micro-aggressions, lack of mentorship, and role ambiguity that drives that decision.

Strengths of the Qualitative Approach for TRM The choice of a qualitative approach is justified by three specific strengths relevant to this study:

1. **Depth and Detail:** It allows for the excavation of the "psychological contract" breaches that define retention risk.
2. **Flexibility:** It enables the researcher to pivot during interviews if participants identify unforeseen risks not present in the initial literature review.

Contextualisation: It situates the findings within the specific resource constraints and historical legacies of the South African higher education landscape, which are critical for understanding the "why" behind the risks.

3.3 RESEARCH STRATEGY

Research strategy serves as the methodological bridge between the philosophical paradigm and the tactical data collection methods. It outlines the broad orientation of the research. For this study, a Qualitative Exploratory and Descriptive Design has been selected. This dual-purpose strategy is necessitated by the current state of knowledge regarding the nGAP and the specific nature of the research questions.

3.3.1 Exploratory Strategy

An exploratory strategy is deployed when a research problem is not well understood, or when the relationships between variables are unclear. Mwita (2022:619) observes that qualitative research is particularly potent for discovering and clarifying situations. While the nGAP has been the subject of policy reviews and some empirical studies (e.g., Hlengwa, 2019), the specific application of a Talent Risk Management framework to this programme represents a novel inquiry.

The literature review revealed a gap: while we know that nGAP scholars face challenges, these have rarely been codified as "strategic risks" (Acquisition, Development, Retention, Succession). Therefore, the study is exploratory in that it seeks to uncover:

- ❖ What constitutes a "talent risk" in the specific context of the nGAP?
- ❖ How do these risks manifest differently across different phases of the six-year programme?
- ❖ What informal or hidden mechanisms are currently being used to mitigate these risks?

By adopting an exploratory stance, the researcher enters the field without a rigid set of hypotheses to prove or disprove. This aligns with the inductive logic of interpretivism, where patterns and theories are allowed to emerge from the data itself (Reeves, 2008, cited in Wells & Giacco, 2025:303). This approach is essential for identifying the "unknown unknowns"; the risks that programme administrators may not even be aware of because they are obscured by the official reporting mechanisms.

3.3.2 Descriptive Strategy

Simultaneously, the research strategy is descriptive. Descriptive research aims to provide an accurate and detailed representation of persons, events, or situations. In this study, the goal is to paint a vivid picture of the lived reality of the nGAP. Phillips (2023:4) notes that social constructionism aims to problematise claims about the nature of the world by analysing the ways society constructs reality. A descriptive strategy facilitates this by allowing the researcher to document the specific narratives, language, and social practices used by participants.

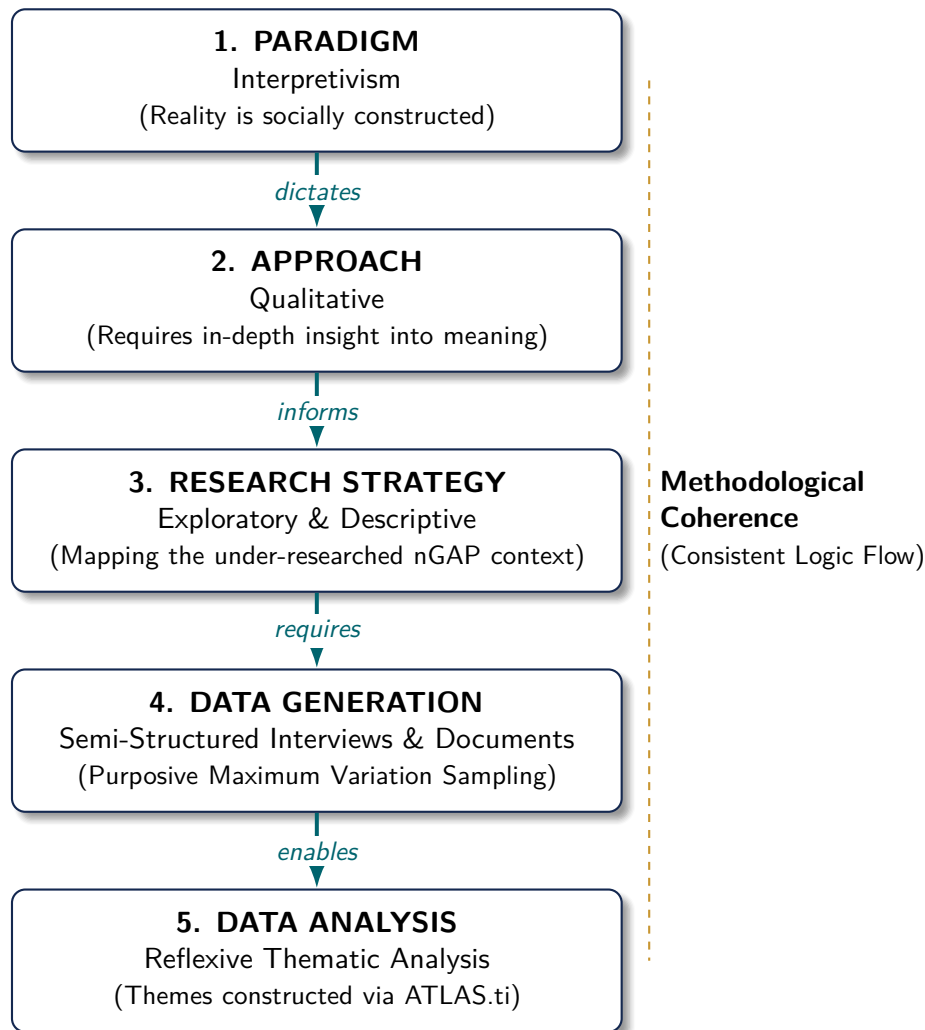


Figure 6: The Methodological Alignment of the Study (Source: Author's construction, adapted from Saunders et al., 2019)

The study seeks to describe:

- ❖ The specific narratives ECAs use to describe their integration into the university culture.
- ❖ The tensions between the "official" description of the nGAP (as found in policy documents) and the "lived" description (as experienced by participants).
- ❖ The specific nature of the power dynamics between mentors and mentees.

Yang and Chen (2024:2) highlight that investigating how individuals perform goal-directed actions during their career pursuits provides insight into the process of career construction. A descriptive strategy captures the texture of these actions. It moves beyond stating that retention is a risk, to describing how the risk feels, how it is spoken about in departmental corridors, and how it influences the daily decisions of the academic staff.

3.3.3 Integrating Exploration and Description

The combination of exploration and description ensures a comprehensive analysis. The exploratory component provides the breadth required to map the "risk universe" of the nGAP, identifying the full range of potential threats to the talent pipeline. The descriptive component provides the depth required to understand the nuance and complexity of these risks. Together, they enable the researcher to answer the "what," "how," and "why" questions central to the study.

The logical flow of this research design; from the interpretivist paradigm through to the specific methods of data collection; is visualized in Figure 6 below. This diagram illustrates the "methodological thread" that ensures coherence throughout the study.

3.4 SAMPLING STRATEGY

The selection of data sources represents a critical decision point in the research design, determining not only the quality of the data collected but also the credibility of the eventual findings. In alignment with the interpretivist paradigm and the qualitative approach established in Section 3.2, this study explicitly rejects probability sampling techniques. Probability sampling, with its reliance on random selection and statistical representativeness, serves the positivist goal of generalisation to a broader population. However, the objective of this study is not to generalise findings to all South African universities, but to acquire an in-depth, nuanced understanding of Talent Risk Management (TRM) within the specific context of the New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP). Consequently, the study operationalises a non-probability, purposive sampling strategy.

3.4.1 The Logic of Purposive Sampling

Purposive sampling is not just a matter of convenience; it is a deliberate, intellectual choice to select participants based on their specific capacity to elucidate the phenomenon under investigation. Nyimbili and Nyimbili (2024:90) define purposive sampling as a procedure where the researcher identifies and selects individuals who possess specific qualities and knowledge relevant to the study. The logic here shifts from "representativeness" (in the statistical sense) to "information richness."

In the context of the nGAP, the population is relatively small and highly specialised. It consists of programme administrators, mentors, and the nGAP lecturers themselves. These individuals possess unique, "insider" knowledge that cannot be accessed through random sampling. As Nyimbili and Nyimbili (2024:93) argue, sampling choices stem directly from ontological and epistemological matters. Ontologically, this study views talent risk as a constructed reality experienced by specific actors within the university hierarchy. Epistemologically, accessing this reality requires interaction with those who live it. Therefore, the sample must be handpicked to ensure that the selected

participants hold the necessary characteristics to provide the epistemological insight required to answer the research questions.

3.4.2 Maximum Variation Sampling Strategy

Within the broader domain of purposive sampling, this study specifically employs Maximum Variation Sampling (MVS). According to Nyimbili and Nyimbili (2024:95), MVS involves selecting participants who share common characteristics; in this case, their direct involvement with the nGAP; but who exhibit significant differences in their backgrounds, experiences, and institutional locations.

The rationale for selecting MVS is grounded in the complexity of the TRM framework. Talent risk does not manifest uniformly across the institution. The risks associated with an nGAP scholar in the natural sciences (characterised by laboratory work, high equipment costs, and collaborative publishing) differ fundamentally from those in the humanities (often characterised by solitary scholarship and high teaching loads). Similarly, the "risk" of attrition looks different from the perspective of a Human Resources Director compared to that of a junior lecturer struggling with integration.

Bouncken, Czakon and Schmitt (2025:4) argue that choosing cases with maximum variation permits the researcher to capture a wide range of adaptations to different conditions. By sampling across these divergences, the study aims to identify central themes that cut across this variety. This aligns with the concept of detecting "discord" and "harmony" in qualitative data (Bouncken et al., 2025:3). "Harmony" refers to the coherent patterns that emerge regardless of the participant's discipline or rank, suggesting systemic institutional issues. "Discord" refers to contradictions and divergences that highlight specific contextual variables. By explicitly seeking out this variation, the study ensures that the findings are robust and not just idiosyncratic to a single department or demographic profile.

To achieve maximum variation, the sample is stratified into two distinct, information-rich groups:

- ❖ **Group A: Programme Administrators and Mentors** This group represents the institutional perspective. It includes individuals responsible for the strategic implementation, financial oversight, and day-to-day management of the nGAP. Their participation is critical for understanding the Acquisition and Succession domains of the conceptual framework. They provide data on the strategic intent of the programme, the structural challenges of recruitment, and the mechanisms in place for career progression. This group is selected to provide the "top-down" view of talent risk.
- ❖ **Group B: nGAP Participants (Current and Alumni)** This group consists of the academics appointed through the programme. Their narratives provide the primary evidence for Development and Retention risks. To ensure maximum variation within this group, participants are selected

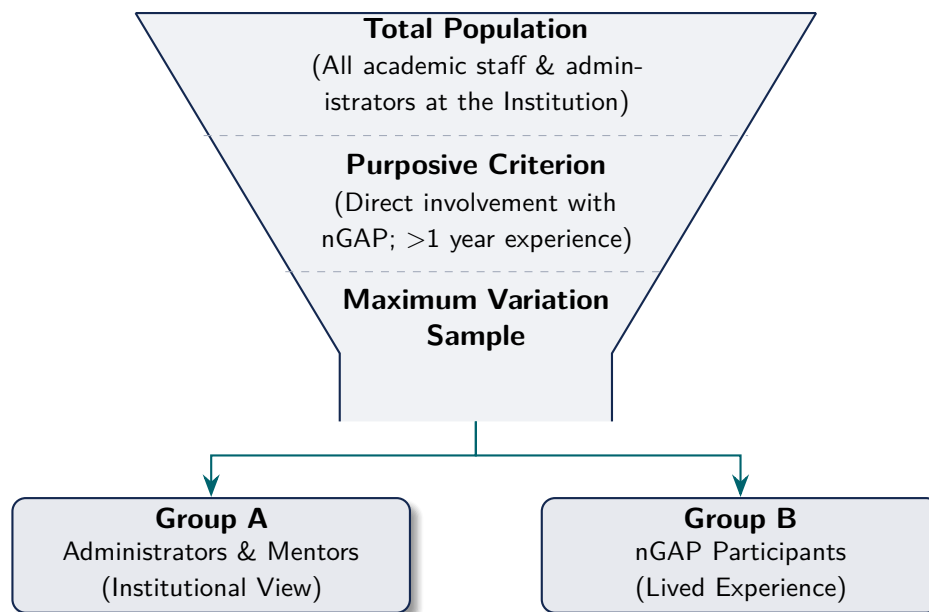


Figure 7: Application of the Maximum Variation Sampling Strategy (Source: Author)

across different disciplines (STEM vs. Humanities/Social Sciences), different phases of the programme (newly appointed vs. nearing completion), and different demographic profiles (race and gender). This diversity is essential because the literature suggests that the experience of workplace isolation and "imposter syndrome" often varies significantly along these lines. This group provides the "bottom-up," lived experience of talent risk.

The process of refining the total population down to these specific, purposively selected groups is visualised in Figure 7. This diagram illustrates how the maximum variation strategy is applied to capture both institutional and individual perspectives.

3.4.3 Sample Size and the Principle of Saturation

A pervasive challenge in qualitative research is determining the appropriate sample size. Unlike quantitative research, where power calculations determine the number of respondents required for statistical significance, qualitative inquiry relies on the principle of saturation. However, the concept of saturation is often "overworked and misunderstood," frequently invoked as a convenient stopping point rather than a rigorous methodological criterion (Tight, 2024:579).

This study rejects a simplistic view of saturation as just "hearing the same thing twice." Instead, it adopts a rigorous, thematic saturation approach. Saunders et al. (2018:1897) define inductive thematic saturation as the point where the analysis of data yields no new codes or themes, and the dataset is robust enough to support the theoretical categories. To operationalise this rigour and avoid the "wet diaper" phenomenon described by Thorne and Darbyshire (cited in Tight, 2024:579); where saturation is claimed prematurely to avoid further work; this study implements the three-phase

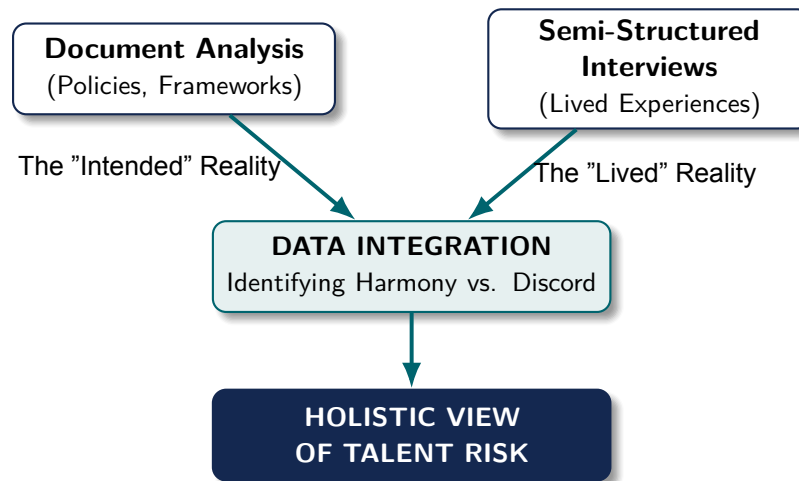


Figure 8: The Three-Phase Method for Determining Thematic Saturation (Source: Adapted from DiStefano & Yang, 2023:149)

method proposed by DiStefano and Yang (2023:149). This process is depicted in Figure 8 below.

Phase one: A priori sample size prediction, while saturation determines the final number, ethical clearance and research planning require an initial estimate. Based on the study's scope and precedents in similar qualitative inquiries, an initial sample of 12 to 15 participants is estimated. Hennink and Kaiser (2022:9) note that code saturation is typically reached within 9 to 17 interviews. Furthermore, Bouncken et al. (2025:5) observe that heterogeneous samples (such as the one proposed here) require larger numbers to manage the "discord" of findings. Therefore, planning for 15 interviews allows for sufficient breadth to cover the divergent experiences of administrators and participants. The study ultimately recruited 11 participants, which fell within the lower bound of this a priori predicted range. This confirmed that thematic saturation was achieved prior to reaching the upper estimate, validating the sufficiency of the final sample.

Phase two: Provisional Estimation During Data Collection Saturation is not a static endpoint but a dynamic process. During data collection, the researcher engages in concurrent preliminary analysis. Following the guidance of DiStefano and Yang (2023:149), frequent debriefing and provisional coding will be conducted after every third interview. This iterative process tracks whether new interviews yield novel insights or merely redundant information. If "discord" persists, meaning participants are providing radically different accounts that the emerging themes cannot explain, additional participants will be recruited. Conversely, if "harmony" is established early, data collection may cease once the theoretical categories are well-developed.

Phase three: Post hoc confirmation refers to the final determination that saturation is confirmed retrospectively. This occurs when the coding process stabilises, and the inclusion of further transcripts fails to alter the established thematic structure. By explicitly reporting on this three-phase

process, the study demonstrates methodological rigour, moving beyond vague claims of saturation to a defensible, evidence-based justification of the sample size.

3.4.4 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure the sample remains focused on the research objectives, strict inclusion and exclusion criteria are applied. This corresponds to what Nyimbili and Nyimbili (2024:97) refer to as criterion sampling, where participants must meet specific attributes to be included.

Inclusion Criteria:

- ❖ Administrators/Mentors: Must have been directly involved in the management or mentorship of nGAP scholars for a minimum of one year. This ensures they possess sufficient historical memory of the programme's challenges.
- ❖ nGAP Participants: Must be permanently appointed staff members under the nGAP banner. Both current participants (in the 6-year developmental phase) and alumni (who have completed the cycle) are eligible, as alumni offer unique retrospective insights into succession risks.

Exclusion Criteria:

- ❖ Staff members who are not part of the nGAP (e.g., standard academic appointments), as their developmental trajectory and risk profile differ fundamentally.
- ❖ nGAP scholars appointed less than six months prior to data collection, as they may lack sufficient experience of the programme's developmental and retention dynamics.

By adhering to these strict criteria within a maximum variation framework, the study ensures that the data collected is both relevant and rich in diverse perspectives.

3.5 DATA COLLECTION

Data collection is the operational bridge between the theoretical research questions and the generation of empirical evidence. Consistent with the social constructionist lens adopted in Section 3.2, this study acknowledges that data is not just "collected" like pebbles on a beach; it is co-constructed through interaction. To achieve a holistic view of talent risk, the study employs a multi-method qualitative approach, utilising semi-structured interviews as the primary method, supported by document analysis for triangulation.

3.5.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

The primary instrument for data generation is the semi-structured interview (SSI). Ruslin et al. (2022:23) describe the interview not as a mechanical extraction of facts, but as a "professional conversation" where knowledge is constructed in the inter-action between the researcher and the interviewee. This method occupies a strategic middle ground between the rigidity of structured surveys and the chaos of unstructured conversations.

The SSI is particularly suitable for this study because it provides enough structure to ensure all four domains of the TRM framework (Acquisition, Development, Retention, Succession) are covered, yet retains the adaptive flexibility to explore "unforeseen issues" (Adams, 2015:493). If a participant raises a critical risk factor not previously identified in the literature; such as the impact of departmental politics on retention; the SSI allows the researcher to pursue this new lead immediately.

The Interviewer as Traveller Methodologically, this study adopts the metaphor of the interviewer as a "traveller" rather than a "miner," as conceptualised by Brinkmann and Kvale (2015:57). The "miner" metaphor assumes that knowledge is a buried metal waiting to be unearthed, uncontaminated by the researcher. In contrast, the "traveller" metaphor posits that the interviewer "wanders through the landscape and enters into conversations," constructing stories and meanings alongside the inhabitants.

