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# Talent management of skilled migrants: propositions and an agenda for future research

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## ABSTRACT

This paper unpacks the dominant conceptualizations of talent management (TM) in contemporary academic publications, and considers these in relation to the increasingly important workforce population of skilled international migrants. It postulates that TM approaches are generally built from a relatively narrow human capital-based perspective wherein organizations focus on readily accessible and immediate skills, ignoring the longer term strategic potential of the international workforce of skilled migrants, particularly for multinational enterprises and other international organizations. Through a series of propositions, the paper highlights how organizations, in strategically using a more comprehensive TM lens rather than a human capital lens in approaching the TM of skilled migrants, could benefit from improved HRM performance over time. It also proposes a research agenda, by which future studies might test, explore, and further develop understanding on a more strategic utilization of skilled migrants in organizations.

## KEYWORDS

Strategic talent management; global talent management; skilled migrants; international careers; human capital; strategic international human resource management

## Introduction

Academic discussions on talent management (TM) and those on skilled migrant careers remain separate in management studies. This separation contributes to a lack of understanding of skilled migrants as part of the global pool of diverse human resources (Mahadevan & Kilian-Yasin, 2016). In order to fill this knowledge gap, and building on both respective literatures, this paper aims to present a framework for better understanding skilled migration as a flow of talents requiring appropriate management and support from their organizations. This is important for organizations as they expand globally and search for the best human resources to recruit for their strategic international business objectives. The key assumption underlying our conceptual framework is that organizations may gain long-term

IHRM competitive advantages through the effective utilization of the currently under-recognized talents of the skilled migrants in their workforce. There are other workforce categories (e.g. the low-paid, Devins & Gold, 2014; 'B players', Malik & Singh, 2014) which have also been neglected in TM strategies and practices. Focusing on the TM of skilled migrants, this paper advances a series of propositions that recognize how skilled migrants can be valuable resources for organizations. Additionally, the paper contributes to the IHRM literature by proposing a research agenda that promotes more strategic and enhanced utilization of the international skilled migrant pool.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next section discusses the rationale of this paper followed by a discussion of the literature on TM. The discussion reveals the integrated connection between TM, human capital, and skilled migration. The paper then unpacks the TM of skilled migrants from five different TM perspectives, and builds up respective propositions to better support the TM of skilled migrants. Next, a future research agenda is proposed, before, finally, the limitations of the paper and managerial implications are outlined.

### **Background to and rationale for the TM of skilled migrants**

While its origins have been credited to Steven Hankin (McKinsey & Co.) within the practitioner-professional domain (Sheehan & Anderson, 2015), academic interest in the topic of TM has recently grown in management and organization studies (e.g. Al Ariss, Cascio, & Paauwe, 2014; Collings, Scullion, & Vaiman, 2015; Dries, 2013a, 2013b; Festing, Schäfer, & Scullion, 2013; Iles, Chuai, & Preece, 2010; Iles, Preece, & Chuai, 2010; Ramaswami, Carter, & Dreher, 2016; Scullion, Collings, & Caligiuri, 2010; Thunnissen, Boselie, & Fruytier, 2013; Vaiman & Collings, 2013; Vaiman, Haslberger, & Vance, 2015), with *The International Journal of Human Resource Management* producing a special issue on TM in 2013 (volume 24, issue 9).

A commonly accepted definition of TM (Collings & Mellahi, 2009, p. 304) is the following:

activities and processes that involve the systematic identification of key positions that differentially contribute to the organization's sustainable competitive advantage, the development of a talent pool of high-potential and high-performing incumbents to fill these roles, and the development of a differentiated human resource architecture to facilitate filling these positions with competent incumbents and to ensure their continued commitment to the organization.

This comprehensive definition of TM highlights the requirement for 'the systematic identification of key positions' which 'contribute to the organization's sustainable competitive advantage' (Collings & Mellahi, 2009, p. 304). Global TM encompasses attracting, identifying, selecting, recruiting, developing, and retaining talents in international contexts in a way that meets the strategic global goals of companies (Al Ariss, 2014; Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Vaiman et al., 2015).

TM is therefore concerned with potential employees joining the organization, as well as with existing employees within organizations. As organizations move internationally, finding and retaining top talents becomes crucial and this is one reason why skilled migration becomes so important from a TM and, more broadly, from an IHRM perspective. In this paper, using the core underlying principles of TM we have found in contemporary literature, we propose that the recognition, assessment and promotion of skilled migrants to fill key organizational positions could result in long-term sustainable competitive advantages for organizations.

Talent has been defined as 'the human capital in an organization that is both valuable and unique' (De Vos & Dries, 2013, p. 1818). The human capital pool represents the sum of employee skills within an organization at any point in time. It is important that the human capital pool is aligned with the strategic intent of the organization in order that the requisite skills exist in the organization to facilitate the organization's attainment of its strategic aims (Huselid, 1995). Throughout TM literature, it is apparent that a focus on human capital underlies the realized conceptualization of TM. TM is conceptualized as the management of recognized human capital ('talent') within organizations, where talent equates to attributes that can be innate or acquired (Meyers et al., 2013); talent as 'object', i.e. talent as natural ability, mastery, commitment, fit (Gelens, Dries, Hofmans, & Pepermans, 2013); talent as capital, individual difference, giftedness, identity, strength, and perception of talent (Dries, 2013b). What is considered as valuable human capital is narrowly defined, with certain 'talents' prioritized, and other arguably important 'talents', particularly in an international business context such as cross-cultural adaptability, flexibility and resilience, under-recognized.

Research on skilled migrants in the management domain has also been gaining increasing attention (e.g. Crowley-Henry, O' Connor, & Al Ariss, 2016; Dietz, Joshi, Esses, Hamilton, & Gabarrot, 2015), with, for example, the publication of a special issue from *The International Journal of Human Resource Management* on international migrants in 2015 (volume 26, issue 10) and papers published in top journals such as *Journal of International Business Studies* (e.g. Cerdin, Abdeljalil Diné, & Brewster, 2013). Recent research considers the strategic value of skilled migrants to organizations (Zikic, 2015), the need for more relational analysis on skilled migrants' careers, and the business case for the HRM of skilled migrants (Guo & Al Ariss, 2015). From a theoretical perspective, such research calls on researchers to better link the topics of international mobility and TM (Crowley-Henry et al., 2016; Ramaswami et al., 2016). The same call has also been issued by organizations in the 2016 Brookfield report on international mobility (Brookfield Global Mobility Trends, 2016). This paper is therefore timely in terms of responding to such calls.