In the context of the nGAP, this distinction is vital. The study does not seek to "mine" objective facts about workload hours or publication counts. Instead, the researcher acts as a traveller, exploring how the nGAP participant interprets the experience of workload pressure, and how they construct the meaning of their academic identity. The knowledge produced is relational and contextual, reflecting the social constructionist epistemology.

Conducting the Interview, Interviews were conducted virtually via Microsoft Teams and lasted approximately 45–60 minutes each. Following the practical guidelines of Adams (2015:496), the interviews were conducted with a high degree of adaptability. While an agenda (interview guide) exists, the dialogue is permitted to meander if the participant raises significant but unanticipated issues. To mitigate the "power asymmetry" inherent in research interviews, where the researcher typically controls the questioning (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015:37), the study prioritises rapport-building. The interview is framed as a collaborative reflection on professional practice, treating the participant as the expert of their own lived experience.

Probing questions are essential to this method. As Adams (2015:497) notes, closed questions can serve as gateways to open-ended probing. For example, after asking "Do you have a mentor?"

(closed), the researcher will probe with "How would you describe that relationship?" or "Can you give an example of a time that support failed?" (open). This technique ensures the study moves beyond surface-level descriptions to the deeper meanings of the academic experience.

3.5.2 The Interview Protocol Refinement (IPR) Framework

To ensure the trustworthiness and rigour of the interview instrument, the development of the interview guide followed the Interview Protocol Refinement (IPR) Framework outlined by Shoozan and Mohamad (2024:2). This systematic, four-phase process ensures that the instrument is not based solely on intuition but is methodologically sound.

Phase one: Alignment. The first phase involves ensuring alignment between the interview questions and the research questions (Shoozan & Mohamad, 2024:4). A matrix was developed to map every item in the interview guide to the specific objectives of the study. For instance, questions regarding "integration into the department" were explicitly linked to the Retention Risk domain of the conceptual framework. This prevents the collection of irrelevant data and ensures no theoretical gaps exist.

Phase two: Constructing an Inquiry-Based Conversation. The second phase focuses on the flow of the interview. Shoozan and Mohamad (2024:5) emphasise the need to construct an "inquiry-based conversation" that follows social rules. The guide was scripted to move from non-threatening introductory questions (e.g., "Tell me about your journey into academia") to more complex inquiries about institutional barriers and succession planning. This sequencing helps build trust before tackling sensitive topics like burnout or discrimination.

Phase three: Receiving Feedback. The protocol was peer-reviewed. Colleagues with experience in Higher Education studies reviewed the guide to identify leading questions, academic jargon, or ambiguities that might alienate participants (Shoozan & Mohamad, 2024:7). Based on this feedback, questions were rephrased to be more open-ended and less directive.

Phase four: Piloting. Finally, a pilot interview was conducted with an academic who fits the nGAP profile but is not part of the final sample. As noted by Shoozan and Mohamad (2024:8), this phase is critical for assessing the protocol's feasibility. The pilot revealed which questions elicited limited responses, enabling the researcher to refine probes and prompts before the primary data collection phase.

3.5.3 Document Analysis

To supplement the interview data, the study employs document analysis. Bowen (2009:27) defines this as a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents, both printed and electronic material. In this study, documents are not treated as containers of absolute truth but as "social

facts” produced, shared, and used in socially organised ways (Atkinson & Coffey, cited in Bowen, 2009:27). They represent the “official” discourse of the institution.

Selection and Analysis The study analyses specific documents related to the nGAP, including:

- ❖ The DHET’s Staffing South Africa’s Universities Framework (SSAUF).
- ❖ Institutional nGAP implementation policies and guidelines.
- ❖ Internal reports on staff retention and development.
- ❖ Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for mentorship.

These documents provide the context within which the participants operate. The analysis seeks to identify the discrepancy between the intended policy (e.g., the promise of a reduced teaching load) and the implemented reality reported in the interviews. Bowen (2009:31) highlights that document analysis is efficient and cost-effective, providing stable data that is “non-reactive”; meaning it is unaffected by the research process itself. This stability provides a necessary counterweight to the subjective, fluid nature of the interview data.

3.5.4 Methodological Triangulation

The integration of semi-structured interviews and document analysis constitutes methodological triangulation. Meydan and Akkaş (2024:102) posit that triangulation enhances the credibility and validity of research by integrating multiple methods or data sources to verify findings.

However, this study does not view triangulation just as a tool for confirmation or convergence. Following Schlunegger, Zumstein-Shaha and Palm (2024:612), the goal is to capture “diverse perspectives” and enrich the analysis. Triangulation allows the researcher to explore the dissonance between different data sources. For example, if the document analysis indicates robust mentorship policies, but the interviews reveal a persistent lack of support, this divergence is not an error to be smoothed over. Instead, it is a significant finding regarding Implementation Risk (the gap between policy and practice).

As illustrated in Figure 9, the study uses triangulation to identify both “harmony” (where policy and practice align) and “discord” (where they diverge). By moving between the “what” of the documents (the official script) and the “how” of the interviews (the lived reality), the study achieves a holistic understanding of the talent risk landscape.

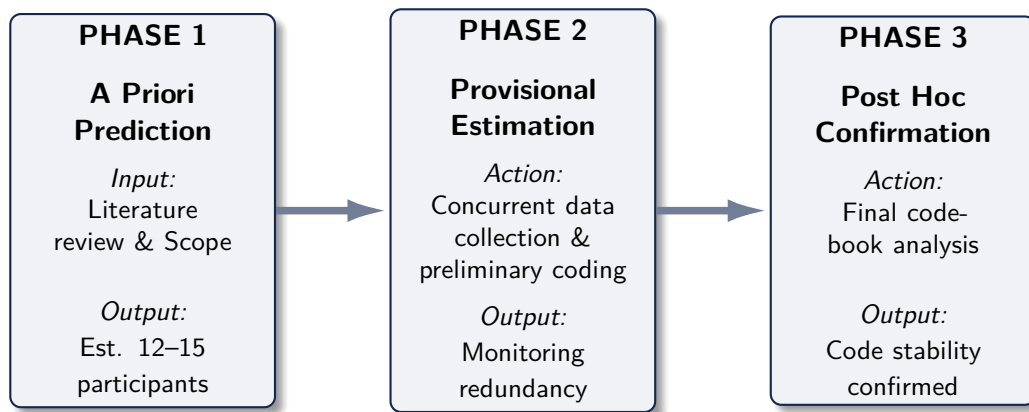


Figure 9: Methodological Triangulation of Data Sources (Source: Author)

3.6 DATA ANALYSIS

The transformation of raw qualitative data into meaningful strategic insight requires a rigorous, systematic analytic framework. Consequently, this study employs Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), facilitated by ATLAS.ti software. This selection is not just procedural; it is a theoretical choice aligned with the interpretivist paradigm and social constructionist lens established in Section 3.2. Unlike "coding reliability" approaches that prioritise inter-coder agreement and the "accurate" discovery of pre-existing themes, RTA recognises the researcher's subjectivity as a resource rather than a liability (Braun & Clarke, 2019:594). Analysis, in this context, is an active process of constructing meaning, not a passive process of witnessing it.

3.6.1 Theoretical Justification: Reflexive Thematic Analysis

The analysis rejects the notion that themes are "diamonds scattered in the sand" waiting to be found by a lucky researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2024:613). Instead, themes are conceptualised as patterns of shared meaning, crafted by the researcher through deep engagement with the data. This study specifically adopts the Big Q orientation to qualitative research. As distinguished by Braun and Clarke (2021:37), "Big Q" qualitative research operates within a qualitative paradigm that values situated knowledge and partiality, whereas "small q" research attempts to impose positivist standards of objectivity and reliability onto qualitative data.

The choice of RTA is justified by its theoretical flexibility and its capacity to generate "thick description" of complex social phenomena (Braun & Clarke, 2006:78). In the context of the nGAP, where the research seeks to understand the process of talent development and the experience of risk, RTA allows for both semantic coding (descriptive) and latent coding (interpretive). This dual capability is essential. A semantic approach captures the explicit barriers reported by participants (e.g., "workload is too high"), while a latent approach interrogates the underlying assumptions and institutional power dynamics that normalise such workloads (Braun & Clarke, 2006:84).

Furthermore, methodological congruence dictates that the analytic strategy must match the research question. Since the inquiry explores subjective perceptions of "risk" and "talent," a codebook approach, which fixes codes prior to analysis, would be inappropriate. Instead, the coding process in this study is organic and recursive, allowing codes to evolve as the researcher's understanding of the data deepens (Byrne, 2022:1393).

3.6.2 The Role of Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS)

To manage the complexity of the dataset and ensure a rigorous audit trail, the study utilises ATLAS.ti (Version 24). However, it is imperative to clarify the role of this technology. ATLAS.ti does not analyse data; the researcher does. As Friese (2019:26) articulates, the software serves as a container for the researcher's "intellectual work," facilitating the systematic organisation of text, codes, and memos.

The utility of ATLAS.ti lies in its ability to support the Noticing-Collecting-Thinking (N-C-T) model of analysis (Friese, 2019:4).

- ❖ Noticing: The software allows the researcher to highlight and annotate interesting segments of data during the familiarisation phase.
- ❖ Collecting: It facilitates the aggregation of data segments into codes and the grouping of codes into thematic categories.
- ❖ Thinking: Through the use of network views and memos, the software provides a space for the researcher to visualise relationships between concepts and develop higher-order theoretical constructs.

Mastrobattista, Muñoz-Rico and Cordon-García (2024:623) argue that CAQDAS tools enhance the "consistency and rigour" of analytical procedures. By using ATLAS.ti, this study maintains a comprehensive record of the analytic process, allowing for the retrieval of data segments in their original context and preventing the fragmentation of narratives that often occurs with manual coding methods. The software further enables the analysis of "co-occurrence," revealing where specific risks (codes) intersect with specific demographic groups or career stages (Mastrobattista et al., 2024:624).

3.6.3 The Six-Phase Analytic Process

Following the protocol established by Braun and Clarke (2006:87), and refined in their later work (2022), the data analysis proceeds through six iterative phases. These phases are not linear steps but a recursive cycle where movement back and forth is required to ensure depth and accuracy.

Phase one: Familiarisation with the Data Analysis begins during the transcription phase. Immersion in the data is achieved by reading and re-reading the transcripts, noting initial analytical observations. As suggested by Frieze (2019:54), initial "research diary" memos are created within ATLAS.ti at this stage to capture immediate reactions and potential patterns before formal coding begins. This phase moves beyond passive reading to active engagement, searching for meanings and patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006:87).

Phase two: Generating initial codes. This phase involves systematically coding the entire dataset. Codes are the "building blocks" of analysis (Byrne, 2022:1399). In ATLAS.ti, this is executed by tagging data segments with descriptive or interpretive labels. Consistent with the reflexive approach, no pre-determined codebook is used. Codes are generated inductively from the data. For example, a participant's statement about feeling overwhelmed might be coded semantically as "high workload," but also latently as "psychological contract breach" if the context suggests a violation of expectations. The study employs "complete coding," ensuring that every data item relevant to the research question is identified (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Phase three: Generating initial themes. Here, the analytic focus shifts from the specific (codes) to the general (themes). Codes are collated into potential themes, with all relevant data gathered for each. Using the "Network View" function in ATLAS.ti, codes are clustered visually to identify relationships, hierarchies, and overarching concepts. This process involves what Frieze (2019:107) describes as "segmenting the castle into sub-units," where the researcher organises loose codes into coherent categories that tell a story about the data.

Phase four: Reviewing themes. This phase involves a two-level quality check. First, themes are reviewed at the level of the coded data extracts to ensure they form a coherent pattern (internal homogeneity). Second, themes are reviewed in relation to the entire dataset to ensure they accurately reflect the meanings evident in the data (external heterogeneity) (Braun & Clarke, 2006:91). "Topic summaries" (e.g., "Benefits of Mentoring") are rejected in favour of "shared meaning-based themes" (e.g., "Mentoring as a Double-Edged Sword"), which capture the nuance and complexity of the participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2024:613).

Phase Five: Defining and Naming Themes This phase requires the researcher to "define and refine" the themes, identifying the "essence" of what each theme is about (Braun & Clarke, 2006:92). Each theme is given a concise, punchy name that immediately conveys the analytic point to the reader. Definitions are written in ATLAS.ti memos to ensure conceptual clarity and to prevent scope creep.

Phase six: Producing the Report. The final phase involves weaving together the analytic narrative and data extracts. The report does not just describe the data; it makes an argument in relation to

the research question. Vivid data extracts are selected to demonstrate the prevalence of the theme, embedded within an analytic narrative that goes beyond description to provide an interpretation of the significance of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006:93). This write-up is the final stage of analysis, not just a presentation of results.

3.7 RIGOUR AND TRUSTWORTHINESS

The evaluation of qualitative inquiry requires a definitive departure from the positivist criteria of internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity. These conventional metrics, rooted in a realist ontology, assume a single, tangible reality that can be measured without interference (Lincoln & Guba, 1985:289). Given that this study operates within an interpretivist paradigm, identifying talent risk as a socially constructed phenomenon within the specific context of the nGAP, the application of positivist criteria is methodologically incoherent. Consequently, this study establishes quality through the criteria of trustworthiness, adopting the four-dimensional framework proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985:290): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

3.7.1 Credibility

Credibility replaces the conventional concept of internal validity. It addresses whether the researcher's reconstruction of the participants' views is recognisable and authentic to the participants themselves (Enworo, 2023:373). To ensure the findings accurately represent the lived experiences of nGAP administrators and participants, three specific strategies are employed.

First, the study relies on triangulation. Lincoln and Guba (1985:305) argue that no single item of information should be given serious consideration unless another source can verify it. This study utilises methodological triangulation (combining semi-structured interviews with document analysis) and data source triangulation (comparing perspectives between nGAP administrators and ECAs). By cross-referencing interview data against the DHET's "Staffing South Africa's Universities Framework" (2015), the analysis exposes the dissonance between policy intent (the ideal) and operational reality (the lived experience).

This multi-perspective approach is visualised in **Figure 10** below, which illustrates how diverse data sources converge to illuminate the central phenomenon of talent risk.

Second, the research design incorporates peer debriefing. This involves exposing the inquiry process to a disinterested professional peer to explore aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain implicit (Lincoln & Guba, 1985:308). Regular debriefing sessions with the research supervisor serve to challenge the researcher's assumptions, particularly regarding the "insider" status of being a former nGAP participant, thereby preventing premature closure on themes.

The Analytic Process

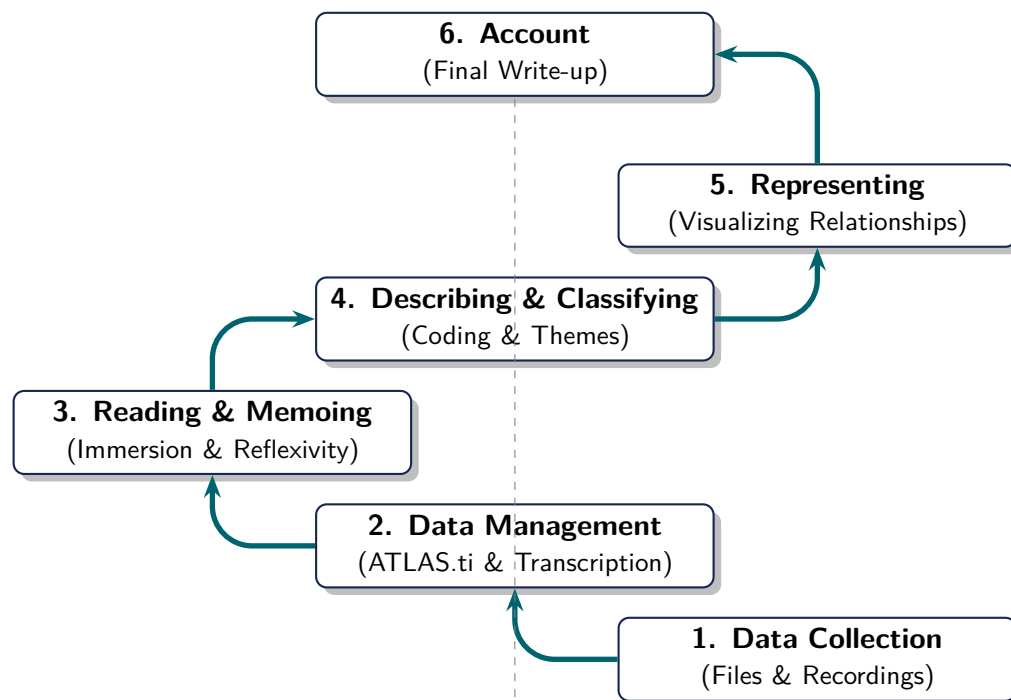


Figure 10: Data Source and Methodological Triangulation Strategy

Third, member checking is utilised. Lincoln and Guba (1985:314) identify this as the most crucial technique for establishing credibility. During interviews, the researcher employs instantaneous member checking by summarising key points and asking the participant, "Is this a correct understanding of your statement?" This ensures that the data reflects the participant's intent rather than the researcher's projection.

3.7.2 Transferability

Transferability is the qualitative counterpart to external validity or generalizability. However, unlike the positivist goal of creating nomothetic statements applicable to all contexts, the naturalist can only set out working hypotheses together with a description of the time and context in which they were found to hold (Lincoln & Guba, 1985:316). The responsibility of the researcher is not to provide an index of transferability, but to provide the database that makes transferability judgments possible on the part of potential applicants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985:316).

To facilitate this, the study provides thick description (Geertz, 1973, cited in Lincoln & Guba, 1985:317). By providing a detailed account of the nGAP context; including the specific structural constraints, disciplinary variations, and institutional cultures of the selected HEI; the study enables future researchers to determine the "fittingness" of the findings to their own contexts (Enworo, 2023:374).

3.7.3 Dependability

Dependability replaces the concept of reliability. It acknowledges that in an emergent design, changes in the research path are expected consequences of the inquiry gaining maturity, rather than evidence of unreliability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985:299). To establish dependability, the study employs an audit trail. Enworo (2023:373) notes that the research process must be logical and transparent so that procedures can be traced.

This audit trail is operationalized through ATLAS.ti. The software maintains a comprehensive record of the analytic process, including raw data (transcripts), data reduction and analysis products (codes and networks), and process notes (memos detailing methodological decisions). This digital archive ensures that an external auditor could, in theory, trace the logic from the raw data through to the final thematic structures.

3.7.4 Confirmability

Confirmability is the naturalist's equivalent of objectivity. However, rather than focusing on the objectivity of the researcher, it focuses on the confirmability of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985:300). The goal is to demonstrate that the findings are grounded in the data rather than the researcher's imagination.

This is achieved through the reflexive journal. Lincoln and Guba (1985:327) suggest that a reflexive journal provides information about methodological decisions and the reasons for making them. Throughout the data collection and analysis, the researcher documents personal reactions, potential biases, and the rationale for coding decisions within ATLAS.ti memos. This practice renders the interpretive process transparent and inspectable, ensuring that the findings are not just the product of the researcher's prior experience as an nGAP scholar but are substantiated by the participants' narratives.