We employ the definition 'migrant' as used by international organizations such as the United Nations (UN, 2013a, 2013b) and the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2014). These institutions define a migrant as a person who is foreign-born or a foreign citizen. The term 'skilled migrants' generally refers

to highly educated and experienced individuals who have developed skills in such diverse occupations as management, engineering, or medicine, among other professions. It is currently estimated that there are 232 million migrant workers around the world (UN, 2013a, 2013b). Studies on the flows of migrants internationally show that migrants from countries in the southern hemisphere migrate to other southern countries as much as they migrate from southern countries to countries in the northern hemisphere (UN, 2013a; see also Al Ariss, Cerdin, & Brewster, 2016). The largest migration flows are within Europe, with an estimated 37.8 million migrants migrating from one European country to another in 2013 (UN, 2013a). In 2008, according to EUROSTAT (2014), the statistical office of the European Union, 6.4% of the total EU-27 population were migrants, with about one-third of these migrants being citizens of another EU-27 member state. An OECD (2011) report on skilled immigrants in the OECD regions showed that up to 41% of all immigrants were categorized as skilled from their 2005 data. This report defines skilled migrants as ‘the number of foreign-born labor force with completed ISCED 5-6 education levels, residing in the region in 2005’, where ISCED refers to the International Standard Classification of Education, and levels 5–6 refer to those having completed short-cycle and bachelors (or equivalent) tertiary education (ISCED, 2011). The population of skilled migrants in national labour markets is considered an important human capital contribution (OECD, 2011), where ‘highly skilled foreign-born individuals contribute heavily to the human capital endowments of regions’ and with ‘evidence that highly skilled migrants bring higher productivity, entrepreneurial assets, and trading opportunities to host regions’ (OECD, 2011). It should be highlighted that studies on skilled migrants in the management literature tend to focus on skilled migrants from developing countries moving to developed countries, with the term ‘self-initiated expatriates’ being used to denote the internationally mobile workforce from developed countries (Al Ariss & Crowley-Henry, 2013).

Nonetheless, despite the apparent recognition at the macro-level regarding the human capital contribution of skilled migrants to national economies, academic research findings persist in reporting predominantly on the underemployment of skilled migrants (e.g. Almeida, Fernando, Hannif, & Dharmage, 2015; De Jong & Madamba, 2001). TIEDL (2015) publishes on the underemployment of immigrants in Canada and Tal’s (2012) research shows that skilled immigrants in Canada tend to be underemployed and suffer pay inequality. In the USA, Batalova and Fix’s report (with Creticos, 2008) emphasizes the brain wastage of skilled migrants. In Europe, a qualitative study on non-EU migrant doctors in Ireland provides further evidence of underemployment (Humphries et al., 2013). Similarly, recent publications on the careers of skilled migrants in the management and organization studies domain confirm the employment challenges faced by this population (Hakak & Al Ariss, 2013; Zikic, 2015). These studies underline that skilled migrants’ human capital is not being optimized at the organizational level.

Over the remainder of this paper, alternative conceptualizations of TM are considered with regard to the skilled migrant population. In the five subsequent propositions, a more equitable, inclusive, and strategically effective management of skilled migrants within organizations is suggested.

### **Understanding the TM of skilled migrants**

As noted above, existing TM theorization positions the human capital focus as central. This dominant application of TM in organizations has resulted in the skilled migrant population being widely overlooked as ‘talent’, because their competences, skills and qualifications/knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) are different to the host country normalized high performance/high potential human capital expectations. Skilled migrants, by their very designation as ‘skilled’, are considered valuable human capital in countries and regions (OECD, 2011). Nevertheless, it is evident from publications on skilled migrants in the management literature that they encounter challenges in their respective host countries, where their skills/qualifications may not be recognized or accredited (Pearson, Hammond, Heffernan, & Turner, 2011).

The potential organizational benefits accruing from an international workforce have been propounded (Liu-Farrer, 2011; Stroh, 1999; Tzeng, 1995). For instance, Collings (2014) considers the integration of international mobility and global TM practices within multinational enterprises (MNEs), while other studies bring together the literature on both global TM and expatriate management (Cerdin & Brewster, 2014; Festing & Schäfer, 2014; McNulty & Hutchings, 2016; Ramaswami et al., 2016). These articles focus mainly on the international mobility of organization-assigned expatriates, those employees who are assigned internationally for a temporary duration and supported by their organization during the process, rather than on skilled migrants. With regard to the research on skilled migrant careers, research attention has concentrated almost exclusively on careers within the medical and scientific professions (e.g. Bourgeault, Neiterman, & LeBrun, 2011; Fang, 2007; Girasek, Molnar, Eke, & Szócska, 2011; Hardill & MacDonald, 2000; Ricketts, 2010; Roberts & Simmons, 2009). However, skilled migrants do not feature as ‘talents’ in any of this literature, and success stories of skilled migrants are lacking (Crowley-Henry et al., 2016). Their human capital is arguably under-recognized by their employer organizations, and they are widely excluded from what is recognized as the talent pool of employees within organizations.

In the IHRM literature, research on skilled migrants suggests this workforce category is not readily granted the opportunity to display their particular human capital talents (Crowley-Henry et al., 2016). This oversight, essentially resulting in the exclusion of skilled migrants from the talent pool, is discussed further in the rest of the paper where we unpack the specific talents and experiences that skilled migrants possess.

**Table 1.** Alternative conceptualizations of talent management in existing academic literature.

Conceptualization and description	Key authors
<p>1. TM conceptualized as a re-labelling of <i>HRM</i>; those <i>strategies</i> and practices targeted at the superior performing/highest potential employees in the organization. TM as a strategic initiative involving the organizational practices which attract, select, develop, and retain the best employees (under the assumptions that they are the best in terms of their human capital) in the most strategic positions in the organization in order to attain and maintain organizational strategic priorities</p> <p>This conceptualization of TM is expanded upon and developed in Proposition 1</p>	Al Ariss et al. (2014), Cappelli (2008a, 2008b), Farndale, Scullion, and Sparrow (2010), McDonnell et al. (2010), Scullion et al. (2010), Tarique and Schuler (2010), and Vaiman et al. (2012)
<p>2. TM conceptualized as <i>human resource planning</i> (HRP), with the specific focus on the identification, recruitment, and selection of individuals for key organizational <i>positions</i> based on their recognized and valued human capital potential contribution, rather than other capital considerations; and measured against an organizational level of generic expectation regarding human capital requirements</p> <p>This conceptualization of TM is expanded upon and developed in Proposition 2</p>	Al Ariss et al. (2014) and Collings and Mellahi (2009)
<p>3. TM conceptualized as a <i>human resource development</i> (HRD), focused on the development of employees' human capital for specific strategic requirements; the objective career is prioritized where TM practices equate with progression within the organization's decision-making levels</p> <p>This conceptualization of TM is expanded upon and developed in Proposition 3.</p>	Al Ariss et al. (2014), Collings (2014), Iles, Preece, et al., (2010), Scullion et al. (2010), and Ramaswami et al. (2016)
<p>4. TM conceptualized as <i>exclusive or inclusive</i>. This conceptualization focuses on the population that is considered 'talent'; whether it is all employees in an organization or an elite sub-section; talent as 'subject', i.e. as all people or as some people (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013). In practice, it is evident that exclusive TM dominates</p> <p>This conceptualization of TM is expanded upon and developed in Proposition 4</p>	Gallardo-Gallardo (2011), Gallardo-Gallardo et al. (2013), Scullion et al. (2010), and Thunnissen et al. (2013)
<p>5. TM conceptualized as a broader phenomenon, which integrates individuals, organizations, and society, <i>embracing diversity</i> and equality in societies</p> <p>This conceptualization of TM is expanded upon and developed in Proposition 5.</p>	Al Ariss et al. (2013), Shen and Hall (2009), Sidani and Al Ariss (2014), and Thunnissen et al. (2013)

'Talent management' means different things to different people (Lewis & Heckman, 2006; Dries, 2013a, 2013b; Gelens et al., 2013; Meyers, van Woerkom, & Dries, 2013), with researchers varying distinctively in their definitions and understandings (Dries, 2013a, 2013b; Festing & Schäfer, 2014). Table 1 presents an overview of five dominant conceptualizations of TM from recent literature. Next, we briefly discuss each of these TM lenses in turn, as applied to the skilled migrant population in organizations, and then unpack them further in our research propositions.

The broad definition of TM as 'identifying, selecting, recruiting, developing, and retaining talents in a way that meets the [...] strategic goals of companies' (Al Ariss, 2014, p. 5) positions TM as encompassing those HRM strategies and initiatives which are closely linked to strategic management objectives whereby the focus would be on the long-term sustainability of the organization (Collings & Mellahi, 2009) (see Table 1, conceptualization 1). While industry reports indicate the value of skilled migrants for regions and organizations (OECD, 2011) and academic publications accentuate the value of international experience for organizations (Liu-Farrer, 2011; Stroh, 1999; Tzeng, 1995), there is a dearth of management publications highlighting the strategic benefits to organizations of having a skilled migrant workforce population (Crowley-Henry et al., 2016). Indeed, skilled migrants do not feature in human resource planning (HRP) strategies, where their

skills may be sought specifically for particular organizational positions (see Table 1, conceptualization 2), or in human resource development (HRD) strategies, where their skills may be honed for specific strategic requirements (see Table 1, conceptualization 3). From the research on organizations' TM strategies and practices to date, it is clear that a more exclusive approach to TM dominates organizational strategies and actions, where the focus on the identification, selection, recruitment, development, and retention of those 'talented' employees considered eligible for the current and future strategic positions in the organization excludes the skilled migrant workforce population (see Table 1, conceptualization 4). This omission, we argue, requires reconsideration and organizational attention. With the conceptualization of TM as respecting individual, organizational, and societal dimensions (see Table 1, conceptualization 5) where equality and diversity are paramount, neglect of the skilled migrant population in organizations' TM plans warrants attention.

Bearing in mind the various TM conceptualizations evident in current academic discussions (Table 1) with regard to the fundamental focus on human capital which goes across all TM perspectives, the remainder of this paper explores how existing alternative TM perspectives (represented in conceptualizations 1–5, Table 1) may have the potential to enable positive organizational outcomes over the long term from the TM of skilled migrants.

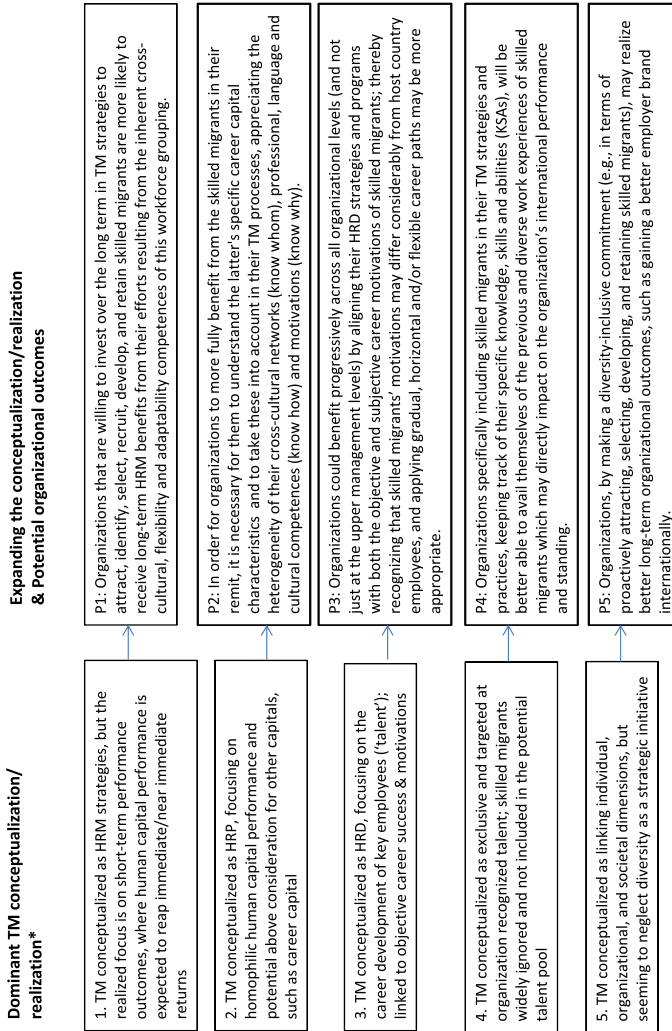
### **Relating TM principles to skilled migrants**