3.8 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Research involving human participants, particularly within the hierarchical and often politically charged environment of Higher Education, demands rigorous adherence to ethical standards. The study is guided by the fundamental principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Beyond procedural compliance, the ethical framework of this study critically engages with issues of power, consent, and researcher positionality.

3.8.1 Institutional Approval and Informed Consent

Prior to data collection, full ethical clearance was obtained from the North-West University Research Ethics Committee. Furthermore, gatekeeper permission was secured from the participating HEI to access staff members.

Informed consent is treated not as a static event but as a process. Zhang et al. (2024:8) highlight that informed consent reporting is often neglected in qualitative research, particularly in digital data research. To address this, detailed Participant Information Sheets were distributed, outlining the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Consent was obtained in writing prior to the interviews.

Given the use of AI-assisted transcription tools (such as Otter.ai), specific ethical provisions were put in place. Samuel and Wassenaar (2025:3) argue that researchers must inform participants when AI software is used to process their recorded responses. Accordingly, the consent process explicitly disclosed the use of AI for transcription, assured participants of data security measures for cloud storage, and offered the option of manual transcription if the participant was uncomfortable with AI processing. This transparency is essential to maintain trust and uphold the integrity of the informed consent principle.

3.8.2 Confidentiality and Anonymity

The protection of participant identity is paramount, particularly given the relatively small nGAP scholar population and the potential career risks associated with critiquing institutional support structures. To prevent "jigsaw identification", whereby the combination of specific demographic details (e.g., "Black female lecturer in Chemical Engineering") reveals a participant's identity, data is reported using pseudonyms and aggregated thematic descriptors. Specific departmental affiliations are obscured where necessary to protect participants from potential professional repercussions. All digital data, including audio recordings and transcripts, is stored on password-protected, encrypted drives, accessible only to the researcher and the supervisory team.

3.8.3 Positionality and Reflexivity

A critical ethical dimension of this study is the management of the researcher's positionality. Positionality describes a researcher's social position and power relative to their area of study (Cadman et al., 2024:2). As a former nGAP participant researching the programme, the researcher occupies an "insider" status.

Wilson, Janes, and Williams (2022:46) note that conducting research as an insider offers easier access and a deeper understanding of the context. However, they warn that prior knowledge can

affect how the researcher is perceived and how data is interpreted. Participants may assume the researcher "knows what they mean," leading to unexplored assumptions, or they may perform specific narratives to impress a peer.

To mitigate these risks, the study moves beyond a performative "shopping list" of identities; a practice criticised by Sibbald et al. (2025:4) for reducing positionality to a check-box exercise without genuine reflexive engagement. Instead, the study employs reflexive practice as an active, inward-facing method (Cadman et al., 2024:2). This involves:

- ❖ **Transpersonal Reflexivity:** Engaging in dialogue with the research supervisor to hold a "reflexive mirror" up to the analysis, ensuring that themes are derived from the data and not projected from the researcher's own experience (Sibbald et al., 2025:5).
- ❖ **Reflexive Journaling:** Documenting moments of discomfort or convergence between the researcher's experience and the participants' narratives.

By explicitly acknowledging this positionality, the study does not claim a false neutrality but instead offers a "strong objectivity" (Harding, 1993, cited in Sibbald et al., 2025:2), where the researcher's situated knowledge is treated as an analytical resource that is critically examined, rather than a bias to be eliminated.

3.9 Limitations of the Research

The delineation of limitations is an essential component of rigorous qualitative inquiry. As Creswell and Poth (2018:235) observe, acknowledging boundaries does not weaken a study but instead defines the specific scope of its transferability and establishes the specific context in which the findings hold validity. This study operated within specific methodological and contextual parameters, which inevitably constrained the scope of its conclusions.

Perception-Based Data The primary data source for this study was the subjective narratives of nGAP administrators and participants. Consequently, the findings represent the perceived reality of talent risk rather than an objective measure of risk events. This reliance on memory subjects the data to recall bias, where participants may reconstruct past events through the lens of their current emotional state. To mitigate this, the study employed methodological triangulation, cross-referencing interview data against static policy documents and institutional reports to verify structural facts and timelines. This limitation is inherent to the interpretivist paradigm, which posits that the participant's construction of reality is the primary object of study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985:37).

Limited Generalizability As a qualitative case study situated within a single South African Higher

Education Institution (HEI), the findings possess limited statistical generalizability. The institutional culture, resource allocation, and management style of the selected university may create unique risk profiles do not present at other institutions. This limitation prevents the extrapolation of findings to the entire national nGAP cohort. To address this, the study focused on transferability rather than generalizability. By providing "thick description" of the institutional context, the study enables future researchers to determine the degree to which these findings fit other contexts (Patton, 2015:102).

Participant Self-Selection The use of voluntary recruitment introduces the risk of self-selection bias. Individuals who volunteer for interviews regarding talent risk may be those with the strongest opinions; either those who are highly critical of the programme or those who are exceptionally successful "champions." This creates a potential skew where the "average" experience remains under-represented. To mitigate this, the sampling strategy explicitly sought maximum variation (as detailed in Section 3.4.2), purposefully recruiting participants across different disciplines and career stages to capture a spectrum of experiences. However, the ethical mandate for voluntary participation makes some degree of self-selection unavoidable.

Researcher Positionality The researcher's status as a former nGAP participant introduces the risk of bias, specifically the danger of projecting personal experiences onto participant narratives. This "insider" status could potentially blind the researcher to alternative interpretations of the data. This limitation was actively managed through the rigorous reflexive practices detailed in Section 3.8.3, including the use of a reflexive journal and peer debriefing to challenge interpretive assumptions. Despite the risk, this insider status was necessary to secure access to a hard-to-reach population and to establish the rapport needed to discuss sensitive career risks.

Temporal and Design Constraints The study employed a cross-sectional design, capturing a snapshot of talent risk at a single point in time. It did not longitudinally track the evolution of risk for specific individuals across the complete six-year nGAP cycle. Consequently, the study infers developmental trajectories rather than directly observing them. To mitigate this, the sample was stratified to include participants currently situated at different stages of the programme (Years 1–6), creating a composite picture of the lifecycle. Furthermore, the hierarchical nature of Higher Education introduces power dynamics that may have influenced participant candour. Despite assurances of anonymity, Early Career Academics may have exercised self-censorship when discussing departmental leadership. This limitation is intrinsic to organisational research and was mitigated by emphasising the researcher's independence from the university's management structures.

3.10 SUMMARY

This chapter has delineated the research architecture for investigating Talent Risk Management within the New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP). The methodological choices detailed herein are not a random assembly of techniques but a cohesive, integrated research design in which each element logically necessitates the next. As emphasised by Creswell and Poth (2018:51), methodological coherence, the alignment between philosophical assumptions and practical methods, is the hallmark of rigorous qualitative inquiry.

The central research question, which seeks to understand how talent risks are identified, assessed, and mitigated, demands an investigation into the subjective, socially constructed realities of academic staff. This requirement precluded a positivist approach, necessitating an interpretivist paradigm. Because the nature of talent risk in this context is complex, nuanced, and deeply embedded in institutional culture, a qualitative approach was the only viable option to generate the necessary depth of insight. This choice, in turn, dictated the use of an exploratory and descriptive strategy to map a phenomenon that has been under-researched in the South African public sector context.

To operationalise this strategy, the study employed purposive maximum variation sampling. This ensured that the data reflected a comprehensive range of perspectives, from high-level administrators to early-career academics, rather than a homogenous or statistically representative subset. The complexity of these perspectives required flexible data-collection instruments; thus, semi-structured interviews, supported by document analysis, served as the primary mechanism for data collection.

The logic extends to the analytic phase. Reflexive Thematic Analysis was selected as the analytic strategy because it aligns with the interpretivist acknowledgement of the researcher's active role in constructing meaning from the data. Finally, because traditional validity metrics are incompatible with this paradigm, the study adopted Lincoln and Guba's criteria for trustworthiness and a robust ethical reflexivity framework to ensure the findings are both credible and ethically sound. This methodological thread is visualised in Figure 11.

The following chapter, Chapter Four: Discussion of Findings, presents the empirical results emerging from this methodological process. It details the themes generated through the thematic analysis, structured according to the four domains of the Talent Risk Management conceptual framework: Talent Acquisition, Development, Retention, and Succession Planning. By applying the analytic lens defined in this chapter, the subsequent discussion moves from the theoretical planning of the research to the concrete realities of the nGAP as experienced by its stakeholders.

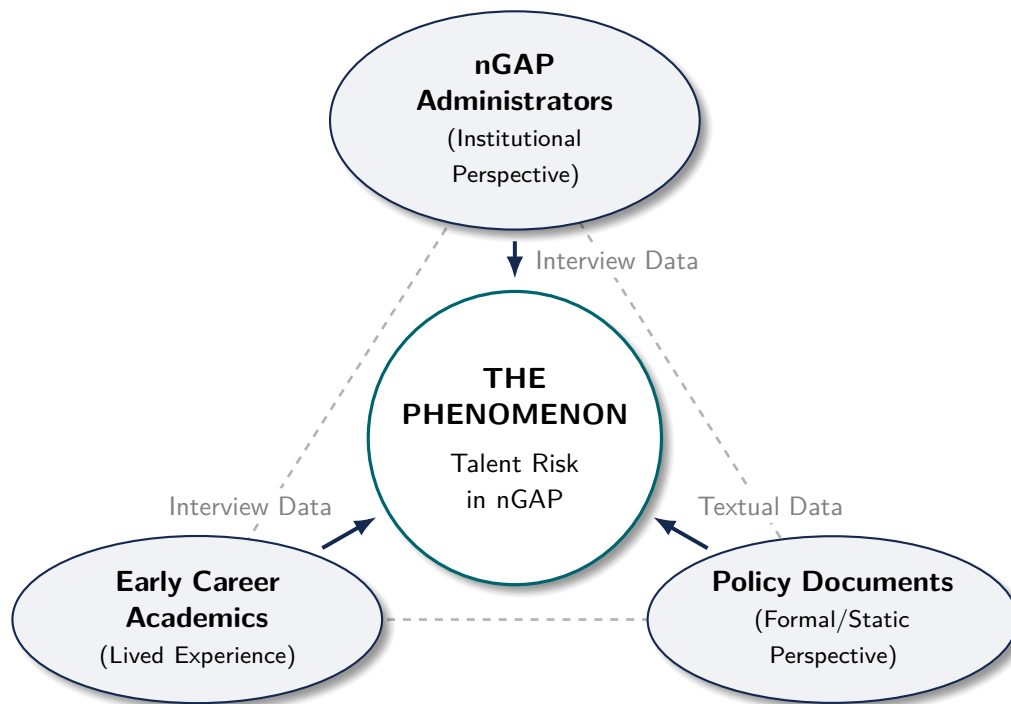


Figure 11: The "Golden Thread" of Methodological Coherence

Chapter four will now discuss the research findings

CHAPTER FOUR

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

4.1. INTRODUCTION

The New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP) represents the South African state's most ambitious strategic intervention to avert a looming crisis in the higher education sector: the "academic talent void" precipitated by an ageing professoriate and the slow pace of demographic transformation. However, as established in the preceding chapters, funding and the creation of permanent posts are necessary but insufficient conditions for success. The central premise of this study is that the nGAP must be understood not just as a funding mechanism, but as a complex, volatile talent supply chain subject to specific strategic risks.

Having defined the theoretical architecture of Talent Risk Management (TRM) in Chapter Two and operationalised an interpretivist methodological design in Chapter Three, this chapter presents the empirical evidence of how these risks materialise in the lived reality of South African Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). This study rejects the positivist notion that "risk" is an objective, static variable to be measured solely through retention statistics or completion rates. Instead, consistent with the social constructionist lens adopted in Chapter Three, this chapter excavates the subjective realities, constructed meanings, and institutional power dynamics that define the nGAP experience for its stakeholders.

The findings presented herein represent a "thick description" of the friction between national policy intent and institutional operational practice. The analysis reveals a landscape defined by dissonance. On one hand, the nGAP is successfully creating a new cohort of Black academics who, under specific conditions of support, are thriving, publishing, and transforming the academy. On the other hand, the data reveals deep gaps in the programme's implementation. Structural resource constraints, toxic institutional cultures, and ad hoc management practices threaten to derail this national investment, transforming what should be a "virtuous cycle" of development into a "vicious cycle" of stagnation and attrition.

The discussion anchors the empirical data within the Conceptual Framework for Talent Risk Management developed in Chapter two. It moves past the generic Human Resources view of talent management to apply a rigorous risk governance lens. By triangulating the "top-down" narratives of Programme Administrators (the institutional architects) with the "bottom-up" lived experiences of nGAP Fellows, the study exposes the "Translation Risk"; the gap that emerges when robust

national policy is translated into the messy reality of departmental politics and resource scarcity.

Crucially, the analysis argues that talent risk in the nGAP is not distributed equally across the sector. The findings suggest the emergence of a "two-tier system" of academic development across the participating institutions. In well-managed, well-resourced institutions, talent risks are identified and mitigated through systematic governance, leading to high retention and rapid doctoral completion. Conversely, in under-resourced or poorly managed institutions, talent risks are allowed to crystallise, leaving fellows isolated and unsupported. This divergence poses a fundamental threat to the programme's equity goals, suggesting that the nGAP may inadvertently be reproducing the very institutional hierarchies it seeks to dismantle.

By weaving together, the theoretical insights of the Resource-Based View (RBV) (Barney, 1991) with the raw, often emotional data from the interviews, this chapter moves from the theoretical planning of the research to the realities of the nGAP. It provides the evidence base necessary to determine whether the South African higher education sector is effectively managing the risks to its most valuable asset: its future intellectual capital.

4.2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To ensure methodological rigour and analytical alignment, the findings presented in this chapter are not organised randomly but are structured to answer the specific lines of inquiry established at the outset of this study. The research questions function as the lens through which the reality of the nGAP is viewed.

The Main Research Question serves as the central pivot of the study, shifting the focus from the general administration of the programme to the specific governance of uncertainty. It asked:

- ❖ "How are talent risks identified, assessed, and mitigated within the New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP) concerning the acquisition, retention, development, and succession planning of academic talent?"

This overarching inquiry necessitates a holistic view of the academic talent lifecycle. It posits that risk is not an isolated event but a continuous thread that runs through every stage of a fellow's career. To unpack this, the analysis is driven by five Sub-Research Questions (Sub-RQs), each targeting a specific domain of the Conceptual Framework developed in Chapter Two.

- ❖ **Sub-RQ1 (Acquisition):** Focuses on the "War for Talent" and the tension between scarcity and transformation.
- ❖ **Sub-RQ2 (Retention):** Investigates the "psychological contract" and the specific "shocks" that

trigger exit.

- ❖ **Sub-RQ3 (Development):** Examines the "black box" of academic growth, mentorship, and infrastructure.
- ❖ **Sub-RQ4 (Succession):** Explores the sustainability of the intervention and the leadership transition.
- ❖ **Sub-RQ5 (Effectiveness):** Evaluates the gap between policy intent and operational reality.

By addressing these questions, the following discussion dismantles the monolithic view of the nGAP, revealing that the "risk profile" shifts dramatically across the talent lifecycle and across institutional contexts.

4.3. DEMOGRAPHICS AND DATA ANALYSIS

The validity of qualitative inquiry rests not on the statistical representativeness of the sample, but on its "information richness" (Patton, 2015). Consistent with the purposive, maximum variation sampling strategy detailed in Chapter three, this study engaged with 11 participants across seven distinct Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). This sample was deliberately stratified to capture the "discord" and "harmony" between policy intent and operational reality, juxtaposing the perspectives of those who design the risk management systems (Programme Administrators) with those who must navigate them (nGAP Fellows).

The resulting dataset offers a panoramic view of the South African higher education landscape, capturing the stark structural inequalities that define the sector. The sample includes four Programme Administrators and seven nGAP Fellows. To ensure strict anonymity, a critical ethical requirement given the relatively small nGAP population and the potential for triangulation, participants are identified by pseudonyms (e.g., Administrator **L_N**, Fellow **M_K**) and their institutions are coded (A through G).

Table 2: Participant Demographics and Institutional Context

Participant	Role	Inst. Code	Institutional Type	Discipline	Status/Tenure
L_N	Administrator	Inst B	Urban HDI (Well-managed)	N/A	10 Years (Active)
T_M	Administrator	Inst A	Urban HDI (Resource-constrained)	N/A	5 Years (Active)

Participant	Role	Inst. Code	Institutional Type	Discipline	Status/Tenure
S_V	Administrator	Inst G	Multi-campus HDI	N/A	6 Years (Retired)
E_F	Administrator	Inst G	Multi-campus HDI	N/A	3 Years (Active)
N_M	Fellow	Inst C	Urban HAI (Well-resourced)	Education	Year 5 (PhD Completed)
M_K	Fellow	Inst B	Urban HDI (Well-managed)	Sociology	Year 6 (PhD Completed)
T_D	Fellow	Inst A	Urban HDI (Resource-constrained)	Engineering	Year 4 (In Progress)
L_G	Fellow	Inst F	Urban HAI (Well-resourced)	Health Sciences	Year 4 (In Progress)
R_P	Fellow	Inst D	Rural HDI (Under-resourced)	Physics	Year 3 (Struggling)
S_P	Fellow	Inst E	Rural HDI (Under-resourced)	Chemistry	Year 2 (Struggling)
K_L	Fellow	Inst G	Multi-campus HDI	STEM	Year 5 (Delayed)

Source: Primary Data (2025)

4.3.1 The "Two-Tier" Sample Composition

The demographic spread is not just descriptive; it is explanatory. The sample was constructed to isolate institutional capacity as a primary variable in the crystallisation of talent risk.

The data reveals a clear bifurcation. On the one hand, the sample includes fellows such as **N_M** (Institution C) and **M_K** (Institution B). These participants are situated in urban, well-resourced environments; either Historically Advantaged Institutions (HAIs) or well-managed Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDIs). Their narratives represent the "ideal" nGAP trajectory: successful PhD completion, strong mentorship, and integration into global research networks.