This section engages with the TM conceptualizations presented in Table 1, developing five corresponding propositions. Figure 1 synthesizes the propositions developed from the alternative existing conceptualizations of TM, applied to skilled migrants, which could lead to better HRM outcomes for organizations.

### ***TM of skilled migrants: unpacking the conceptualization of TM as HRM strategies***

As described previously, TM scholars have generally considered the topic of TM from a human capital perspective (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Dries, 2013a, 2013b; Ramaswami et al., 2016). Human capital denotes the education, training, and professional experiences accumulated by individuals (Navarro & Moya, 2005; Kulvisaechana, 2006; Rodríguez-Pose & Vilalta-Bufi, 2004). Gary Becker and Theodore Schultz from the University of Chicago first promoted this theory from the 1960s (Becker, 1975; Schultz, 1963). TM scholars often emphasize the value of an organization's stock of human capital, represented by talents, in contributing to the performance and economic position of organizations (Dries, 2013b; Lepak & Snell, 2002). This assumes that human capital renders organizations more productive and financially strong, thereby leading to their superior competitive advantage. For example, using a data-set from Merrill Lynch





\* With the underlying human capital focus at the core of each alternative conceptualization of TM in the literature

**Figure 1.** Talent management of skilled migrants: dominant and alternative conceptualizations.  
 Note: With the underlying human capital focus at the core of each alternative conceptualization of TM in the literature.

Investment Bank in Sydney and in Hong Kong, Royal and O'Donnell (2008) claim that human capital enables investors to predict the financial performance of organizations. HRM systems and processes are necessary to acquire and manage this strategic human capital and ensure that its contribution is maximized (Collings & Mellahi, 2009).

The main assumption of this line of thought is that 'talents' are production resources that need to be immediately operational as their companies expect a high return on investment from them. In this regard, companies act as 'talent factories', with databases of talented internal personnel readily identifiable for specific positions with the simple touch of a button. Such organizations are mooted for their TM practices in prestigious magazines such as the *Harvard Business Review* (Ready & Conger, 2007). Linking these implicit assumptions, compared to locals, organizations might view skilled migrants as requiring additional investments (e.g. in terms of efforts to identify and develop their educational as well as their professional experience). One possible outcome is that skilled migrants' human capital is likely to be considered, whilst often implicitly, to have a slower return on investment than locals. For example, skilled migrants may be vulnerable and underemployed, especially when they are newcomers to a host country (Hakak & Al Ariss, 2013). They could lack language fluency and additional qualifications required for certain professions, and may also struggle initially with host country acculturation (understanding of local customs and legislation). They may well be required to engage in non-work related administrative procedures to secure work/residency. It is also possible that they will lack access to local networks, the result of which could penalize them in their careers and their organizations. Overall, skilled migrants may offer, in the shorter term, reduced human capital outcomes for their employer organizations in the host country (Fossland, 2013), which may explain the lack of attention given to the untapped human capital potential of skilled migrants within MNEs and other international organizations.

In the longer term, skilled migrants can potentially fulfil organizations' needs for cross-cultural flexible talents across countries and therefore might turn out to be a highly valuable resource (Cao, Hirschi, & Deller, 2013; Cerdin et al., 2013; Liu-Farrer, 2011). Organizations could use their experience and knowledge to gain new business in certain markets abroad, and to consider strategic alternatives from different cultural perspectives. Skilled migrants' adaptability to the host country environment would be testimony to their organizational adaptability, a skill useful to organizations needing to be both responsive and proactive to change drivers in the global economy. According to Guo and Al Ariss (2015, p. 1295), 'often multi-lingual, able to adapt to different circumstances and cultures, and internationally experienced, these [skilled migrants] are highly talented individuals with skills of immense global value'. In summary, while skilled migrants may offer lower performance outcomes and more administrative obstacles for organizations in the short term, they may have performance advantages to offer organizations in the longer term.

Through better understanding the potential of skilled migrants' talents over the longer term, a more strategic consideration of the TM of skilled migrants could be realized. Huselid (1995) argues that organizations' different HRM strategies and practices (for example, recruitment, selection, and training practices) impact upon the respective skills and human capital of their employees. Organizations could therefore reap the rewards of increased competitive advantage and enhanced performance if they pay closer attention to their HRM strategies and practices in relation to skilled migrants. This is the basis of the first of this paper's propositions (see Figure 1), which has been developed from the conceptualization of TM as targeted HRM strategies (see Table 1).

**Proposition 1:** Organizations that are willing to invest over the long term in TM strategies to attract, identify, select, recruit, develop, and retain skilled migrants are more likely to receive long-term HRM benefits from their efforts resulting from the inherently cross-cultural flexibility and adaptability competences of this workforce grouping.

### ***TM of skilled migrants from a career capital perspective; moving beyond the human capital focus in HRP***

Almeida, Fernando, and Sheridan (2012, p. 1964) found that research on immigrant professionals' employment outcomes 'are situated within a human capital theoretical framework, where the assumption is that the labour market treats all potential labour equally based on their skills'. The assumption of human capital as central to TM largely ignores the other types of capital such as social and cultural capital that skilled migrants can mobilize in their organizations. Organizations, in their HRP, need to be cognizant of the various capital skilled migrants bring to their respective organizations. Therefore, it is relevant to draw on the career capital literature that recognizes these multiple forms of assets that individuals possess and mobilize (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994, 1996; Zikic, 2015). This aligns with the second conceptualization of TM from the literature which we presented in Table 1: TM as HRP (see Table 1, conceptualization 2).

The career capital competencies are knowing-why, knowing-how, and knowing-whom competencies (Carr, Inkson, & Thorn, 2005; DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994, 1996). The 'know-how' competency includes knowledge of specific technical or managerial skills; 'know-why' relates to the personal motivations of individuals to have or to develop a selected career; and 'know-whom' refers to the networks and social contacts individuals may have which support their careers. Career capital theory helps to unpack the individual competencies of skilled migrants and to consider the possible outcomes of utilizing these competencies at the organizational level. Other 'know-how' competences of skilled migrants, such as their multicultural knowledge, language competences, and relational competences, could be very valuable to their organizations (Cerdin et al., 2013; Tzeng, 2010). With regard to the 'know-why' competency, for example, it is important to understand what motivates skilled migrants' decisions as to whether and where to go

and remain. This is relevant for organizations' retention strategies and practices. Similarly, understanding skilled migrants' 'know-why' competences may lead to organizations better valuing the multicultural knowledge, language competences, relational competences, and intercultural knowledge of skilled migrants, which could be an asset to their organizations (Thomas & Inkson, 2004; Tzeng, 2010). Finally, organizations should be aware of the possibly disadvantageous position of skilled migrants in terms of their 'know-whom' competency due to their potential unfamiliarity with networks and affiliation groupings in the host country (Hakak & Al Ariss, 2013; though it may be that their cross-cultural and international know-whom competencies are far more extensive than local colleagues'). It is therefore postulated that organizations should consider the know-how, know-why, and know-whom career capital elements of skilled migrants when planning and determining their talent pool. These capitals could bring positive business outcomes if organizations were to develop and integrate IHRM programs to better mobilize these resources (see also Zikic, 2015). Proceeding on from this is the second proposition:

**Proposition 2:** In order for organizations to more fully benefit from the skilled migrants in their remit, it is necessary for them to understand the latter's specific career capital characteristics and to take these into account in their TM processes, appreciating the heterogeneity of their cross-cultural networks (know whom), professional, language and cultural competences (know how), and motivations (know why).

### ***TM as HRD, linked to objective and subjective career success***

With regard to the third dominant conceptualization of TM we shared in Table 1 – TM as HRD (Iles, Preece, et al., 2010) – a focus on the objective development of talent as recognized in employees displaying high performance or high potential (Iles, Preece, et al., 2010) is pronounced. However, research studies on skilled migrants have taken both objective and subjective career success conceptualizations into account when examining migrants' careers as vocations (Bimrose & McNair, 2011; Cohen, Arnold, & O'Neill, 2011; Collings, Doherty, Luethy, & Osborn, 2011). Objective career orientations refer to aspects of careers that are more overt, such as titles, promotions, compensation, and rewards. Subjective career orientations, on the other hand, focus on more inherent values that individuals associate with their respective careers, which may include enjoyment of work and positive work values. For example, Zikic, Bonache, and Cerdin's (2010) three-country study of skilled migrants in Canada, Spain, and France finds that objective and subjective career orientations are not mutually exclusive, but co-exist. These findings are confirmed in a study by Pearson et al. (2011) of Polish migrants in Ireland.

On the other hand, TM literature focuses mostly on the objective dimension of career success with regard to human resource development and what is of value. In other words, individuals are generally assumed to value promotion, attaining top performance, filling top demanding positions, and therefore succeeding

objectively in terms of their career outcomes (Mäkelä et al., 2010; Scullion et al., 2010; Thunnissen et al., 2013). For example, the starting point of one of the most well-cited works on TM by Collings and Mellahi (2009) is the focus on key positions within an organization which ‘have the potential to impact differentially on the competitive advantage of the firm’ (p. 305). The assumption is that HRM systems should begin by identifying these key positions in which to invest. This assumption overlooks the fact that some individuals may have subjective understandings of careers, which might contradict the perspective of talents as high-aiming and high-performing employees whose competencies are developed in order for them to successfully fill strategic organizational positions. With regard to performance, organizations are expected to cultivate work-focused motivation and organizational commitment amongst employees to achieve the best of their talent and avoid turnover. This encourages a more holistic research on skilled migrants with a better focus on the subjective career motivations of skilled migrants employed in host country organizations. The next proposition suggests an elaboration of TM as HRD to include a consideration of both subjective and objective career success and motivations particular within the skilled migrant workforce category, appreciating that these may be different to home country nationals and may vary across country of origin of skilled migrants. This broadened interpretation of TM as HRD would lead to a more holistic understanding of the career drivers of skilled migrant talents in the organization. Therefore, this could enable organizations to strategically align their employees’ development and performance to the specific requirements of both employees and the organization, thereby allowing a more strategic and effective utilization and deployment of skilled migrants.

**Proposition 3:** Organizations could benefit progressively across all organizational levels (and not just at the upper management levels) by aligning their HRD strategies and programs with both the objective and subjective career motivations of skilled migrants; thereby recognizing that skilled migrants’ motivations may differ considerably from host country employees, and applying gradual, horizontal and/or flexible career paths may be more appropriate.