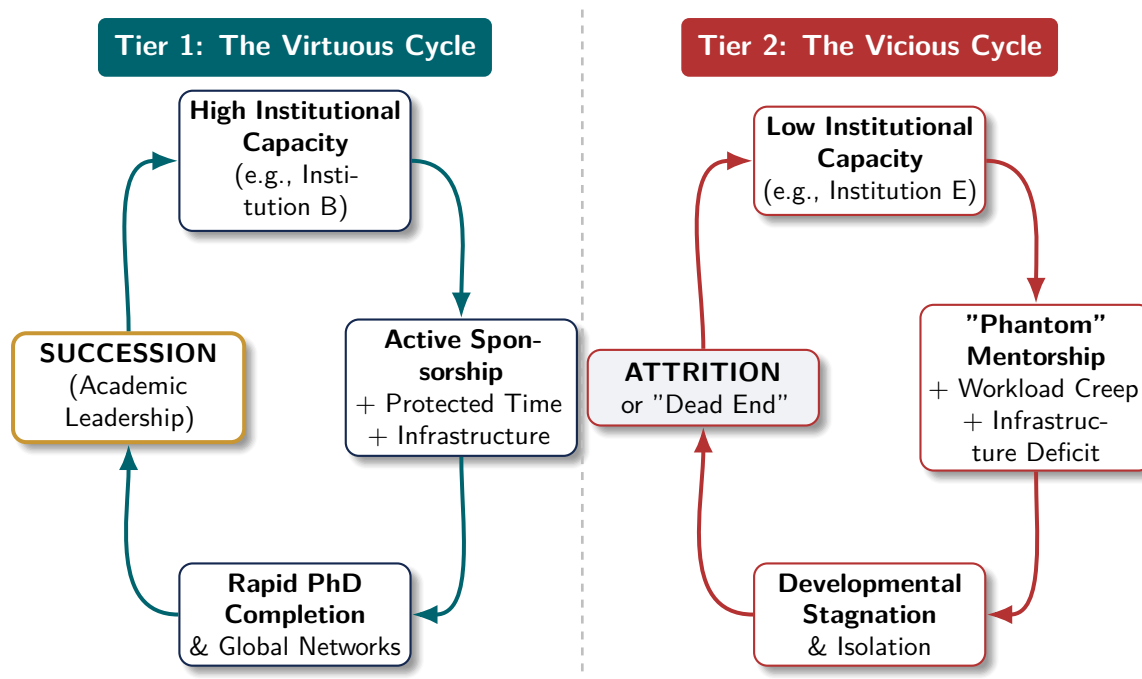


Figure 12: The Divergent Trajectories of nGAP Fellows: Virtuous vs. Vicious Cycles (Source: Author's construction based on primary data)

On the other side, the sample captures the precarious reality of fellows like **R_P** (Institution D) and **S_P** (Institution E). Situated in rural, under-resourced HDIs, their narratives serve as "cautionary tales." They face severe infrastructure deficits, such as the lack of basic chemistry equipment or high-performance computing clusters, which transform the theoretical risk of "developmental stagnation" into a concrete reality. By including these divergent voices, the study moves beyond a homogeneous assessment of the nGAP to reveal a "two-tier system" in which geography and institutional history determine talent outcomes.

Figure 12 visualises the divergence in developmental trajectories, illustrating how institutional capacity acts as the primary variable determining whether the nGAP functions as a mechanism for acceleration or stagnation.

4.3.2 Achievement of Thematic Saturation

Thematic saturation was achieved through the rigorous three-phase process detailed in Chapter Three, Section 3.4.3, following the methodological framework proposed by DiStefano and Yang (2023) to avoid the "wet diaper" phenomenon wherein researchers claim saturation without systematic evidence. This approach required explicit articulation of saturation criteria, systematic assessment during data collection, and post-hoc confirmation through comprehensive dataset analysis.

Phase one: *A Priori* Estimation. Based on the study's scope (five research questions examining four

talent lifecycle stages), the interpretivist qualitative approach requiring rich contextual understanding, and precedents in similar qualitative higher education research employing maximum variation sampling (e.g., Moosa, 2020; Musakuro & De Klerk, 2021), the study predicted achieving saturation within 12-15 interviews. This prediction reflected the research literature, which suggests that maximum variation sampling typically requires larger samples than homogeneous sampling due to the deliberate pursuit of diversity, whilst simultaneously noting that focused research questions with clear conceptual frameworks enable saturation with moderate samples (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Phase two: Provisional Estimation During Data Collection. Data collection proceeded with concurrent preliminary analysis to enable provisional saturation assessment, conducted after every third interview. Following interview 9 (M_K, nGAP fellow at Institution B), preliminary coding and memoing indicated that the five major themes were well-established with robust definition: (1) Acquisition Risks (war for talent in scarce skills, prestige/location advantages); (2) Development Risks (mentorship black box, supervision capacity constraints, infrastructure gaps); (3) Retention Risks (poaching paradox, workload violations); (4) Succession Planning Risks (dead end phenomenon, institutional variation); and (5) Effectiveness (systematic vs. ad hoc implementation differentials). Interviews 8 and 9 generated no new themes beyond these five, with data instead providing additional examples and nuances within existing themes, suggesting saturation was approaching.

Phase three: Post-Hoc Confirmation. Comprehensive analysis of the full dataset confirmed that interviews 10 and 11 generated no new codes beyond those established through interviews 1-9. The ATLAS.ti code co-occurrence analysis demonstrated that all major code clusters were established by interview 9, with interviews 10-11 increasing code frequency (density of evidence) rather than code variety (range of phenomena). This pattern aligns with Saunders et al.'s (2018) definition of saturation as the point where "gathering more data about a theoretical category merely adds to the bulk rather than to the understanding of the category."

The final sample of eleven participants fell within the *a priori* predicted range, achieving saturation slightly earlier than anticipated due to: (1) focused research questions with a clear conceptual framework; (2) maximum variation sampling ensuring exposure to diverse manifestations early; and (3) a structured interview protocol ensuring systematic coverage. Whilst saturation was achieved for the five major themes addressing the research questions, the interpretivist paradigm acknowledges that saturation is construct-specific rather than absolute (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Additional data collection might reveal further nuances regarding intersectional experiences or specific disciplinary contexts underrepresented in the sample. The saturation claim, therefore, applies specifically to the major talent risk patterns across the talent lifecycle within the sample's diversity parameters.

4.4. DOCUMENTATION REVIEW: THE POLICY-PRACTICE GAP

To fully understand the landscape of talent risk within the nGAP, one must first examine the "official script" that governs it. Documents are not just lifeless repositories of text; they function as "social facts" (Bowen, 2009:27) that encode the strategic intent, risk appetite, and ideological assumptions of the institution. Consequently, this study undertook a critical review of the foundational policy documents governing the programme, specifically the Department of Higher Education and Training's (DHET) *Staffing South Africa's Universities Framework* (SSAUF) and the nGAP *Standard Operating Procedures* (SOPs).

The objective of this review was not to conduct a compliance audit, but to operationalise the principle of Methodological Triangulation. By juxtaposing the static policy provisions against the dynamic, fluid narratives of the participants, the analysis exposes a "Translation Risk"; the distortion that occurs when high-level national strategy is filtered through the resource-constrained reality of departmental operations. The following analysis dissects three specific policy mechanisms designed to mitigate risk: Protected Time, Mandated Mentorship, and Financial Locking. These mechanisms often fail in practice to shield the talent asset.

4.4.1 The Illusion of the "Structural Shield": Workload and Protected Time

The central pillar of the nGAP's risk mitigation strategy is the "structural shield" of reduced workload. The SSAUF (DHET, 2015:10) explicitly diagnoses the primary threat to Early Career Academics (ECAs) as the "sink or swim" culture of high teaching loads, which stifles research productivity. To mitigate this Development Risk, the SOPs mandate a "Protected Time" model: fellows are restricted to a teaching load of 20% during the first three years of the programme to facilitate the rapid completion of doctoral qualifications.

On paper, this is a robust control. It aligns with the Resource-Based View (RBV) by acknowledging that the accumulation of "academic asset stock" (a PhD) requires time; a resource that cannot be compressed (Dierickx & Cool, 1989). However, triangulation with the interview data reveals that this shield is often porous, particularly in resource-constrained environments.

T_M (Administrator, Institution A) exposes the fragility of this policy: *"The nGAP guidelines specify 20% teaching load... but what constitutes 20% can be interpreted differently. Some heads of department pressure nGAP fellows to take on additional modules... especially if the department is understaffed."*

This finding suggests a critical flaw in the policy design: it assumes a stable operating environment. The policy presupposes that departments have sufficient staffing "slack" to absorb the remaining

80% of the teaching load. Many HDIs operate in a state of perpetual crisis management. As noted by T_D (Fellow, Institution A), the *teaching contact time* might adhere to the 20% rule, but the invisible labour of administration, committee service, and crisis management pushes the actual workload closer to 40% or 50%.

Consequently, the risk mitigation strategy fails not because the policy is wrong, but because it is unenforceable in the face of structural scarcity. The "shield" becomes a source of role conflict, forcing fellows like K_L (Institution G) to "push back" against senior managers to protect their rights, creating a hostile work environment that paradoxically increases Retention Risk.

4.4.2 The "Black Box" of Mandated Mentorship

The second primary policy intervention is the requirement for mentorship. The SOPs stipulate that every nGAP fellow must be assigned a mentor to guide their integration and development (DHET, 2017). This is intended to mitigate Integration Risk and ensure the transfer of tacit institutional knowledge.

The documentation review reveals that the policy treats mentorship as a binary variable: a mentor is either *assigned* or *not assigned*. It lacks quality assurance mechanisms to evaluate the *efficacy* of that relationship. This creates a "Black Box" risk where the institution assumes development is happening simply because a name has been entered into a database.

The divergence in the lived experience of this policy is stark. In well-managed environments, the policy intent is realised. L_N (Administrator, Institution B) describes a rigorous system where mentors receive training, clear expectations, and honoraria, leading to high satisfaction. However, in the absence of such institutional governance, the policy becomes performative. S_P (Fellow, Institution E) describes a "phantom" mentorship: *"We meet maybe once a semester... conversations are quite surface level."* Similarly, R_P (Fellow, Institution D) notes that his mentor, while well-meaning, lacks the relevant subject matter expertise to provide strategic guidance.

4.4.3 The "Homogeneity Fallacy" and Infrastructure Risk

Perhaps the most significant finding from the documentation review is the "Homogeneity Fallacy." The nGAP policies are applied uniformly across the sector, treating all universities as functionally equivalent environments for talent development. The SSAUF does not differentiate between the infrastructure requirements of a Chemist at a rural HDI and a Sociologist at an urban HAI.

This uniform application ignores the material reality of research production in the hard sciences (STEM). S_P's narrative serves as a devastating critique of this policy blindness. She notes: *"I literally cannot conduct the research I proposed... [My institution] has very limited resources for*

chemistry research... Many things I need, we simply don't have."

For a STEM fellow, Infrastructure Risk is Development Risk. The policy provides funding for "mobility" and "infrastructure," but as **L_N** notes, this funding has "not kept pace with inflation and with the actual costs of developing researchers" in high-cost disciplines. By treating unequal institutions equally, the policy inadvertently sets fellows at under-resourced universities on a trajectory of failure.

4.4.4 Financial Architecture: The "Golden Handcuffs"

Finally, the review examined the programme's financial architecture. The DHET covers the full cost of the post for the first three years, with the university's contribution increasing on a sliding scale until year six (DHET, 2015). This design is intended to mitigate Acquisition Risk by lowering the barrier to entry for universities. However, it incorporates a punitive retention mechanism: fellows who leave the programme prematurely are liable for significant financial penalties.

While intended to secure the state's return on investment (ROI), the interview data suggest this mechanism functions as a breach of the psychological contract. **K_L** (Fellow, Institution G) describes this not as a retention incentive, but as incarceration: *"I've heard people say things like we're being treated like prisoners... we can't leave without paying penalties."*

This creates a perverse form of "retention" in which the body remains in the post, while the mind has disengaged. It transforms Dysfunctional Turnover (leaving) into Dysfunctional Retention (staying but underperforming).

4.4.5 Synthesis: The Policy-Practice Chasm

The documentation review confirms that the nGAP is built on a solid theoretical foundation. The risks of burnout, isolation, and financial cost are all explicitly identified and mitigated in the policy text. However, the mechanism of transmission, from national strategy to local implementation, is broken.

The policy framework suffers from Institutional Isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). It forces diverse institutions to adopt a singular structure that fits poorly in resource-constrained contexts. It relies on structural fixes (money, time) for cultural problems (exclusion, lack of mentorship). As the subsequent themes will demonstrate, it is in this gap between the *design* of the risk management system and its *implementation* that the actual talent risks of the nGAP crystallise.

4.5. PRESENTATION OF THEMES, SUB-THEMES AND CATEGORIES

The findings presented in this section were derived through a rigorous application of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019), where data codes generated from the interview tran-

scripts were inductively clustered into categories, which were then aggregated into sub-themes and overarching themes aligned with the study's Conceptual Framework. Table 3 below provides a master summary of the five themes, their corresponding sub-themes, and the specific categories that emerged from the data analysis.

Table 3: Master Summary of Themes, Sub-Themes, and Categories

Theme	Sub-Themes	Categories
Theme 1: Acquisition Risks (Sub-RQ1)	1.1 The Geography of Prestige	• The "Buyer's Market" (Elite/Urban) • The "Seller's Market" (Rural/HDI) • Strategic Displacement
	1.2 The Scarcity Paradox	• Private Sector Competition (STEM) • The "Timing Mismatch" (Professional Degrees)
	1.3 Adverse Selection	• Compromise Hiring • Capacity Mismatch
Theme 2: Development Risks (Sub-RQ3)	2.1 The Mentorship "Black Box"	• Functional Sponsorship (Virtuous Cycle) • Phantom Mentorship (Vicious Cycle) • Competency Mismatch
	2.2 Materiality of Failure	• Infrastructure Deficits (STEM) • The "Homogeneity Fallacy"
	2.3 Erosion of Protected Time	• Workload Creep • Invisible Labour
Theme 3: Retention Risks (Sub-RQ2)	3.1 The Poaching Paradox	• Success as a Risk Factor • The "Penalty Buyout"
	3.2 Psychological Contract Breach	• The "Gaoler" Mentality • Lack of Belonging
	3.3 Intersectionality Risks	• The Burden of Representation • The Academic Motherhood Penalty
Theme 4: Succession Risks (Sub-RQ4)	4.1 The "Two-Tier" Trajectory	• The Fast Track to Leadership • Permanent Juniorisation
	4.2 Financial Sustainability	• The "Year Seven" Cliff Edge • Role Distortion
	4.3 Knowledge Transfer Failure	• The Empty Chair Risk • Generational Disconnect
Theme 5: Effectiveness (Sub-RQ5)	5.1 Governance Maturity	• Systematic Risk Governance (Dashboards) • Ad Hoc Crisis Management

Theme	Sub-Themes	Categories
	5.2 The Implementation Gap	• Policy vs. Practice (Workload) • The Accountability Vacuum

4.5.1. Theme 1: What are the key perceived talent acquisition risks associated with the nGAP, and how are they assessed and mitigated by programme administrators and HEIs?

This theme addresses the entry point of the talent pipeline, exploring the systemic inequalities and structural constraints that define recruitment in the South African higher education sector. **Table 4** below outlines the sub-themes and categories discussed in this section.

Table 4: Theme 1 – Acquisition Risks

Theme	Sub-Themes	Categories
Theme 1	1.1 The Geography of Prestige	• The "Buyer's" vs. "Seller's" Market • Strategic Displacement
	1.2 The Scarcity Paradox	• Private Sector Competition (STEM) • The "Timing Mismatch"
	1.3 Adverse Selection	• Compromise Hiring • Capacity Mismatch

Acquisition risk in the higher education sector is driven by the "War for Talent," a paradigm where institutions compete aggressively for a finite pool of high-potential equity candidates essential for transformation (Chambers et al., 1998:44). In the South African context, this competition is profoundly asymmetric; candidates with high "academic asset stock" are increasingly mobile and selective about where they invest their human capital, creating a landscape of inequality before the employment contract is even signed (Dierickx & Cool, 1989:1506).

4.5.1.1 Sub-theme: The Geography of Prestige

The sub-theme of geographical prestige reveals that the "location" and historical status of the university act as primary determinants of recruitment success, creating a bifurcated market between urban/elite and rural/disadvantaged institutions (Lesenyeho, Barkhuizen & Schutte, 2018:4). While urban institutions benefit from a "buyer's market," rural institutions face a "seller's market" where the scarcity of talent forces them into precarious positions, often necessitating high-risk appointments (Musakuro & De Klerk, 2021:2).

4.5.1.1.1 Category: The "Buyer's" vs. "Seller's" Market

The category of market power highlights how institutional reputation serves as a natural risk-mitigation tool for elite universities, while the lack of it exacerbates acquisition risk for Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDIs).

"We generally attract strong application pools... I think this is due to several factors: [Institution B's] reputation... our location in a major metropolitan hub... We meet our transformation targets - over 85% of our nGAP fellows are from designated groups." – L_N (Administrator, Institution B)

"Lecturers really go for coastal universities and higher ranking universities... We've had a lot of resignations where people resign to go to [Institution B or Institution X]. That is one of the biggest risks." – E_F (Administrator, Institution G)

The stark contrast between Administrator L_N's confidence and Administrator E_F's frustration confirms the existence of a reputational hierarchy. The data indicate that elite institutions effectively outsource their acquisition risk to the market (which self-selects the best candidates for them), whereas HDIs must expend significant resources to attract candidates who often view them as a second choice (Theron, Barkhuizen & Du Plessis, 2014:11).

4.5.1.1.2 Category: Strategic Displacement

Strategic displacement refers to the risk where candidates accept positions at geographically or culturally undesirable institutions due to a lack of options, leading to an immediate "bad fit" and retention threat.

"Choosing [Institution E] was a mistake... I am from an urban background... and being in a rural area was a significant culture shock. I felt isolated immediately." – S_P (Fellow, Institution E)

S_P's admission illustrates that "acquiring" a body does not equate to acquiring a committed mind. When a geographical mismatch occurs, the acquisition phase creates a latent retention risk that crystallises as soon as the fellow encounters the material realities of the rural context, validating the importance of "person-environment fit" in talent acquisition (Musakuro, 2022:5).

4.5.1.2 Sub-theme: The Scarcity Paradox

This sub-theme addresses the tension where high national unemployment coexists with a critical skills shortage in specialised disciplines, creating a significant barrier to entry for the nGAP (HESA, 2011:6).

4.5.1.2.1 Category: Private Sector Competition (STEM)

The private sector competition category shows that in STEM and professional fields (Accounting, Engineering), the nGAP's financial value proposition is insufficient to compete with industry salaries, leading to vacant posts or unsuccessful searches.

"People with master's degrees and 70% averages in these fields [Engineering/Accounting] have multiple career options. The private sector can offer salaries that are two to three times what we can offer through nGAP... young people with student debt often prioritize immediate income." – T_M (Administrator, Institution A)

This narrative illustrates that for professional disciplines, the academic "psychological contract" of autonomy is outweighed by the immediate financial returns of the corporate sector. The nGAP's rigid salary bands fail to account for the market premium of these specific skills, rendering the acquisition strategy ineffective for high-demand professions (Pienaar & Bester, 2008:35).

4.5.1.2.2 Category: The "Timing Mismatch"

This category identifies a structural misalignment between the nGAP's entry requirements (Master's degree) and the professional registration timelines of particular disciplines.

"For chartered accountants, they need to complete three years of articles... By that time, many have established themselves in practice and aren't interested in the lower academic salaries... The nGAP requires a Master's, but the profession requires articles first." – T_M (Administrator, Institution A)

The participant highlights a "structural barrier" where the nGAP design inadvertently filters out high-potential candidates in professional fields. By the time these candidates qualify for the nGAP (post-Master's), they are already embedded in lucrative private sector careers, creating a permanent supply-side shortage for the academy (DHET, 2015:8).

4.5.1.3 Sub-theme: Adverse Selection

Adverse selection occurs when information asymmetry or desperation leads an institution to appoint a candidate who lacks the requisite fit or potential for the role, effectively importing risk into the system (Akerlof, 1970:489).

4.5.1.3.1 Category: Compromise Hiring

The category of compromise hiring exposes the risk of appointing candidates to meet quotas or fill long-standing vacancies without ensuring they meet the rigorous academic standards required for doctoral success.

"We had to advertise four times to find a suitable candidate... Eventually, you worry that you will

lose the funding if the post isn't filled... so there is pressure to appoint someone who might be 'good enough' rather than ideal." – S_V (Administrator, Institution G)

The administrator's reflection points to the danger of "funding-driven" recruitment. The fear of losing the DHET grant overrides strategic caution, leading to the appointment of "compromise candidates" who inevitably require disproportionate developmental support, shifting the burden from acquisition to development (Cappelli, 2008:74).

4.5.1.3.2 Category: Capacity Mismatch

The category of capacity mismatch identifies the specific risk of appointing a fellow in a specialised field where the institution lacks the internal "absorptive capacity" to supervise or support them (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990:128).

"The interview should have raised red flags for me... it became clear quite quickly that no one on the panel was really expert in my proposed area... Quantum computing is a highly specialised field... but they wanted to build capacity, so they were willing to appoint me." – R_P (Fellow, Institution D)

R_P's experience demonstrates a fundamental failure in risk assessment. The institution acquired talent to "build capacity," but lacked the foundational expertise to nurture it. This confirms that "hiring for potential" is a high-risk strategy if the institutional ecosystem is incapable of converting that potential into performance (Hlengwa, 2019:8).

4.5.2. Theme 2: What talent development risks (e.g., related to skills gaps, mentorship, research output, teaching competence) are identified, and how are these risks assessed and managed?

This theme interrogates the "engine" of the nGAP, examining the variables that determine whether the potential acquired in phase one is converted into capability or allowed to stagnate. Table 5 below outlines the sub-themes and categories discussed in this section.

Table 5: Theme 2 – Development Risks

Theme	Sub-Themes	Categories
Theme 2	2.1 The Mentorship "Black Box"	• Functional Sponsorship (Virtuous Cycle) • Phantom Mentorship (Vicious Cycle) • Competency Mismatch
	2.2 Materiality of Failure	• Infrastructure Deficits (STEM) • The "Homogeneity Fallacy"
	2.3 Erosion of Protected Time	• Workload Creep • Invisible Labour

Talent development in academia is not a linear industrial process but a complex accumulation of "asset stock"; specifically, research outputs, networks, and pedagogical skill, which requires both protected time and the transfer of tacit knowledge (Dierickx & Cool, 1989:1504). However, the findings reveal that without rigorous quality assurance, the developmental inputs provided by the nGAP (mentorship and funding) enter a "Black Box," where their conversion into successful outcomes is highly variable and contingent on institutional capacity (Hlengwa, 2019:7).

4.5.2.1 Sub-theme: The Mentorship "Black Box"

This sub-theme contrasts the policy requirement for mandated mentorship with the participants' lived reality. While mentorship is theoretically intended to provide both career and psychosocial support, the data reveal a stark divergence between "sponsorship" (active advancement) and "phantom mentorship" (performative compliance) (Kram, 1985:110).

4.5.2.1.1 Category: Functional Sponsorship (Virtuous Cycle)

The category of functional sponsorship highlights the "virtuous cycle" experienced by fellows in well-managed environments, where mentors serve as active sponsors, transferring social capital and shielding the fellow from institutional politics.

"She's helped with everything from navigating PhD challenges to understanding promotion... When I experienced a racist incident, she helped me decide how to respond... She's also connected me to networks - she introduced me to senior scholars in my field nationally and internationally." – N_M (Fellow, Institution C)

N_M's narrative demonstrates that effective mentorship extends beyond technical advice to include "political navigation" and network integration. This form of sponsorship mitigates the risk of isola-

tion and accelerates the fellow's integration into the global academic community, validating the importance of psychosocial support in talent development (Biljohn et al., 2024:4).

4.5.2.1.2 Category: Phantom Mentorship (Vicious Cycle)

In contrast, the category of phantom mentorship describes relationships that exist on paper to satisfy compliance reporting but offer no substantive developmental value, leaving the fellow structurally isolated.

"We meet maybe once a semester... conversations are quite surface level - how am I doing, any problems, keep working hard. There's no deep engagement... My current mentor can't provide this." – S_P (Fellow, Institution E)

This "benevolent neglect" crystallises into a critical development risk. The participant's description of "surface-level" interaction confirms that without institutional monitoring, mentorship degenerates into a "tick-box" exercise that masks deep developmental voids (Hlengwa, 2019:8).

4.5.2.1.3 Category: Competency Mismatch

The competency-mismatch category identifies the risk of assigning mentors based on seniority rather than relevance, resulting in obsolete or misaligned guidance.

"My mentor did his PhD 20 years ago in experimental physics... He doesn't understand the current research landscape [in Quantum Computing]... I feel quite lost much of the time." – R_P (Fellow, Institution D)

R_P's experience highlights a failure in the risk management process. The institution prioritised the *availability* of a senior staff member over their *technical relevance*, creating a "blind leading the blind" scenario that hampers the fellow's ability to compete in a modern, metrics-driven academy (Musakuro, 2022:7).

4.5.2.2 Sub-theme: Materiality of Failure

This sub-theme challenges the "Homogeneity Fallacy"; the assumption that academic development is purely a cognitive process independent of physical resources. It demonstrates that in the sciences (STEM), development is inextricably linked to physical infrastructure and capital investment (DHET, 2015:22).

4.5.2.2.1 Category: Infrastructure Deficits (STEM)

The category of infrastructure deficits reveals that for STEM fellows in under-resourced institutions, the lack of capital equipment functions as an absolute barrier to research production, regardless of the fellow's intellectual potential.

"I literally cannot conduct the research I proposed without the equipment we don't have... [My institution] has very limited resources for chemistry research... Many things I need, we simply don't have... I've spent significant time trying to arrange access to equipment at other universities." – S_P (Fellow, Institution E)

This evidence suggests that providing a salary without providing the "means of production" (lab equipment, reagents, computing power) sets rural STEM fellows on a trajectory of inevitable failure. They are forced to become "academic refugees," begging for access to labs at wealthier universities, which consumes critical time and erodes agency (HESA, 2011:13).

4.5.2.2.2 Category: The "Homogeneity Fallacy"

This category critiques the nGAP's uniform funding model, which fails to account for the exponential cost differences across disciplines.

"The infrastructure funding provided [R200,000] hasn't kept pace with inflation and with the actual costs of developing researchers in high-cost disciplines... buying a single piece of lab equipment can exhaust the entire budget." – L_N (Administrator, Institution B)

The administrator's observation confirms that the policy treats unequal disciplines equally. By failing to differentiate between the cost of developing a Sociologist versus a Chemist, the TRM framework inadvertently discriminates against fellows in capital-intensive fields at HDIs (DHET, 2023:21).

4.5.2.3 Sub-theme: Erosion of Protected Time

This sub-theme examines the systematic breach of the nGAP's primary mitigation strategy, the 20% teaching load cap, due to departmental resource constraints and the "invisible" nature of academic work (Moosa, 2020:78).

4.5.2.3.1 Category: Workload Creep

The category of workload creep illustrates how departmental managers, driven by staff shortages, pressure fellows to take on teaching loads that violate the spirit, if not the letter, of the nGAP contract.

"The nGAP guidelines specify 20% teaching load... but what constitutes 20% can be interpreted differently. Some heads of department pressure nGAP fellows to take on additional modules... especially if the department is understaffed." – T_M (Administrator, Institution A)

The participant's admission highlights a systemic "Implementation Gap." The long-term strategic goal of capacity building (research) is sacrificed for the short-term operational need to cover classes (teaching), leading to "Time Compression Diseconomies" where the fellow cannot accumulate the

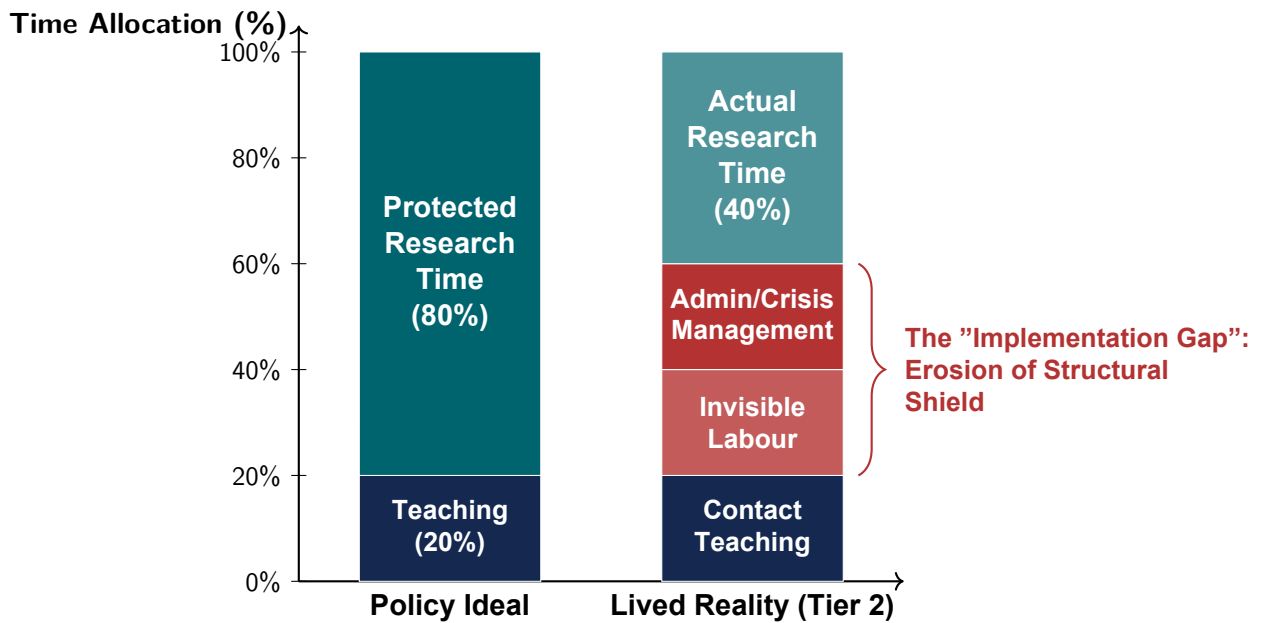


Figure 13: The Erosion of Protected Time: Policy Intent vs. Operational Reality (Source: Author's construction)

necessary research assets within the six-year window (Dierickx & Cool, 1989:1506).

As visualised in Figure 13 below, the 'structural shield' of the 20% cap is theoretically intact but operationally eroded by invisible labour, significantly reducing the actual time available for asset stock accumulation.

4.5.2.3.2 Category: Invisible Labour

The category of invisible labour captures the administrative and pastoral duties that are not formally counted in workload models but consume the fellow's "protected time."

"Teaching one module might be 20%... but all the associated responsibilities add up... I'd estimate I spend about 35-40% of my time on teaching... I have to push back against managers who try to add more." – T_D (Fellow, Institution A)

T_D's narrative reveals that maintaining protected time requires constant political negotiation. For early-career academics lacking political capital, this "invisible labour" goes uncontested, effectively converting the nGAP post into a standard lecturer post with a research mandate it cannot support (Hlengwa, 2019:11).

4.5.3. Theme 3: What are the primary talent retention risks faced by nGAP participants and the programme, and what strategies are used for their assessment and mitigation?

This theme explores the volatility of the talent pipeline, moving beyond simple turnover metrics to examine the complex psychological, financial, and sociological forces that drive attrition in the nGAP. Table 6 below outlines the sub-themes and categories discussed in this section.

Table 6: Theme 3 – Retention Risks

Theme	Sub-Themes	Categories
Theme 3	3.1 The Poaching Paradox	• Success as a Risk Factor • The "Penalty Buyout"
	3.2 Psychological Contract Breach	• The "Gaoler" Mentality • Lack of Belonging
	3.3 Intersectionality Risks	• The Burden of Representation • The Academic Motherhood Penalty

Retention in the nGAP is governed by the principles of Social Exchange Theory, where the fellow's commitment is contingent upon the institution fulfilling its reciprocal promises of support, belonging, and career security (Blau, 1964:91). When toxic cultures or broken promises violate this exchange, or when external market forces offer a significantly better value proposition, "dysfunctional turnover" occurs; the exit of high-potential employees in whom the state has invested heavily (Ohlmer, Dries & Dysvik, 2019:125).

4.5.3.1 Sub-theme: The Poaching Paradox

This sub-theme identifies a counterintuitive, strategic risk: the successful development of equity candidates paradoxically increases their risk of attrition. By validating the fellow's potential through the nGAP, resource-constrained institutions inadvertently signal their value to wealthier competitors (Musakuro & De Klerk, 2021:10).

4.5.3.1.1 Category: Success as a Risk Factor

The category of success as a risk factor highlights the predatory nature of the sector, where Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDIs) act as incubators for elite universities, bearing the high costs of early-career development only to lose the asset at maturity.

"We invest significantly in developing fellows... Then, typically in years three to five, when fellows have completed or are close to completing their PhDs... they get recruited elsewhere. Other

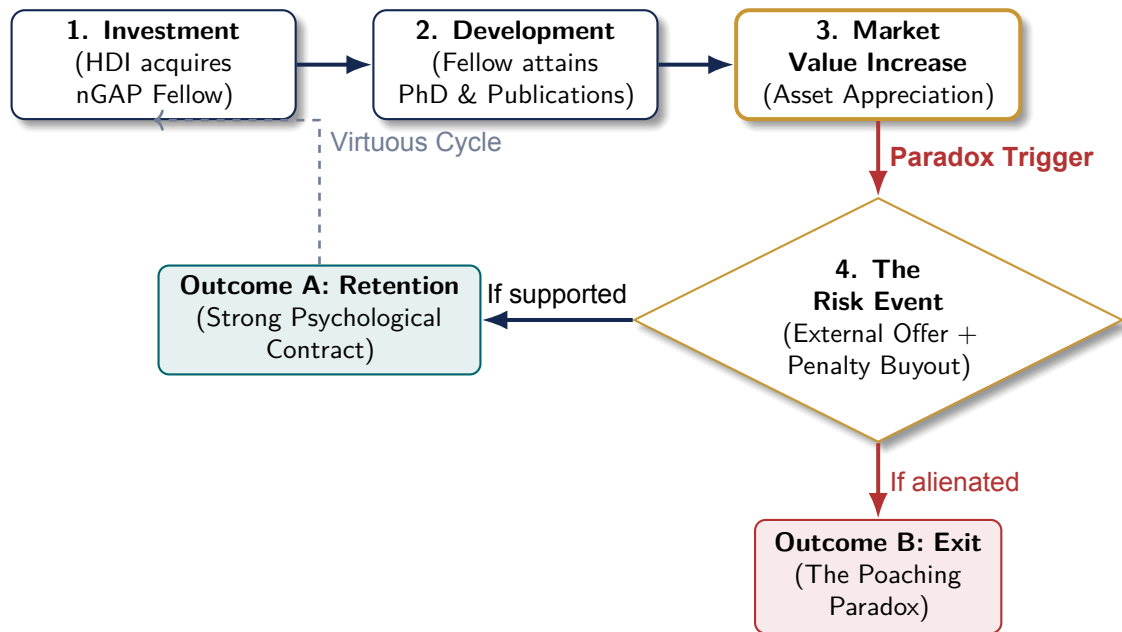


Figure 14: The Mechanism of the Poaching Paradox in the nGAP Supply Chain (Source: Author's construction)

universities, particularly very wealthy universities, actively recruit our successful fellows." – L_N (Administrator, Institution B)

This finding confirms that the "War for Talent" has created a tiered supply chain. The nGAP has not generated enough aggregate supply to dampen demand, leading to a scenario where retention is determined by financial power rather than developmental loyalty, creating a "feeder system" effect that undermines the capacity-building mandate of the programme (Chambers et al., 1998:49).

This finding confirms that the "War for Talent" has created a tiered supply chain. Figure 14 maps this mechanism, demonstrating how the successful development of human capital in resource-constrained environments inadvertently triggers external acquisition risks.

4.5.3.1.2 Category: The "Penalty Buyout"

The penalty buyout category exposes the failure of the nGAP's financial "lock-in" clause. Designed as a retention mechanism, the penalty has been neutralised by the willingness of competitor institutions to absorb the cost.

"Better-resourced universities, particularly coastal universities... can offer higher salaries, better research facilities... and sometimes they offer to pay the penalty that fellows owe [to get them to switch]." – T_M (Administrator, Institution A)

The administrator's observation reveals that the "Golden Handcuffs" designed to secure retention in HDIs have been unlocked by the chequebooks of Historically Advantaged Institutions (HAIs). This

renders the primary contractual retention tool ineffective against aggressive poaching strategies (Lesenyeho et al., 2018:7).

4.5.3.2 Sub-theme: Psychological Contract Breach

This sub-theme examines the internal "push factors" that arise when a punitive or transactional one replaces the developmental relationship. It suggests that retention is threatened when the "Psychological Contract", the unwritten set of mutual expectations, is violated (Rousseau, 1995:9).

4.5.3.2.1 Category: The "Gaoler" Mentality

The "gaoler" mentality is characterised by the negative impact of using financial penalties and rigid contracts as the primary retention tool, which fosters resentment and a desire to escape rather than genuine commitment.

"I've heard people say things like we're being treated like prisoners - we have to serve our time... We shouldn't be treated... like we're doing something wrong by being in the programme... When you've been treated badly, you just want to leave." – K_L (Fellow, Institution G)

The participant's use of the "prisoner" metaphor indicates a severe breakdown in the psychological contract. By emphasising the penalty for leaving rather than the purpose of staying, the institution transforms the nGAP from a privilege into a sentence, catalysing "dysfunctional retention" where the fellow stays physically but disengages psychologically (Musakuro, 2022:3).

4.5.3.2.2 Category: Lack of Belonging

The category of lack of belonging addresses the risk of alienation, where fellows feel "othered" or unsupported by the institutional culture, leading to withdrawal behaviours.

"I am giving it until the end of this year... If things don't improve with the resources, I will have to look elsewhere. I feel quite isolated... it's not the environment I expected." – S_P (Fellow, Institution E)

S_P's narrative highlights that retention is emotional as well as contractual. The failure to integrate the fellow into the social and material fabric of the department creates a "bad fit," making attrition a rational response to professional isolation (Theron et al., 2014:10).

4.5.3.3 Sub-theme: Intersectionality Risks

This sub-theme addresses the specific environmental risks faced by Black women academics, who must navigate the "double bind" of the programme's high expectations and the hostility of untransformed institutional cultures (Hlatshwayo, 2020:168).

4.5.3.3.1 Category: *The Burden of Representation*

The category illuminates the "cultural taxation" placed on equity candidates, where the labour of representing diversity, serving on committees, and mentoring Black students creates a hostile and exhausting environment that drives attrition.

"I experience regular microaggressions - students questioning my expertise, colleagues assuming I'm less knowledgeable... It creates a hostile environment... I know of one fellow who left after three years specifically because of experiencing persistent racism." – T_D (Fellow, Institution A)

This narrative validates the theory that "environmental risk", the daily experience of exclusion and hyper-visibility, is a primary driver of retention failure for Black women in academia. The nGAP places them in the room, but the culture often pushes them out (Joseph, 2012:307).

4.5.3.3.2 Category: *The Academic Motherhood Penalty*

The category of the motherhood penalty identifies a gender-specific risk where the rigid timelines of the nGAP collide with caregiving responsibilities, creating a sustainability crisis for female fellows.

"Managing PhD research, teaching... and mothering two young children is extremely demanding... I've felt enormous guilt and stress. There have been times I've been close to burnout... Many women leave academia at this career stage." – L_G (Fellow, Institution F)

L_G's testimony exposes the "gender-blindness" of the nGAP's workload model. By assuming a normative male subject with few domestic constraints, the programme creates a structural filter that penalizes mothers, threatening the retention of the very demographic it seeks to elevate (Dlamini & Dlamini, 2024:2).