### ***The exclusive–inclusive approach to TM applied to skilled migrants***

The inclusive–exclusive dichotomy in TM literature (e.g. Gallardo-Gallardo, 2011) considers *who* it is that is perceived to possess talent in the organization (see conceptualization 4, Table 1). This has direct implications on whether skilled migrants are considered talents or not. Exclusive TM focuses on people who belong to a select, exclusive group of people considered to be talents (Mäkelä, Björkman, & Ehrnrooth, 2010; Scullion et al., 2010; Thunnissen et al., 2013); while the more inclusive approach to TM considers talent as something that all employees possess and which should be nurtured in all (Devins & Gold, 2014; De Vos & Dries, 2013; Lewis & Heckman, 2006). Fundamentally all the human capital in an organization

is included in this perception of talent, where talent can be supported and developed in all employees (Meyers et al., 2013). Festing et al. (2013) focus on this TM principle in their research within small and medium enterprises SMEs in Germany wherein all employees are included in the TM approach. However, this is not the most common interpretation of TM, but rather the focus is on elite and high performers within organizations, epitomizing an exclusive approach to TM (Lewis & Heckman, 2006)

The literature suggests that exclusive TM, where an elite group of workers is considered more talented than others, and their respective human capital thus more valuable to the organization (Dries, 2013b), is the more commonly practised TM approach in organizations today (Gelens, Dries, Hofmans, & Pepermans, 2013; Gelens, Hofmans, Dries, & Pepermans, 2014; Swailes, Downs, & Orr, 2014). However, the ethics of exclusive TM practices, which, in effect, overlook the majority of the workforce, is questionable in terms of its tendency to favour inequality and exclusion of those employees who are not talents and thus considered as second-class human resources (Gelens, Hofmans, Dries, & Pepermans, 2014; Lacey & Groves, 2014; Sheehan & Anderson, 2015; Swailes, 2013; Swailes et al., 2014; Tansley et al., 2013).

The exclusive approach to TM does not consider skilled migrants, who did not have the chance to accumulate the same human capital in their host country as their local colleagues, but who may still have excellent knowledge and qualifications acquired internationally. Such skills may be skills the organization requires. Inclusion of skilled migrants in talent identification programs will not only have potential positive results for organizations, but also for the individuals themselves, who may feel they have a long-term meaningful career with the organization, and be more committed to that organization (Björkman et al., 2013; Gelens et al., 2014). Research shows that this is not always done in international organizations (Meares, 2010). For example, based on data from 260 MNEs, Meares (2010) found that less than half of all MNEs had both global succession planning and formal management development programs for their international talents. Schuler, Jackson, and Tarique (2011) consider that managing international talents presents an opportunity for firms to gain sustainable global competitive advantages and to develop an attractive employer brand internationally. This paper argues that organizations should target skilled migrants as potential global talents for their business operations. Skilled migrants could play key roles in areas such as global leadership, cross-cultural management, and strategic internationalization of their companies, among others. Keeping track of skilled migrants' specific skills, such as language knowledge, adaptability, and cross-cultural sensitivity to utilize within necessary roles in the organization would serve to advance both the value of the skilled migrant work-pool for the organization, and to add value to the work for skilled migrants exhibiting unique skills and competencies.

By adopting a more inclusive approach to TM and purposefully including skilled migrants within the potential talent pools of high performers in the organization, taking their previous experiences into consideration, organizations should,

in turn, be able to reap the rewards of having an international workforce, with their respective skills recognized, utilized, and valued by the organization (Zikic, 2015). Based on this discussion is the following proposition:

**Proposition 4:** Organizations specifically including skilled migrants in their TM strategies and practices, keeping track of their specific KSAs, will be better able to avail themselves of the previous and diverse work experiences of skilled migrants which may directly impact on the organization's international performance and standing.

### ***Linking TM processes to diversity; integrating individuals, organizations, and society***

Scholars and businesses have been promoting the use of TM in order to increase organizational commitment and work performance among employees to achieve best business outcomes for organizations (Stahl et al., 2012). Dietz et al. (2015) propound the importance of inclusiveness to overcome employment discrimination suffered by skilled migrants. Dwertmann et al. (2016) and Nishii (2013) underline the importance of an inclusive diversity climate, where 'a positive diversity climate is associated with positive outcomes' (Dwertmann et al., 2016, p. 1163). We argue that such a socially responsible approach to TM could embrace diversity as a pillar to TM processes (See Table 1, the fifth TM conceptualization).

Barriers to skilled migrants accessing leadership positions indicate the lack of mentors and diversity management practices in managerial and top management positions (Ng & Burke, 2005). There are also ethical concerns where organizations pursue a homophilic talent focus (Almeida et al., 2015), which contributes to the underemployment of skilled migrants. Organizations could better integrate coaching, mentoring, and organizational role models in the context of their TM processes. For example, they can proactively advocate diversity through visible career development pathways to enhance the progression of skilled migrants. Forde and MacKenzie (2009) suggest that organizations that incorporate an ethical HRM strategy in terms of dealing with migrants appear more likely to reap the benefits of lower labour turnover than organizations that do not.

There are ongoing discrimination practices toward migrants internationally (e.g. Batnitzky & McDowell, 2011; Begley et al., 2008; Crowley-Henry, 2007; Pearson et al., 2011; Siebers, 2010). This creates additional barriers and challenges that skilled migrants face in their host countries. For instance, Salaff, Greve, and Ping (2002) consider the structural barriers existing in Canada which are encountered by skilled migrants searching for work; propounding the resultant human capital redundancy due to underemployment in the host country. The implications of discrimination are underemployment by organizations resulting in talent atrophy (Hakak, Holzinger, & Zikic, 2010; Zikic et al., 2010). This sets barriers to skilled migrants' occupational and upper social mobility in the new country when compared with the host country nationals/locally born citizens (Lin & Christiadi, 2006; McAllister, 1995; Myers & Cranford, 1998).

The topic of gender discrimination is also relevant in this regard. The specific concern for female skilled migrants features across management and organization studies publications (e.g. Ackers, 2004; Raghuram, 2004; Yeoh & Khoo, 1998). Here, most studies focus on the double (or more) challenges for women as migrants (Abraham et al., 2010; Beckgersheim, 1995; Cooke, 2007; Eby, 2001; Meares, 2010; Murray & Ali, 2016; Smithson, 2006; Tharenou, 2010).

To summarize, this paper calls for organizations to proactively adopt HRM policies and practices that commit to societal well-being, fairness, and equity in dealing with skilled migrants and their subgroupings. In this, the final proposition, it is suggested that if TM were to focus on the societal impacts of promoting diversity-embracing initiatives, as well as on organizational performance, then the organizational commitment to diversity could lead to a positive employer brand and a stronger organizational reputation.