4.5.4. Theme 4: What are the risks associated with succession planning for nGAP fellows beyond the programme's initial six years, and how are these addressed or mitigated?

This theme investigates the long-term sustainability of the nGAP intervention, moving beyond the immediate goal of doctoral completion to examine the integration of fellows into the academic hierarchy and the continuity of intellectual capital. Table 7 below outlines the sub-themes and categories discussed in this section.

Table 7: Theme 4 – Succession Risks

Theme	Sub-Themes	Categories
Theme 4	4.1 The "Two-Tier" Trajectory	• The Fast Track to Leadership • Permanent Juniorisation
	4.2 Financial Sustainability	• The "Year Seven" Cliff Edge • Role Distortion
	4.3 Knowledge Transfer Failure	• The Empty Chair Risk • Generational Disconnect

Succession planning in the context of the nGAP aims to fill the "Academic Talent Void" left by the ageing professoriate, but proper succession requires the successful transfer of intellectual authority and institutional memory, not merely the filling of a vacancy (Theron et al., 2014:1). Risks in this domain threaten to convert the nGAP from a transformation pipeline into a "dead end," where fellows are employed but not empowered to lead the next generation of the academy (Musakuro & De Klerk, 2021:8).

4.5.4.1 Sub-theme: The "Two-Tier" Trajectory

This sub-theme reveals a profound divergence in career outcomes: fellows in resource-constrained environments face professional stagnation, while those in elite environments are fast-tracked into seniority. This mirrors the "Matthew Effect" in science, where advantage begets advantage, creating a polarised workforce (Pienaar & Bester, 2008:32).

4.5.4.1.1 Category: The Fast Track to Leadership

The fast-track category highlights the success of the nGAP in well-resourced institutions (Tier 1), where clear promotion pathways and active sponsorship convert fellows into academic leaders.

"I'm preparing my promotion application for senior lecturer... Several Phase 1 and 2 fellows have been promoted to senior lecturer and associate professor. The pathway to progression seems clear... My DVC has explicitly identified us as 'future leadership'." – M_K (Fellow, Institution B)

M_K's narrative demonstrates Successful Succession. Here, the fellow is not just a replacement; they are an investment. The institution actively grooms the nGAP cohort to assume authority, ensuring the sustainability of the academic project and the transformation of its leadership profile (HESA, 2011:13).

4.5.4.1.2 Category: *Permanent Juniorisation*

In stark contrast, the category of permanent juniorisation describes the risk faced by fellows in Tier 2 institutions, where a lack of resources and mentorship traps them at the lecturer level, unable to meet the criteria for seniority.

"If I stay [here], promotion to senior lecturer might eventually happen, but I'll never be competitive nationally or internationally... I'll never be a research leader. I will just be someone who teaches classes." – S_P (Fellow, Institution E)

This sobering assessment suggests that without adequate support, the nGAP guarantees *employment* (a job) but fails to ensure *employability* (a career). These fellows risk becoming the "teaching proletariat" of the sector, burdened with heavy loads to plug gaps but structurally excluded from the research prestige required for the professoriate (DHET, 2015:7).

4.5.4.2 Sub-theme: **Financial Sustainability**

This sub-theme addresses the structural risk posed by the nGAP's declining subsidy model, which transfers full financial liability to the university after year six. This shift tests the financial resilience of the host institution (DHET, 2015:22).

4.5.4.2.1 Category: *The "Year Seven" Cliff Edge*

The cliff-edge category highlights the financial shock faced by faculties when they must fully absorb the cost of the post. For HDIs, this transition often converts the nGAP fellow from a "funded asset" into an "unfunded liability."

"To come up with 1.3 million commitment... for someone... it's a huge financial responsibility... The risk is if a lecturer resigned after a few years... faculties struggle to budget for that huge extra money that should be ploughed back into a nGAP position." – E_F (Administrator, Institution G)

The administrator's concern indicates that for HDIs, the nGAP represents a long-term "unfunded mandate." Without strategic financial planning, the absorption of these posts threatens the faculty's budget, potentially leading to hiring freezes elsewhere or the resentment of the "expensive" nGAP fellow (HESA, 2011:6).

4.5.4.2.2 Category: *Role Distortion*

The category of role distortion identifies the risk where, to justify the high salary cost after the grant expires, departments pressure fellows to take on excessive teaching loads, effectively terminating their research trajectory.

"There is a danger that once the funding ends, the department just sees you as 'extra hands' for

teaching... to earn your keep. The research focus disappears because they need the subsidy income from student throughput.” – T_M (Administrator, Institution A)

This creates a perverse incentive where the financial sustainability of the post is secured by sacrificing the very *purpose* of the post (research capacity building), reverting the fellow to a standard teaching role (Musakuro, 2022:9).

4.5.4.3 Sub-theme: Knowledge Transfer Failure

This sub-theme identifies the risk that the departure of senior academics occurs without the effective transfer of “tacit knowledge”, the unwritten rules of grant writing, publishing, and networking, to the nGAP fellow (HESA, 2011:13).

4.5.4.3.1 Category: The Empty Chair Risk

The category describes the failure of mentorship to bridge the generational gap. When a senior professor retires, the “chair” is physically filled by the nGAP successor, but the intellectual lineage and influence are lost because the transfer of wisdom did not occur.

“My mentor did his PhD 20 years ago... He doesn't understand the current research landscape... He couldn't really show me how to apply for NRF ratings or get international grants.” – R_P (Fellow, Institution D)

This evidence points to a “competency gap” in succession. The institution successfully replaced the *body*, but failed to replace the *capacity*, leaving the department weaker despite the appointment (Hlengwa, 2019:8).

4.5.4.3.2 Category: Generational Disconnect

The category of generational disconnect highlights the friction between the “Old Guard” (mentors) and the “New Guard” (fellows), where the older generation cannot prepare the younger generation for the neoliberal, metrics-driven university because they operated in a different paradigm.

“The senior academics... they come from a different time. They don't understand the pressure to publish or perish that we face now... Their advice is sometimes 'take your time', which is dangerous for us.” – L_G (Fellow, Institution F)

L_G's observation suggests that succession planning is compromised when the “successors” are being trained for a university system that no longer exists. This disconnect increases the risk that nGAP fellows will fail to meet modern tenure criteria, despite following their mentors' advice (Webster & Mosoetsa, 2001:5).

4.5.5. Theme 5: How effective are the current risk mitigation strategies as perceived by nGAP administrators and participants, and what are the primary gaps in the current TRM approach?

This theme evaluates the maturity of universities' risk management systems, contrasting systematic governance with reactive administration. It moves beyond identifying risks to assessing the efficacy of the "controls" designed to manage them. Table 8 below outlines the sub-themes and categories discussed in this section.

Table 8: Theme 5 – Effectiveness

Theme	Sub-Themes	Categories
Theme 5	5.1 Governance Maturity	• Systematic vs. Ad Hoc Management
	5.2 The Implementation Gap	• Policy vs. Practice (Workload)
	5.3 The Accountability Vacuum	• Data Blindness

Effective Talent Risk Management requires moving beyond administrative compliance to a "Talentship" model that treats human capital decisions with the same rigour and logic as financial decisions (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2005:129). The findings reveal that effectiveness is not a static property of the nGAP policy but is a function of the institution's risk maturity; where governance is robust, mitigation is effective, but where it is reactive, risks crystallise into failure (Meyer, Roodt & Robbins, 2011:3).

4.5.5.1 Sub-theme: Governance Maturity

This sub-theme contrasts institutions that use data-driven "early warning systems" against those that rely on "open door policies" and reactive crisis management. It validates the COSO (2017:4) principle that risk management must be integrated with strategy and performance to be effective.

4.5.5.1.1 Category: Systematic vs. Ad Hoc Management

The category reveals a direct correlation between the management style and the outcome. Systematic governance leads to higher retention and completion rates, while ad hoc management results in high attrition and strategic "blind spots."

"We have a formal talent risk management framework... [and] a talent risk dashboard... It flags fellows who show multiple risk indicators - behind on PhD, low satisfaction scores, poor relationship with supervisor... This allows early intervention." – L_N (Administrator, Institution B)

4.6. EMERGENT GAPS

While the five themes discussed above directly address the study's research questions, the inductive analysis of the data revealed critical "emergent gaps"; systemic blind spots that sit outside the current policy framework and literature. These gaps represent fundamental disconnects between the nGAP's design and the complex reality of the South African higher education landscape.

4.6.1. The "Two-Tier" System of Academic Citizenship

The most significant emergent finding is that the nGAP, while designed to level the playing field, is inadvertently reproducing the sector's historical inequalities. The data reveal the crystallisation of a "Two-Tier System" of academic citizenship.

- ❖ Tier 1 (Elite/Urban/ HAI): Fellows in these institutions enjoy a "virtuous cycle" of support, active sponsorship, and resource abundance. They are effectively shielded from risk and are fast-tracked into leadership.
- ❖ Tier 2 (Rural/HDI): Fellows in these institutions face a "vicious cycle" of isolation, infrastructure deficits, and workload creep. They are exposed to high risk and face professional stagnation.

The Gap: The current TRM framework and national policy suffer from Institutional Isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The policy treats all universities as functionally equivalent, applying the same rules and funding models to vastly different contexts. This lack of differentiation creates a gap where the programme accelerates inequality: elite universities use the funding to capture more talent, while rural universities struggle to support the talent they have, widening the gap between the centre and the periphery.

4.6.2. Resource Blindness in STEM Disciplines

A critical operational gap identified is the programme's "Resource Blindness" regarding the materiality of research in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) disciplines.

- ❖ **The Issue:** The nGAP provides a standardised infrastructure grant (approximately R200,000) regardless of the fellow's discipline.
- ❖ **The Reality:** For a Humanities fellow, this amount is sufficient for laptops, books, and conferences. For a Chemistry or Physics fellow, this amount is negligible compared to the cost of essential equipment (e.g., Spectrometers, High-Performance Computing clusters).

The Gap: The failure to differentiate funding based on the "capital intensity" of the discipline creates a structural barrier for STEM fellows in HDIs. Unlike their counterparts in HAIs who can plug

into existing labs, HDI fellows must build infrastructure from scratch. The current funding model effectively sets these fellows up for failure, creating a gap between the *expectation* of global scientific output and the *resources available locally*.

4.6.3. The Failure of "Golden Handcuffs" (Punitive Retention)

The study identified a gap in the logic of retention management. The nGAP relies heavily on "Golden Handcuffs"; financial penalties for early exit; to secure the state's return on investment.

- ❖ The Outcome: The data proves this mechanism is ineffective for two reasons. First, the "Penalty Buyout" means wealthy competitors pay the fine to poach high-performing fellows. Second, for those who cannot leave, it creates "Dysfunctional Retention," where unhappy fellows stay solely to avoid debt, becoming disengaged "dead wood."

The Gap: There is a lack of Positive Retention Architecture. The system focuses on *preventing exit* (punitive) rather than *encouraging stay* (restorative). The gap lies in the absence of "Stay Interviews," career pathing, and non-financial incentives that build genuine loyalty (Social Exchange) rather than contractual entrapment.

4.6.4. Key Person Dependency (Fragility of Support)

Finally, the analysis revealed that the success of the nGAP often hinges not on the *system*, but on the *individual*.

- ❖ The Observation: Successful fellows (like N_M and M_K) consistently attributed their survival to a specific "hero" mentor or administrator who went beyond the call of duty to shield them from institutional dysfunction.
- ❖ The Risk: This indicates a lack of institutionalisation. If that specific mentor leaves or retires, the risk mitigation strategy collapses.

The Gap: The TRM framework currently lacks Systemic Redundancy. It relies on the voluntary emotional labour of senior academics (often Black women) rather than embedded processes. This "Key Person Dependency" renders the programme fragile and unsustainable in the long term.

"I have to be honest - we don't have a comprehensive formal framework... What we have is more ad hoc and reactive... We typically only realize a fellow is considering leaving when they inform us they've received another offer." – T_M (Administrator, Institution A)

This direct comparison validates the premise that talent risk is manageable only when it is measured and monitored systematically. Institution B's proactive use of "leading indicators" allows it to salvage

at-risk fellows, whereas Institution A's reliance on "lagging indicators" (resignations) means it only manages the aftermath of failure (Vaiman, Scullion & Collings, 2012:925).

Sub-Theme 5.2: The Implementation Gap

This sub-theme identifies the dissonance between the robust national policy framework (the *design*) and the weak operational enforcement at the departmental level (the *reality*). It highlights that a policy is only as effective as its enforcement mechanism (Hlengwa, 2019:12).

Category: Policy vs. Practice (Workload) The category exposes how critical mitigation strategies, such as the 20% teaching workload cap, are rendered ineffective by local interpretation ("what constitutes 20%?") and a lack of consequences for non-compliance.

"The nGAP guidelines specify 20% teaching load... but what constitutes 20% can be interpreted differently. Some heads of department pressure nGAP fellows to take on additional modules... especially if the department is understaffed." – T_M (Administrator, Institution A)

"When you are junior, you can't really say no to the HOD... even if the policy says 20%, the reality is you have to do what is needed to keep the department running." – K_L (Fellow, Institution G)

These narratives confirm that the "structural shield" of the nGAP is permeable. Without strict external compliance mechanisms, "self-regulation" fails to protect the talent asset from exploitation, rendering the primary development mitigation strategy ineffective (Moosa, 2020:78).

Sub-Theme 5.3: The Accountability Vacuum

This sub-theme critiques the lack of consequences for institutions that fail to provide the necessary support to nGAP fellows, suggesting that the current TRM approach is "toothless" regarding institutional failure.

Category: Data Blindness The category highlights that national monitoring focuses on quantitative inputs (money spent, posts filled) rather than qualitative outcomes (mentorship quality, resource access), creating an accountability gap where risks remain invisible to the oversight body.

"The national nGAP programme provides funding and guidelines, but there's no accountability for whether universities can actually support fellows adequately... Universities get allocated positions... without verification that they can provide necessary support." – S_P (Fellow, Institution E)

This participant observation points to a systemic failure in the programme's governance. The funding model incentivises acquisition but does not penalise developmental negligence. This "Data Blindness" prevents the DHET from identifying "at-risk" institutions and intervening before the talent pipeline leaks (DHET, 2015:22).

4.7. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

The empirical analysis presented in this chapter provides a definitive diagnosis of the state of Talent Risk Management within the nGAP. By triangulating the narratives of administrators and fellows with policy documentation, the study has moved beyond a descriptive evaluation to a strategic critique of the programme's risk architecture. The key findings are summarised below, categorised by the domains of the conceptual framework.

1. Acquisition is Governed by Asymmetry, The "War for Talent" in South African higher education is not a competition between equals. The findings confirm that acquisition risk is determined by a "Geography of Prestige." Elite urban institutions operate in a "buyer's market," outsourcing their risk to a self-selecting pool of high-potential candidates. Conversely, rural and historically disadvantaged institutions operate in a "seller's market," frequently forced into "Compromise Hiring" (Adverse Selection) to fill quotas. Furthermore, the "Scarcity Paradox" in STEM and professional disciplines renders the nGAP's salary value proposition ineffective against the private sector, leaving critical strategic posts vacant.
2. Development is Context-Dependent and Material. The study dismantles the "Homogeneity Fallacy" aimed at by national policy. It proves that the "virtuous cycle" of development is contingent on Institutional Capacity. In well-resourced environments, fellows enjoy active sponsorship and protected time. In under-resourced environments, development is stalled by "Phantom Mentorship" and critical Infrastructure Deficits, particularly in the sciences. The "structural shield" of the 20% workload cap is theoretically robust but operationally permeable, eroded by the "invisible labour" required to sustain understaffed departments (Dierickx & Cool, 1989:1506).
3. The Psychological Contract drives retention. Retention failure is rarely a function of salary alone. The findings reveal that breaches of the Psychological Contract drive attrition; specifically, violations of protected time and the lack of belonging experienced by equity candidates (Social Exchange Theory). The study identified a perverse "Poaching Paradox," where the successful development of fellows in HDIs increases their flight risk to wealthier competitors who can afford to "buy out" the nGAP penalty clauses. This transforms capacity-building institutions into mere incubators for the elite (Rousseau, 1995:9).

4. Succession is Bifurcated The nGAP is producing two distinct classes of academic citizens. The "Two-Tier System" creates a trajectory of "Accelerated Leadership" for Tier 1 fellows and "Permanent Juniorisation" for Tier 2 fellows. For the latter, the end of the programme often represents a "Dead End" or a financial cliff-edge for the faculty, rather than integration into the professoriate. The failure to transfer Tacit Knowledge from the ageing cohort to the new cohort threatens to leave the "academic chair" intellectually empty, even if it is physically filled (Theron et al., 2014:1).
5. Effectiveness is a Function of Governance Maturity. Finally, the study confirms the theory of "Talentship" (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2005). There is a direct, observable correlation between the maturity of the risk management system and the fellow's success. Institutions that employ Systematic Governance (dashboards, early warning systems) successfully mitigate risk. Institutions that rely on Ad Hoc Management (open doors, crisis reaction) fail to protect the talent asset. The primary failure of the national programme is the "Accountability Vacuum," in which funding is disbursed without verifying the existence of the necessary governance structures.

4.8. CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter has navigated the complex, often contested terrain of Talent Risk Management (TRM) within the New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP). By employing an interpretivist lens and triangulating the "top-down" narratives of Programme Administrators with the "bottom-up" lived experiences of Fellows, the analysis has moved beyond the statistical abstractions of national reports to excavate the granular reality of academic development. The empirical evidence presented herein confirms the study's central hypothesis: that the nGAP cannot be managed merely as a funding instrument; it must be governed as a volatile talent supply chain subject to specific, manageable, yet frequently neglected strategic risks.

The investigation into Acquisition Risk (Theme 1) revealed that the "War for Talent" in South Africa is profoundly asymmetric. The emergence of the "Geography of Prestige" means that while elite urban institutions operate in a "buyer's market," rural and historically disadvantaged institutions face a debilitating "seller's market." This structural inequality forces under-resourced universities into a cycle of "Compromise Hiring" and "Strategic Displacement," where they must often appoint candidates who lack the requisite fit or capacity, effectively importing risk into the system at the very first stage of the lifecycle.

In the domain of Development Risk (Theme 2), the study dismantled the policy assumption of institutional homogeneity. The findings exposed a "Materiality of Failure" in STEM disciplines, where the lack of physical infrastructure in HDIs functions as an absolute barrier to research production,

rendering the theoretical protection of "reduced workload" irrelevant. Furthermore, the identification of "Phantom Mentorship" exposed the fragility of the support ecosystem; without rigorous quality assurance, the transfer of tacit knowledge fails, leaving fellows structurally isolated and navigating the "hidden curriculum" of the academy alone.

The analysis of Retention Risk (Theme 3) utilised Social Exchange Theory to demonstrate that attrition is driven less by salary and more by the breach of the "Psychological Contract." The study uncovered a perverse "Poaching Paradox," where the successful development of equity candidates in resource-constrained environments paradoxically increases their flight risk to wealthier competitors. This dynamic suggests that HDIs are inadvertently functioning as incubators for the elite sector, bearing the cost of development while losing the long-term return on investment. Additionally, the "Burden of Representation" faced by Black women and the "gender-blindness" regarding academic motherhood emerged as critical environmental risks that threaten the programme's transformation mandate.

Regarding Succession Planning (Theme 4), the data revealed that for a significant cohort of fellows, particularly in Tier 2 institutions, the nGAP represents a "Dead End" rather than a pipeline to leadership. The risk of "Permanent Juniorisation", where fellows complete the programme without the competitive profile required for seniority, combined with the "Year Seven Financial Cliff Edge," threatens the sustainability of the intervention. The failure to transfer tacit knowledge from the ageing professoriate to the new cohort creates an "Empty Chair" risk, in which the physical vacancy is filled but the intellectual authority is lost.

Finally, the evaluation of Effectiveness (Theme 5) provided a definitive verdict on the state of risk governance. The contrast between the systematic, data-driven governance of Institution B and the ad hoc, reactive management of Institutions A and G validates the theory of "Talentship." The study confirms that talent risk is manageable, but only through deliberate architecture. The current "Accountability Vacuum" and "Implementation Gap"; where local operational exigencies dilute robust national policies; undermine the efficacy of the state's investment.

Ultimately, the most significant emergent finding of this chapter is the crystallisation of a "Two-Tier System" of academic citizenship. The nGAP is accelerating a "virtuous cycle" for the elite while trapping the periphery in a "vicious cycle" of stagnation. These empirical insights provide the necessary evidentiary foundation for the final phase of this dissertation. Chapter five: Conclusions and Recommendations will synthesise these themes to propose a revised, differentiated Talent Risk Management Framework that addresses these systemic gaps and offers actionable strategies for both the DHET and participating universities.

The next chapter will relate these findings to the research objectives and theoretical frameworks, and derive at conclusions.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. INTRODUCTION

The sustainability of the South African higher education sector rests fundamentally on a single, volatile variable: the successful cultivation of the next generation of academic talent. As established at the outset of this inquiry, the sector faces a "perfect storm" characterised by an ageing professoriate, the slow pace of demographic transformation, and a "war for talent" that has intensified the competition for scarce skills (Theron, Barkhuizen & Du Plessis, 2014:1). Against this backdrop, the New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP) emerged not just as a funding instrument, but as the state's primary strategic countermeasure to the looming "academic talent void."

This study departed from traditional, optimistic appraisals of talent management, adopting the diagnostic lens of Talent Risk Management (TRM) instead. By integrating the Resource-Based View (RBV) with the principles of Enterprise Risk Management (ERM), the research sought to interrogate the nGAP not as a static policy success, but as a dynamic supply chain subject to specific vulnerabilities. The central premise, validated throughout the preceding chapters, is that the provision of permanent posts and funding, while necessary, is insufficient to secure the academic pipeline. Without the rigorous identification, assessment, and mitigation of strategic risks, the national investment in human capital remains precarious.

The empirical journey undertaken in Chapter four revealed a landscape defined by dissonance. The findings exposed a profound gap between the robust strategic intent of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and the uneven operational realities of universities. While the nGAP has successfully introduced a new cohort of Black academics into the system, the analysis uncovered the emergence of a "Two-Tier System." In well-resourced institutions, talent risks are mitigated through systematic governance, creating a virtuous cycle of development. Conversely, in resource-constrained environments, risks related to ineffective mentorship, infrastructure deficits, and aggressive poaching are allowed to materialise, threatening to reproduce the very inequalities the programme seeks to dismantle.

Consequently, this final chapter synthesises these empirical insights into a coherent set of conclusions. It moves from the diagnosis of risk (what is wrong) to the prognosis for sustainability (what must be done). The chapter begins by revisiting the research objectives to ensure all lines of inquiry have been satisfied. It then summarises the key findings across the four domains of the Talent Risk

Management framework: Acquisition, Development, Retention, and Succession. Finally, it presents actionable recommendations for the DHET and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), outlining a revised "Talent Stewardship" framework that bridges the gap between policy and practice.

5.2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The primary research objective of this study, as articulated in Chapter One, was *to explore the talent risk management aspects of the nGAP, focusing on identification, assessment, and mitigation strategies related to academic talent development*. This objective was successfully realised through the development of a novel Conceptual Framework in Chapter Two and its empirical operationalisation in Chapter Four. By shifting the analytical focus from "talent management" (optimising value) to "talent risk management" (protecting value), the study provided a unique diagnostic assessment of the vulnerabilities inherent in the national academic pipeline. This pivot was theoretically justified by integrating the Resource-Based View (RBV) with Enterprise Risk Management (ERM) principles, positioning TRM as a strategic imperative for protecting organisational value (Meyer, Roodt & Robbins, 2011:3; Vaiman, Scullion & Collings, 2012:925).

To achieve this primary aim, the study pursued and satisfied five secondary objectives:

Secondary Objective One: *To identify the key risks associated with talent acquisition within the nGAP framework from the perspective of administrators and participants.* Through the analysis of the "asymmetric war for talent," the research confirmed that acquisition success is primarily determined by the "geography of prestige." The literature established that South African HEIs face a critical "academic talent void" driven by an ageing professoriate and insufficient pipeline of new scholars (Theron, Barkhuizen & Du Plessis, 2014:1; HESA, 2011:6). The objective was met by mapping how elite institutions operate in a low-risk "buyer's market," while rural institutions face severe "location risks" and "adverse selection" (Musakuro & De Klerk, 2021:5), where candidates are appointed based on potential but may lack the resilience or institutional fit required for the academic environment.

Secondary Objective Two: *To explore the risks related to the development (including mentorship, skills acquisition, and performance) of nGAP academics.* This objective was met by piercing the "black box" of mentorship and supervision. The literature identified mentorship quality as a critical yet variable element, often becoming ad-hoc and unstructured (Hlengwa, 2019:7). The research interrogated the variability of support, confirming that theoretical protections (like reduced workload) are frequently rendered ineffective by infrastructure deficits and "phantom" support structures in STEM disciplines. Furthermore, the study validated the theoretical concept of "time compression diseconomies" (Dierickx & Cool, 1989:1506), demonstrating that the nGAP's accelerated devel-

opmental timelines can compromise the depth of scholarly accumulation, forcing a "fast science" approach that threatens long-term academic sustainability.

Secondary Objective Three: *To identify and explore the perceived critical risks impacting talent retention of nGAP fellows during and potentially after the programme.* This objective was achieved by applying Social Exchange Theory to the participants' narratives. The literature characterises the early career phase as highly volatile, creating a "leaky pipeline" with significant attrition rates (Pienaar & Bester, 2008:32). The analysis confirmed that retention is driven by the "psychological contract" rather than financial penalties, with workload overload emerging as a primary driver when institutional realities contradict the promised reduced teaching load (Hlengwa, 2019:11; Moosa, 2020:78). The study highlighted specific vulnerabilities such as the "poaching paradox" and the "burden of representation" borne by Black female academics, who experience marginalization and lack of collegial support in historically white institutional cultures (Biljohn, Marange, Le Roux & Schroeder, 2024:4).

Secondary Objective Four: *To examine the risks concerning the succession planning and long-term career integration of nGAP fellows within HEIs.* The study successfully mapped the divergent career trajectories of fellows, confirming a bifurcation between those on a "fast track" to leadership and those facing the "dead end" of permanent juniorisation. The literature identifies succession planning as the mechanism by which the "talent void" left by retiring academics is filled (Theron et al., 2014:2), yet highlights the absence of formal succession planning as a systemic weakness in South African HEIs (Musakuro & De Klerk, 2021:10). The findings validated the risk that without structured knowledge transfer mechanisms, the departure of the ageing professoriate represents a massive loss of institutional memory and tacit knowledge (HESA, 2011:13).

Secondary Objective Five: *To analyse the strategies currently employed to mitigate identified talent risks within nGAP and explore the perceptions of administrators and participants regarding their effectiveness.* This was realised by contrasting "systematic governance" with "ad hoc crisis management," revealing significant gaps in accountability and data-driven decision-making at both national and institutional levels. The literature established that while the nGAP provides robust structural mitigation strategies, "implementation fidelity" remains a major challenge (Hlengwa, 2019:12). Furthermore, the absence of integrated TRM frameworks means that talent risks are often managed reactively rather than proactively (Musakuro, 2022:2), reflecting the broader challenge that decision-making in talent management is frequently flawed by bias and lack of rigorous risk assessment (Vaiman et al., 2012:925).

In satisfying these objectives, the study has moved beyond a descriptive evaluation of the nGAP to

provide a strategic risk profile of the programme.

5.3. SUMMARY OF CHAPTERS

The structural logic of this dissertation was designed to move from a broad contextual identification of the research problem to a specific, empirically grounded diagnosis of talent risk within the nGAP. Each chapter functioned as a necessary building block in this argumentative sequence, ensuring that the conclusions are robust, theoretically anchored, and methodologically defensible.

Chapter one: Introduction and Problem Statement established the study's strategic imperative. It located the research within the volatile context of the South African higher education sector, defined by the "academic talent void" and the urgent need for demographic transformation. The chapter articulated the central problem: while the nGAP represents a significant financial investment, the risks associated with the acquisition, development, and retention of this talent have not been systematically examined. By framing the study through the lens of Talent Risk Management (TRM) rather than traditional Human Resources administration, Chapter One sets the stage for a diagnostic inquiry into how universities govern the uncertainty inherent in the academic talent pipeline.

Chapter two: Literature Review and Conceptual Framework provided the theoretical scaffolding for the study. It critically engaged with the literature on Strategic Talent Management, grounding the research in the Resource-Based View (RBV) of the firm. This theoretical lens justified classifying academic talent as a rare, valuable, and inimitable strategic asset. The chapter juxtaposed the "War for Talent" narrative with the specific constraints of the South African context, including the "leaky pipeline" and the pressures of New Public Management. Crucially, Chapter two synthesised these diverse literature streams into a novel Conceptual Framework. This framework, structured around the four domains of the talent lifecycle: Acquisition, Development, Retention, and Succession, provided the analytical "map" that guided the subsequent data collection and analysis.

Chapter Three: Research Methodology operationalised the conceptual framework through a rigorous research design. Rejecting the positivist impulse to measure risk through static statistics, the chapter justified adopting an interpretivist paradigm and a social constructionist epistemology. It argued that talent risk is not an objective fact but a socially constructed reality, experienced differently by administrators and fellows. The chapter detailed the use of a qualitative, exploratory strategy, employing purposive maximum variation sampling to capture the "discord" between well-resourced and resource-constrained institutions. By utilising semi-structured interviews and Reflexive Thematic Analysis, the methodology was designed to "excavate" the subjective meanings and institutional power dynamics that define the nGAP experience, ensuring the findings were both deep and trustworthy.

Chapter Four: Discussion of Findings presented the empirical evidence generated by the study. Organized according to the five sub-research questions, this chapter moved beyond description to critical analysis. It revealed the emergence of a "Two-Tier System" of academic development, where the effectiveness of the nGAP is primarily determined by institutional capacity. The findings exposed specific, high-impact risks: the "asymmetric war for talent" in acquisition; the "mentorship black box" and infrastructure deficits in development; the "poaching paradox" and psychological contract breaches in retention; and the "dead end" of permanent juniorisation in succession. By triangulating the narratives of administrators with those of fellows, Chapter four highlighted the "Implementation Gap" between national policy intent and the programme's lived reality.

Together, these chapters provide a comprehensive narrative arc. Chapter one identified the risk; Chapter two theorised it; Chapter three designed the tools to investigate it; and Chapter four provided the evidence of its existence. This logical progression lays the foundation for the current chapter, which distils these insights into conclusions and actionable recommendations.

5.4. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The empirical investigation into the Talent Risk Management (TRM) practices of the New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP) has yielded a complex and deeply stratified risk profile. The central conclusion of this study is that the nGAP, while theoretically robust in design, faces significant execution risks that are unevenly distributed across the higher education sector. The study confirms that "risk" in the nGAP is not a monolithic variable; it is a function of institutional capacity.

The overarching finding, drawn from the participating universities, is the crystallisation of a "Two-Tier System" of academic development. In "Tier 1" institutions (typically well-resourced HAs or well-managed HDIs), the nGAP serves as an acceleration mechanism, where talent risks are proactively governed, and fellows are groomed for leadership. In "Tier 2" institutions (typically resource-constrained, rural HDIs), the programme risks becoming a mechanism of stagnation, isolating fellows due to infrastructure deficits and ad hoc management. This bifurcation suggests that without targeted intervention, the nGAP may inadvertently reproduce the structural inequalities it was designed to dismantle.

The following sections summarise the findings across the four domains of the TRM framework.

5.4.1 Acquisition Risks: The Asymmetric War for Talent

The study concludes that the "War for Talent" in South African higher education is an asymmetric conflict, fundamentally shaped by the "Geography of Prestige." The findings reveal that Acquisition Risk acts as the primary gatekeeper of the programme's success, with two distinct realities emerging.

For elite and urban institutions, the study identified a "Buyer's Market." These universities leverage their reputational capital and geographic location to attract high-potential candidates, effectively outsourcing the risk of "adverse selection." They operate with a surplus of applicants, allowing for rigorous selection based on cultural fit and academic potential. Conversely, rural and historically disadvantaged institutions operate in a "Seller's Market," characterised by a "Scarcity Paradox." Despite high national unemployment, these institutions face a critical shortage of appointable candidates, particularly in STEM and professional disciplines (Accounting, Engineering).

This scarcity forces under-resourced universities into a high-risk strategy of "Compromise Hiring." The data confirms that to fill quotas and secure DHET funding, selection panels often appoint candidates who lack the requisite specialisation or support structures. This creates a "Bad Fit" risk at the point of entry, where the institution acquires a body but lacks the *absorptive capacity* to support the mind. Furthermore, the study identified the risk of "Strategic Displacement," where HDIs bear the transaction costs of recruiting and socialising talent, only to serve as "incubators" for wealthier institutions that poach these fellows once they have proven their viability.

5.4.2 Development Risks: The "Black Box" and the Materiality of Failure

The study interrogated the developmental engine of the nGAP, concluding that it functions as a "Black Box": a process in which inputs (funding/time) do not automatically guarantee outputs (PhDs/publications) due to the variability of the support environment.

The primary finding here is the distinction between "Sponsorship" and "Phantom Mentorship." In successful cases, mentorship functions as active sponsorship, transferring the tacit knowledge and social capital required to navigate the academy. However, in many cases, mentorship is reduced to a performative administrative exercise. The study found that "phantom mentors", senior academics who are assigned on paper but disengaged in practice, leave fellows structurally isolated. This risk is compounded by "Remote Control Supervision," in which institutions outsource supervision to external experts who lack a commitment to the fellow's institutional context, leading to drift and delay.

Perhaps the most critical finding in this domain is the "Materiality of Risk." The study exposes a policy blind spot regarding the physical requirements of research in the hard sciences. The nGAP's standardised infrastructure funding fails to account for the massive cost differentials across disciplines. For fellows in Chemistry or Physics at under-resourced HDIs, the lack of basic equipment (e.g., spectrophotometers, computing clusters) turns the fellowship into a structural barrier. This confirms that for STEM disciplines, Infrastructure Risk *is* Development Risk; without the material means of production, "protected time" is rendered irrelevant.

Furthermore, the study confirms the erosion of the "Structural Shield." The 20% teaching load cap, the programme's primary risk mitigation tool, is frequently pierced by "workload creep." In understaffed departments, fellows are pressured to take on "invisible labour" (administration, crisis management), resulting in Time Compression Diseconomies. The fellow is unable to accumulate the necessary "asset stock" (research outputs) within the six-year window, leading to a frantic, quality-compromised rush to complete the doctorate.

5.4.3 Retention Risks: The Poaching Paradox and Psychological Contract

The investigation into retention risks overturns the assumption that salary is the primary driver of attrition. Instead, the study anchors retention behaviour in Social Exchange Theory, concluding that fellows leave when the "Psychological Contract" is breached.

The most counterintuitive finding is the "Poaching Paradox." The study confirms that the nGAP creates a perverse incentive structure: the more successful the university is at developing a fellow (PhD completion, publications), the higher the fellow's market value becomes, and the more likely they are to be poached. Wealthy institutions, capable of "buying out" the nGAP's financial penalties, treat HDIs as a feeder system. This finding suggests that for resource-constrained universities, Success is a Risk Factor.

Internally, the study identified "push factors" rooted in institutional culture. For Black female fellows, the "Burden of Representation", the taxation of identity through committee service and hyper-visibility, creates an exhausting work environment that accelerates burnout. This is compounded by the "Academic Motherhood Penalty," where the gender-blind design of the workload model fails to account for the "double shift" of caregiving, forcing high-potential women to choose between family and tenure.

The study also identified the risk of "Dysfunctional Retention." The financial penalty clause ("Golden Handcuffs") often fails to secure genuine commitment. Instead, it traps unhappy fellows in posts they wish to leave, creating a cohort of "zombie academics" who are employed but psychologically disengaged. This finding suggests that the current retention model relies on punitive compliance rather than on cultivating belonging.

5.4.4 Succession Planning Risks: The Dead End

The study concludes that succession planning is the weakest link in the nGAP value chain. While the programme succeeds in creating *jobs* (employment), it often fails to create *careers* (employability) for fellows in Tier 2 institutions.

The findings reveal a trajectory of "Permanent Juniorisation." Fellows in under-resourced environ-

ments, having struggled through a "weak" PhD process without adequate mentorship or infrastructure, reach the end of the six-year programme without the competitive profile required for promotion. They face a "Dead End," transitioning from "protected fellow" to "overloaded lecturer" without ever ascending to academic leadership. This contrasts sharply with the "Fast Track" observed in Tier 1 institutions, where fellows are explicitly groomed for associate professorships.

Furthermore, the study highlights a "Financial Succession Risk." The shifting of salary liability from the DHET to the university in the latter years of the programme creates a "fiscal cliff" for HDIs. This financial pressure often leads to "Role Distortion," where departments burden post-nGAP fellows with excessive teaching loads to justify their salaries, effectively terminating their research careers.

5.4.5 Effectiveness of Mitigation Strategies: System vs. Sentiment

The evaluation of effectiveness confirms the validity of Boudreau and Ramstad's (2005) concept of "Talentship"; the need for a decision science in HR. The study found a direct correlation between the maturity of the risk governance system and the fellow's success.

Institutions that employ "Systematic Governance" (e.g., Institution B) achieve high retention and completion rates. These institutions utilise data-driven tools (Risk Dashboards), proactive interventions (Stay Interviews), and formalised mentorship contracts to manage uncertainty. In contrast, institutions relying on "Ad Hoc Crisis Management" (e.g., Institution A) suffer from "Information Asymmetry," where risks remain invisible until they crystallise into resignation.

The study also identified a critical "Accountability Vacuum" at the national level. The current monitoring framework is descriptive (counting heads) rather than analytical (assessing quality). This "Data Blindness" allows institutions to collect funding while failing to provide the mandated support, with no consequences for "phantom mentorship" or infrastructure neglect.

5.5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The diagnosis presented in this study is precise: the New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP) is a vital national asset operating under significant structural strain. The emergence of a "Two-Tier System" of academic development suggests that the current "one-size-fits-all" approach to risk management is insufficient. To bridge the gap between the programme's strategic intent and its operational reality, a fundamental paradigm shift is required; moving from administrative "Grant Compliance" to strategic "Talent Stewardship."

The following recommendations are grounded in the empirical findings of Chapter four and are aligned with the principles of Talent Risk Management (TRM). Recognising the study's qualitative,

context-specific nature and the limitations acknowledged in Section 5.6, these recommendations are presented as Strategic Principles rather than universal prescriptions. They represent evidence-informed guidance derived from the lived experiences of 11 participants across seven institutions, offering transferable insights that require adaptation to specific institutional contexts. The recommendations are categorised into two levels of intervention: Systemic Recommendations (for the DHET and National Policy) and Operational Recommendations (for Higher Education Institutions).