**Proposition 5:** Organizations, by making a diversity-inclusive commitment (e.g., in terms of proactively attracting, selecting, developing, and retaining skilled migrants), may realize better long-term organizational outcomes, such as gaining a better employer brand internationally.

In the above sections a relationship has been drawn between existing TM perspectives, which have been shared in recent literature on TM (see Table 1 for summary), and the topic of skilled migrants. To summarize, organizations need to move from the current predominant short-term human capital focus regarding the TM of skilled migrants to a more comprehensive TM realization that would be capable of securing competitive advantage over the long term.

### Future research avenues

In terms of future research avenues, we recommend that the propositions shared in this paper form the bases of further studies on the TM of skilled migrants. Table 2 lays out each of the propositions and a respective research design detailing suggestions for empirical research to test these propositions. In gathering data on skilled migrants' educational qualifications and employment experiences, as well as language and cultural competencies, amongst others, within specific organizations, researchers could map the TM of skilled migrants to the strategic focus of organizations.

Using the five propositions in this paper, researchers could develop survey questions to capture the data and explore the accuracy of the propositions empirically. Where possible the same survey could be reissued again some years later in order to grasp a more longitudinal overview of skilled migrants' careers and TM in the same organization over time. Including biographical questions such as country of origin, destination country, gender, marital status, age, family status, etc. would further facilitate in-depth analyses which could pick out comparisons and variations across different skilled migrant attributes. Studying intersectionality, where the migrant status is combined with other demographic factors such as gender,





**Table 2.** Future research agenda on talent management of skilled migrants.

Propositions	Appropriate research design
<p>1. Organizations that are willing to invest over the long term in TM strategies to attract, identify, select, recruit, develop, and retain skilled migrants are more likely to receive long-term HRM benefits from their efforts resulting from the inherently cross-cultural flexibility and adaptability competences of this workforce grouping</p>	<p>This proposition calls on longitudinal research, which would map organizations' investment in their skilled migrant employees and the corresponding performance results from those employees over time. This could be a quantitative study, correlating attributes such as investment in training of skilled migrants, promotional routes for skilled migrants with the performance ratings for those migrants over time</p>
<p>2. In order for organizations to more fully benefit from the skilled migrants in their remit, it is necessary for them to understand the latter's specific career capital characteristics and to take these into account in their TM processes, appreciating the heterogeneity of their cross-cultural networks (know whom), professional, language and cultural competences (know how), and motivations (know why)</p>	<p>This proposition could be tested by surveying skilled migrants in employment, asking them which aspect of career capital (know why, know how, know whom) they feel they control personally and correlating these opinions with more objective data on their position, salary, and hierarchical level in the organization. Here, data including the country of origin of the respective skilled migrants could be collected and included in the analysis in order to determine variations within and across the skilled migrant workforce group. This data could then be analyzed, unpacking the extent to which each of the career capital triad links closest to the employee's position in the organization. Alternatively, qualitative interviews with skilled migrants would explore the career capital they embody and employ in the host country organization, allowing for a more nuanced analysis of how skilled migrants' career capital enables or restricts their progression in organizations</p>
<p>3. Organizations could benefit progressively across all organizational levels (and not just at the upper management levels) by aligning their HRD strategies and programs with both the objective and subjective career motivations of skilled migrants; thereby recognizing that skilled migrants' motivations may differ considerably from host country employees, and applying gradual, horizontal and/or flexible career paths may be more appropriate</p>	<p>A survey of employees which investigates the objective and subjective career motivations would be very useful here, using attributes such as the importance of title (on the objective career front) and the importance of reaching potential (on the subjective career front). It this survey could be repeated annually, time series analysis could be conducted to map variations in career motivations of skilled migrants from different countries of origin, in different receiving country destinations, with different attributes (e.g. gender, marital status, religion, family status) over time. Alternatively, qualitative interviews with skilled migrants would explore their objective and subjective career motivations, empirically showing the main motivations for skilled migrants in host country organizations, which would be important data for organizations seeking to attract and retain skilled migrants to their organizations. To explore and test this proposition, data analyses within international organizations could be undertaken, tracking the recruitment, development, and retention of skilled migrants against other workforce categories, collected before and then after the implementation of organization-specific TM HRM initiatives directed specifically toward skilled migrants, and measured against organizational financial results and image</p>
<p>4. Organizations specifically including skilled migrants in their TM strategies and practices, keeping track of their specific knowledge, skills and abilities, will be better able to avail themselves of the previous and diverse work experiences of skilled migrants which may directly impact on the organization's international performance and standing</p> <p>5. Organizations, by making a diversity-inclusive commitment (e.g. in terms of proactively attracting, selecting, developing, and retaining skilled migrants), may realize better long-term organizational outcomes, such as gaining a better employer brand internationally</p>	<p>While this proposition could be tested as part of employee surveys concerning their opinions on how diversity-inclusive the organization is, it could also be explored qualitatively, through ethnographic means or organizational case studies, where observations and interviews with employees and managers within organizations could be collected and analyzed</p>

age, occupational group, education, would add further nuance to existing studies here. Furthermore, in order to get more detailed and nuanced data, researchers may decide to focus on qualitative research particularly to unearth data regarding Propositions 2 and 3 from skilled migrants concerning their career capital and subjective careers. Researchers could also engage in ethnographic work further exploring the lived experiences of skilled migrants with their respective employing organization's TM processes. An ethnographic approach may be best suited to considering Proposition 5.

Moving ahead, comparisons across empirical populations and country contexts are needed to further refine and comprehensively develop theories on the TM of skilled migrants. For example, corporate social responsibility is becoming more significant in attracting employees in emerging country contexts (Vaiman, Scullion, & Collings, 2012). This could be of great importance as such countries suffer from insufficient talent pools. It should be recognized that there is a great difference between the contexts in which people management takes place across the globe particularly between emerging economies and the US context from which most of the theory comes (Vaiman et al., 2012).