5.5.1 Systemic Recommendations: Reforming the National Architecture

Recommendation one: Abandon Policy Homogeneity for "Differentiated Support." The study identified the "Homogeneity Fallacy" as a primary driver of risk in Tier 2 institutions. Treating a resource-constrained rural university the same as a well-endowed urban university exacerbates inequality.

- ❖ Action: The DHET should adopt a "Differentiated Funding Model." While the salary subvention can remain standardised, the infrastructure and mobility grants must be indexed to the institution's resource base and the fellow's discipline.
- ❖ Specific Intervention: Establish a "STEM Capital Injection Fund" specifically for nGAP fellows in laboratory-based disciplines at Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDIs). Suppose a fellow in Chemistry or Physics is appointed at an institution lacking specific equipment (e.g., NMR spectrometers). In that case, an additional capital grant should be triggered to ensure the fellow has the "means of production" to compete globally.

Recommendation two: From Quantitative Monitoring to Qualitative Assurance. The study exposed an "Accountability Vacuum" where monitoring focuses on headcount rather than support quality.

- ❖ Action: The DHET monitoring framework must evolve from a "compliance checklist" to a "Quality Assurance Dashboard."
- ❖ Specific Intervention: Implement a mandatory, anonymous "National Fellow Feedback Loop." Annual surveys should be conducted independently of the universities to assess the quality of mentorship, the reality of workload protection, and the adequacy of infrastructure. Institutions that consistently flag "Red" on mentorship or workload violations should face remedial action, such as the temporary suspension of new nGAP allocations until a "Risk Remediation Plan" is implemented.

Recommendation three: A National "Mobility Protocol" for the Poaching Paradox. The "Poaching Paradox" reveals that the current penalty clauses are ineffective deterrents against wealthy institutions.

- ❖ Action: Instead of viewing mobility as a failure, the sector should regulate it.
- ❖ Specific Intervention: Develop a "National Transfer Protocol." Suppose a fellow moves between public universities before the six-year period ends. In that case, the "poaching" institution should not just pay a penalty to the DHET, but pay a "Developmental Transfer Fee" directly to the losing institution. This fee should be ring-fenced to fund the recruitment and development of a replacement fellow. This transforms "Poaching" from a capital destruction event into a capital recirculation event.

5.5.2 Operational Recommendations: Institutional Risk Governance

Recommendation four: Professionalising the "Black Box" of Mentorship. The study found that "phantom mentorship" is a critical point of failure. Mentorship must be converted from a voluntary favour into a professional obligation.

- ❖ Action: Institutions must formalise the mentorship relationship through "Mentorship Service Level Agreements (SLAs)."
- ❖ Specific Intervention: The SLA must stipulate meeting frequency (e.g., bi-weekly) and deliverables (e.g., grant review, career planning). Mentors should evaluate their mentees annually. Poor performance should lead to the reassignment of the mentor and the forfeiture of the mentorship honorarium.

Recommendation five: Operationalising the "Structural Shield" (Workload Management). The breach of the "protected time" clause via "workload creep" is the primary driver of burnout.

- ❖ Action: Move from "Self-Regulation" to "Centralised Workload Auditing."
- ❖ Specific Intervention: The nGAP Coordinator's office should have sign-off authority on the fellow's workload model *before* the academic year begins. Furthermore, a "Time-Use Audit" should be conducted in Year 1 and Year 3. Departments that abuse nGAP fellows as "relief teaching staff" should be barred from hosting future fellows.

Recommendation six: Implementing "Stay Interviews" to Manage Retention. Reliance on "Exit Interviews" is a failure of governance; by then, the talent is already lost.

- ❖ Action: Adopt the proactive retention architecture observed in Tier 1 institutions.
- ❖ Specific Intervention: Conduct semi-annual "Stay Interviews" (distinct from performance reviews) focused on the Psychological Contract. To address the "Burden of Representation" for Black women, institutions should establish funded "Affinity Networks" and provide access to external

executive coaching.

Recommendation seven: Securing Succession through the "Launchpad Strategy." The "Dead End" at Year 6 creates anxiety and flight risk. Succession planning must begin at acquisition.

- ❖ Action: Replace the "Replacement Logic" with a "Launchpad Strategy."
- ❖ Specific Intervention: Institutions should budget for a "Launchpad Grant" (e.g., R50,000) to be awarded upon successful completion of the nGAP. This provides the fellow with independent research seed capital for their first year as a fully funded academic, preventing the "Role Distortion" where they immediately sink under teaching loads.

5.5.3 The "Talent Stewardship" Framework

Synthesising these recommendations, this study proposes a revised approach to managing the nGAP, termed the Talent Stewardship Framework. This framework rejects the "laissez-faire" approach of Tier 2 institutions and operationalises the "Talentship" decision science.

It rests on three pillars:

1. Rigour in Acquisition: Utilizing "Grow Your Own Timber" pipelines to mitigate adverse selection.
2. Governance in Development: Utilizing data (dashboards) and contracts (mentorship SLAs) to manage the "Black Box."
3. Empathy in Retention: Utilising "Stay Interviews" and cultural support to secure the psychological contract.

5.5.4 Recommendations for Further Study

While this study has provided critical insights into the nGAP's risk landscape, several avenues for further inquiry remain. Future research should employ longitudinal designs that track cohorts of fellows across the full six-year cycle to observe the evolution of risk exposure and the effectiveness of mitigation over time. Additionally, quantitative studies utilising larger, statistically representative samples are needed to test the generalizability of the "Two-Tier System" thesis across the entire higher education sector. Finally, the inclusion of Heads of Department as a distinct research cohort would illuminate the operational pressures and constraints that drive the "implementation gap" between institutional policy and departmental practice, thereby providing a more complete understanding of the governance mechanisms required for effective talent stewardship.

5.6. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The rigorous interpretation of research findings requires a transparent acknowledgement of the study's boundaries. While this inquiry has provided a deep, diagnostic analysis of Talent Risk Management within the nGAP, it operated within specific methodological and contextual parameters that constrain the scope of its conclusions.

Methodological Transferability As a qualitative study anchored in an interpretivist paradigm, the research prioritised "information richness" over statistical representativeness. With a purposive sample of 11 participants across seven institutions, the findings cannot be statistically generalised to the entire South African higher education sector. However, this limitation does not diminish the strategic value of the insights. The identification of the "Two-Tier System" is a robust analytical heuristic derived from maximum variation sampling across diverse institutional contexts. The study offers transferability through "thick description" rather than generalizability through statistical power. The recommendations in Section 5.5 are thus framed as Strategic Principles that institutions can adapt to their specific contexts, rather than prescriptive universal solutions.

Perception-Based Data and Bias: The data is derived exclusively from the subjective perceptions of administrators and fellows. While this aligns with the social constructionist aim of understanding "lived experience," it is subject to Recall Bias. Participants reflecting on events from three or four years ago (e.g., their recruitment interview) may reconstruct these memories through the lens of their current emotional state. Furthermore, despite assurances of anonymity, Social Desirability Bias may have influenced administrators' responses, potentially softening their critique of their own institutional governance to appear compliant with national policy.

Missing Stakeholder Voices: A significant limitation is the exclusion of Heads of Department (HoDs) from the sample. The findings frequently identified HoDs as the agents of "workload creep" and the "implementation gap." By focusing on the strategic (Administrators) and operational (Fellows) layers, the study inadvertently silenced the "middle management" layer. Future research should specifically target this cohort to understand the operational pressures that lead to policy non-compliance.

Cross-Sectional Design: Finally, the study employed a cross-sectional design, capturing a snapshot of the nGAP at a specific moment in time. It did not longitudinally track the evolution of risk for specific individuals across the complete six-year cycle. Therefore, the conclusions regarding "retention trajectories" are inferential, based on the diverse career stages of the participants, rather than observational tracking of a single cohort over time.

5.7. EXPECTED CONTRIBUTIONS

This study makes a distinct contribution to the field of Human Resource Management in Higher Education by bridging the disciplinary divide between Talent Management (TM) and Risk Governance. By reframing the New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP) through the diagnostic lens of Talent Risk Management (TRM), the research moves beyond the standard evaluation of "programmatic success" to offer a more nuanced understanding of "programmatic vulnerability."

Theoretical Contribution: Theoretically, the study extends the discourse on Strategic Talent Management into the public sector context. It challenges the assumption that standard corporate talent models can be seamlessly applied to Higher Education. By documenting the "Two-Tier System" and the "Materiality of Risk," the study refines the Resource-Based View (RBV), demonstrating that in unequal contexts, the *acquisition* of human capital does not automatically lead to the *accumulation* of strategic assets without the necessary "absorptive capacity" (infrastructure and governance). Furthermore, it validates the utility of Social Exchange Theory in explaining retention behaviour in non-profit environments, positioning the "Psychological Contract" as the primary currency of loyalty.

Empirical Contribution Empirically, the study provides the first qualitative risk profile of the nGAP from the perspective of the "lived experience." It documents the "Implementation Gap"; the chasm between national policy (the SOPs) and local practice (phantom mentorship, workload creep). The identification of the "Poaching Paradox" adds a critical empirical insight to the literature on academic mobility, highlighting the unintended consequences of capacity building in a stratified sector.

Practical Contribution: Practically, the study offers the Talent Stewardship Framework as a managerial tool for the DHET and universities. By distinguishing between "Grant Compliance" and "Risk Governance," it provides administrators with a vocabulary and a method to move from reactive crisis management to proactive risk mitigation. The recommendations regarding "Differentiated Funding" and "Mentorship SLAs" offer concrete levers to enhance the return on the state's significant investment in transformation.

5.8. CHAPTER SUMMARY

This concluding chapter has synthesised the study's trajectory, moving from the empirical diagnosis of vulnerability to the strategic prognosis for sustainability. By revisiting the research objectives, the discussion confirmed that the nGAP is not a monolithic success story but a complex landscape defined by a "Two-Tier System" of risk exposure. The summary of findings highlighted the "Asymmetric War for Talent," the "Mentorship Black Box," and the "Poaching Paradox" as critical threats that erode the return on the national investment.

Consequently, the recommendations proposed a fundamental paradigm shift: moving the sector from passive "Grant Compliance" to active "Talent Stewardship." Through the proposal of the *Talent Stewardship Framework*, the chapter offered concrete interventions, such as differentiated infrastructure funding, Mentorship Service Level Agreements, and a National Mobility Protocol, to bridge the implementation gap between national policy intent and the university's operational reality.

Ultimately, this dissertation posits that the "Academic Talent Void" will not be closed by funding alone. It requires rigorous risk governance. Suppose the South African higher education sector can transition from just funding posts to stewarding the careers within them. In that case, the nGAP has the potential to realise its promise: not just replacing the "Old Guard," but transforming the very soul of the academy.

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APPENDIX A

CONSENT LETTER TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY

13 November 2025

DEAR PARTICIPANT

INFORMED CONSENT TO COMPLETE SURVEY

You are invited to take part in a research study that forms part of a Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree. Please take some time to read the information presented here, which will explain the details of this study. Please ask the researcher or person explaining the research to you any questions about any part of this study that you do not fully understand. It is very important that you are fully satisfied that you clearly understand what this research is about and how you might be involved. Also, your participation is entirely voluntary, and you are free to say no to participating, this will not affect you negatively in any way whatsoever. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any point, even if you do agree to take part now.

This study has been approved by the NWU Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EMS-REC) and will be conducted according to the ethical guidelines and principles of the North-West University and other international ethical guidelines applicable to this study.

Title of the project: Talent risk management in the New Generation of Academics Programme within a South African university

Institution: NWU Business School

Ethics Reference Number: NWU-00859-25-A4

Names and contact details of project staff

	Supervisor	Researcher
Title, name & surname	Prof Anna-Marie Pelser	Dr Katlego Moloto
Full Names	Anna Magrieta Fredrika	Katlego Daniel
Function in Project	Principle Investigator	Researcher
Telephone	082 375 6636	082 620 3446

What is this research study all about?

Talent Risk Management (TRM) involves assessing an organisation's current workforce capacity against future needs, identifying and prioritizing risks, and implementing strategies to mitigate those risks, such as training, knowledge transfer, and succession planning

What will be expected of you?

You will be expected to:

- ❖ Participate in an interview, which should take approximately 45-60 minutes.
- ❖ Respond to the questions in an open and honest manner.

Please note that your responses are completely anonymous and no personally identifiable data will be collected. The interview will be recorded to ensure accuracy and preserve the essence of your responses. You will have the option to review or listen to the recorded information upon your request. Please note that your identity will remain confidential, and all identifying information will be replaced with codes during data analysis.

The recorded interviews will be transcribed and securely stored on a password-protected computer. All collected data, including transcripts and recordings, will be retained for three years and subsequently deleted. Any information shared during the interview will be anonymised to ensure your confidentiality.

A summarized copy of the final report will be available to you upon request. The study adheres to the principles of minimal data collection, and all requirements outlined in the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA), 2013, will be followed.

DECLARATION

Declaration by participant

By selecting the option below, I agree to take part in the research study titled: Examining Talent Risk Management in the New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP): Identification, Assessment, and Mitigation Strategies in South African Higher Education.

1. I confirm that I have read the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions, and have these answered satisfactorily.
2. I understand that as I have completed the study anonymously it will not be possible to remove any information I have provided, as you will not be able to identify me in any way.

3. I understand that individuals from the University may look at anonymous research data collected during the study, to ensure that the study is conducted appropriately.
4. I agree that my anonymous information can be shared with individuals from the project team detailed above.

I agree to take part in the above study

Yes	No
1	2

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: PROGRAMME ADMINISTRATORS

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Here are potential interview questions for both nGAP Programme Administrators and nGAP Participants (Fellows), designed to explore talent risk management within the programme. They are meant to provide a starting point and can be adapted or expanded upon based on the flow of the interview and the specific experiences and insights of the participants.

Interview Questions for nGAP Programme Administrators:

Introduction:

1. Could you please describe your role and involvement with the New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP)?
1. From your perspective, what are the primary goals and intended outcomes of the nGAP programme?
2. Biographic details:
 1. How long are you working in this institution?
 2. How many years have you been in this position?

Talent Acquisition Risks:

1. What do you perceive as the main challenges or risks in attracting a sufficient number of high-quality candidates to the nGAP programme? (Probe for diversity, competition, awareness of the programme, etc.)
1. How are these potential acquisition risks assessed or monitored by the programme administration (at national and/or institutional level)?
2. What strategies or initiatives are currently in place to mitigate these talent acquisition risks? How effective do you believe these strategies are?
3. Are there specific challenges in attracting candidates in certain disciplines or from particular designated groups? If so, how are these addressed?

Talent Retention Risks:

1. What do you see as the key risks that could lead to nGAP fellows leaving the programme or academia prematurely? (Probe for workload, institutional culture, support, career progression, etc.)
1. How is the retention of nGAP fellows monitored within your institution/at the national level? Are there specific metrics tracked?
2. What strategies or support mechanisms are in place to encourage the retention of nGAP fellows? How effective do you think these are in addressing potential retention risks?
3. Are there any specific challenges in retaining fellows from particular backgrounds or in certain disciplines? How are these being addressed?

Talent Development Risks:

1. What are the potential risks related to the development of nGAP fellows in terms of their skills, research capacity, and teaching competence? (Probe for mentorship quality, access to resources, workload balance, training opportunities, etc.)
1. How are the developmental needs and progress of nGAP fellows assessed and monitored throughout the programme?
2. What formal and informal support mechanisms (e.g., mentorship programmes, funding opportunities, workshops) are in place to mitigate these development risks? How effective are these perceived to be?
3. Are there any identified gaps in the development support provided to nGAP fellows? How are these being addressed?

Risk Identification, Assessment, and Mitigation Processes:

1. Are there any formal processes or frameworks in place for systematically identifying and assessing talent risks within the nGAP programme (at national and/or institutional level)? If so, could you describe them?
1. Are there any informal ways in which talent risks are identified and discussed within the programme administration?
2. How are decisions made regarding which talent risks to prioritize and how to mitigate them?

3. How is the effectiveness of the implemented risk mitigation strategies evaluated?

Overall Perceptions and Recommendations:

1. From your perspective, how effectively is talent risk currently managed within the nGAP programme? What are the strengths and weaknesses you observe?
1. What recommendations would you make to strengthen the identification, assessment, and mitigation of talent risks within the nGAP programme to enhance its overall effectiveness and sustainability?
2. Is there anything else you would like to share regarding talent risk management within the nGAP programme?

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: NGAP FELLOWS

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Here are potential interview questions for both nGAP Programme Administrators and nGAP Participants (Fellows), designed to explore talent risk management within the programme. They are meant to provide a starting point and can be adapted or expanded upon based on the flow of the interview and the specific experiences and insights of the participants.

Interview Questions for nGAP Participants (Fellows):

Introduction:

1. Could you please tell me about your background and your current stage in the nGAP programme?
1. What were your initial expectations and motivations for joining the nGAP programme?
2. Biographic details:
 1. For how many years are you a nGAP participant?
 2. What is your age?

Experiences with Talent Acquisition:

1. Can you describe your experience with the application and selection process for the nGAP programme? Were there any challenges or difficulties you encountered?
1. Do you feel the programme effectively attracted a diverse cohort of fellows? Why or why not?

Experiences with Talent Development:

1. How would you describe the support and development opportunities you have received through the nGAP programme (e.g., mentorship, funding for postgraduate studies, research support, teaching development)?
1. Have you experienced any challenges or gaps in the development support provided? (Probe for specific areas like mentorship quality, research resources, workload management, etc.)
2. How effective has the mentorship component of the programme been for you in addressing potential challenges or risks to your development?

3. Do you feel your workload allows sufficient time for research and professional development alongside your teaching responsibilities?

Experiences with Talent Retention:

1. What factors make you feel supported and motivated to continue your career in academia, particularly within your current institution?
1. Have you experienced any factors within the nGAP programme or your institution that could potentially lead to fellows leaving the programme or academia? (Probe for institutional culture, workload, lack of support, career progression concerns, etc.)
2. How well do you feel integrated into your department and the wider university community?
3. What are your perceptions of the long-term career prospects for nGAP fellows within your institution and in South African higher education in general?

Perceived Risks and Mitigation Strategies:

1. From your perspective, what do you see as the biggest risks that could hinder your success as an academic within the nGAP programme and beyond?
1. How effective do you think the current support mechanisms and strategies within the nGAP programme are in addressing these potential risks?
2. Have you experienced or observed any instances where talent risks were effectively mitigated within the programme? Could you describe them?

Recommendations for Improvement:

1. What changes or improvements do you think could be made to the nGAP programme to better support fellows and mitigate potential talent risks across the acquisition, development, and retention stages?
1. What additional support or resources would you find beneficial for your development and long-term career in academia?
2. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences within the nGAP programme or your perspectives on talent risk management in this context?

APPENDIX D

LANGUAGE CERTIFICATE



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Thursday, 04 December 2025

CERTIFICATION OF LANGUAGE EDIT, TYPOGRAPHY AND TECHNICAL PRECISION

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Author	KD Moloto		
Student number	20661533		
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Direct quotations (Qualitative responses)	Spelling only X		Not applicable
Citations & reference list	Yes X		No
Style used	Harvard	APA7 X	NWU
Typographic editing	Yes X		No

Final, last-minute corrections remain the responsibility of the author.

Precision ... to the last letter