Cross-country comparative studies concerning female skilled migrants are lacking in international HRM literature (Adler, 1999a, 1999b, 2002; Linehan, 2002). Women are known to face additional career challenges (De Cieri, 2009). Studies of female skilled migrants, perhaps using career narratives (e.g. Crowley-Henry & Weir, 2007) to uncover different experiences in the career development of women in the host country, would enable management and organization studies scholars to unpack existing weaknesses where organizations could improve processes and/or support mechanisms. This analysis could be linked back to the proposition on diversity and TM (see Proposition 5). Future studies could consider gender differences in the TM and career development paths and supports for skilled migrants.

There is furthermore a dearth of studies on international migrants in key positions in organizations where best practice and the business case for the TM of skilled migrants could be proven (Crowley-Henry et al., 2016). Future studies detailing cases where skilled migrants have attained objectively senior occupational positions are required in order to present the specific experiences, facilitators, and challenges that they face. Similarly, the career support required by skilled migrants is acknowledged (Bimrose & McNair, 2011; Collings et al., 2011), but remains under-explored empirically.

In short, multi-level, international comparative research is required in order to build a repository of factors impacting on the TM of skilled migrants internationally. Finally, while the focus of this paper is on the TM of skilled migrants, further research could consider if similar propositions could apply across other overlooked or neglected workforce categories when it comes to TM practices, such as 'B players' (Malik & Singh, 2014) and the low-paid (Devins & Gold, 2014).

## Contribution and limitations

The focus of this conceptual paper and its contributions are at the organizational level. Our analysis unpacks the dominant TM approaches and suggests how alternative conceptualizations developed from the literature on TM could lead to superior HRM outcomes for organizations. We engage with the definition of TM in which TM is of strategic relevance for the organization (Collings & Mellahi, 2009), and encompasses the attraction, identification, selection, recruitment, career development, and retention of talents by an organization in order to help attain the strategic business objectives of the organization.

The contribution of this paper to IHRM is threefold. First, our review shows that the dominant organizational approaches to TM are founded upon a human capital perspective which overlooks skilled migrants as talents in the organization. Second, by unpacking existing alternative conceptualizations of TM applied to skilled migrants, the potential organizational benefits of skilled migration are introduced through five key propositions. Finally, we integrate our propositions in a research agenda for further investigation on the TM of skilled migrants.

Unpacking the alternative conceptualizations of TM in the literature led to the following five propositions. First, organizations that are willing to invest over the long term in TM strategies to attract, identify, select, recruit, develop, and retain skilled migrants are more likely to receive long-term HRM benefits from their efforts, resulting from the inherent competences of this workforce grouping. Second, in order for organizations to benefit more fully from the skilled migrants in their remit, it is necessary for them to understand the latter's specific career capital characteristics and to take the heterogeneity of these into account in their TM processes. Third, organizations could benefit progressively across all organizational levels by aligning their HRD strategies and programs with both the objective and subjective career motivations of skilled migrants; recognizing that skilled migrants' motivations may differ considerably from host country employees, and applying gradual, horizontal and/or flexible career paths may be more appropriate. Fourth, companies specifically including skilled migrants in their TM strategies and practices, and being cognisant of their specific KSAs, will be better able to avail themselves of the previous and diverse work experiences of skilled migrants. Finally, organizations, by making a diversity-inclusive commitment (e.g. in terms of proactively attracting, selecting, developing, and retaining skilled migrants), may realize better long-term organizational outcomes, such as gaining a better employer brand internationally.

The paper has a number of limitations. The analysis has been predominately undertaken at the organizational level, but national outcomes concerning the TM of skilled migrants are not explored. For example, heavily regulated labour markets in terms of the entry of migrant workforce could constitute barriers to the skilled migrants' career development in the host country (Raghuram, 2004). Additionally, support that labour market regulations may offer to organizations in terms of the

TM of international migrants is not explored in this paper. Another aspect that this paper did not deal with is the type of employing organization (multinational or domestic employment setting) as a contextual factor. This would add further nuances to the respective experiences of skilled migrants regarding the TM strategies of their organizations, and would influence the strength of the five propositions in this paper. It should furthermore be noted that this paper is conceptual and the argumentation would be strengthened by empirical observations. Further studies may consider the TM of different international migrant populations within the same organization, focusing upon and comparing intersectionality nuances across the skills, abilities, experiences, and opportunities of domestically located international employees and delving deeper into whether country of origin, or gender, or religion, for instance, plays a significant role. Finally, while the different conceptualizations of TM existing in the current literature are separated in this paper, we acknowledge that these conceptualizations may well overlap and blur in reality. Many of the limitations of our paper can be mitigated by future research initiatives in this area.

### **Conclusions and managerial implications**

This paper has argued that the human capital focus within TM dominates and results in skilled migrants' talents being under-recognized by organizations in the host countries. Our conceptualization of the potential TM of skilled migrants, as presented in this paper, shares a longer term focus, a consideration of career capital and human capital potential, a realization of both objective and subjective career influences, an inclusion of skilled migrants, and appreciation of the business case for diversity. This paper's analysis suggests how organizations can improve the attraction, identification, selection, recruitment, retention, support, development of, and achieve the maximum input from their skilled migrant labour pool, to the betterment of their long-term organizational performance and international competitive advantage.

At the organizational level, the existing TM strategies and practices employed by organizations are failing to take into account skilled migrants. In order to address this omission, this paper has suggested that by taking a longer term perspective, organizations could better pinpoint areas where skilled migrants may be able to perform competitively particularly across international contexts. By including skilled migrants in their identified talent pool, keeping record of their additional skills inherent in the very act of being a skilled migrant (such as adaptability, resilience, cultural intelligence), organizations would be better able to identify employees with the required talent for particular positions and postings domestically and internationally.

Future research may consider the five propositions in this paper with regard to other minority groups (see also McNulty & Hutchings, 2016). In keeping with Swailes et al.'s (2014) recommendation, such research would deepen the rationale

and possibilities for organizations, whereby all employees have the opportunity to be part of the organization's talent program.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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