




“Talent management practices in a selected South African higher education institution”

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TALENT MANAGEMENT PRACTICES IN A SELECTED SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION

Abstract

Organizations utilize talent management as one integrated method to attract and retain staff, resulting in long-term competitive advantage. However, it has emerged that higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa (SA) are experiencing talent management challenges. The study aimed to establish talent management practices that are poorly managed in a selected SA HEI and further recommend ways to improve talent management practices leading to sustainable competitive advantage. The study was carried out using mixed methods within the interpretive and positivist research paradigms. This study interviewed 7 non-academic staff using purposive sampling; questionnaires were randomly distributed to 153 academic staff working at one selected HEI. Results of the study indicate shortcomings in workforce planning, succession planning, and performance management. It became clear that these three talent management functions were poorly managed by the HEI. This study further recommended ways to improve talent management practices that should significantly lead to the sustainable competitive advantage of the institution.

Keywords

talent management, talent attraction, talent retention,
higher education institutions, South Africa

JEL Classification

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INTRODUCTION

Talent management is important to organizations. Its goal is to ensure that organizations always have people available when they are needed (Cheese et al., 2007). Silzer and Dowel (2010) state that talent management is a strategic approach that incorporates different business functions, as well as several processes, and these are further executed strategically to achieve sustainable competitive advantage. Key business functions linked with talent management include workforce planning, recruitment and selection, training and development, succession planning, performance management, compensation and rewards, and talent retention (Musakuro & De Klerk, 2021). Silzer and Dowel (2010) recommend that these key functions linked to talent management need to be prioritized because they are highly depended on each other.

Effective talent management practices impact organizational performance. However, not all organizations have embraced the importance of talent management for their successes (Khalid, 2019). In the case of SA HEIs, there are increasing concerns regarding supply and availability of academic staff in the future. This is because baby boomers are now reaching retirement age, which suggests that more academic staff will be leaving the workforce than those entering the sector. According to Higher Education South Africa (HESA, 2014), talent management challenges in SA HEIs are evidenced by the shortage of trained and experienced academic staff to fill the gaps left by the retiring gener-

ation. Thus, the talent management system is not receiving enough attention as evidenced by the lack of high figures from young academics entering the higher education sector. It appears that in SA HEIs, there are poor talent management practices, and talent management gaps have emerged in recent years. The capacity of SA HEIs to deliver against their obligations has been affected. As a result, there is a need to investigate important business processes associated with talent management in SA HEIs to address gaps created by the retiring employees and recruit high potential individuals. To date, there is limited research on talent management in SA HEIs, even though the topic of talent management in SA HEIs has been investigated over the past years (Theron et al., 2014; Robyn & du Preez, 2013).

The study aimed to establish talent management practices that are poorly managed in a selected SA HEI and further recommend ways to improve talent management practices leading to sustainable competitive advantage.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

There are many definitions of talent management in the literature. However, there is no universally accepted definition of talent management (Galagan, 2008). Zhang and Bright (2012) explain that since talent is viewed from several viewpoints, it is challenging to come up with a universally recognized definition of talent management. However, there are some similarities in what is commonly associated with talent management in the workplace. Talent management is concerned with the management of competences and performance systems, as well as the evaluation of the impact of talent on business objectives (Galagan, 2008). Hughes and Rog (2008) go on to say that talent management is all about acquiring and retaining talents, as well as managing the engagement of identified talents. As a result, managers in charge of talent management must execute effective talent management strategies that result in a long-term competitive advantage for their organizations through the attraction and retention of talents.

Workforce planning can be viewed as a process that involves development and practical implementation of action plans of talent management (Grobler et al., 2006). It is a systematic procedure in which HR experts develop, assess, and anticipate the required future availability of staff needed to accomplish and execute the demands of an organization (Erasmus & Swanepoel, 2014). Workforce planning as a process that involves forecasting labor requirements as well as labor availability to determine employment gaps among these projections, thereafter, develop action plans

that can address these gaps (Heneman & Judge, 2009). The responsibility of workforce planning rests with human resource practitioners (Warnich et al., 2015). However, they cannot work in isolation, which implies that they need to interact with line management.

Recruitment is a way in which an organization brings attention to a new vacancy. Grobler et al. (2006) define recruitment as a process of attracting suitably qualified candidates into organizations. Hunter (2012) explains that the recruitment process usually starts by communicating with the potential job applicants when a vacancy exists and ends when a selection process starts. In some cases, the recruitment process may be determined by the needs arising out of the workforce planning process (Erasmus & Swanepoel, 2014). This substantiates the linkage between the two components of the talent management system.

Selection refers to the act of choosing and hiring appropriate applicants with potential skills, qualifications, and experience valuable to contribute more to business success (Wild et al., 2009). Du Plessis (2015) emphasizes the need for a proper procedure and fairness during the selection process because if it is not performed as it should be, it can lead to the wrong person filling the position.

The training and development of employees are essential for SA HEIs. It helps to continuously improve employee performance through better-quality output resulting in improved efficiency (Hunter, 2012). The training and development of employees can be split into two parts. First, the concept of training refers to a planned organiza-

tional initiative for employees aimed at acquiring skills, knowledge, and attitudes to improve job performance (Erasmus & Swanepoel, 2014). This implies that training is taken as a deliberate intervention to address either present or future shortfalls. Training programs are conducted in a specific way to facilitate learning in an organization and most of these are short-term in nature (Warnich et al., 2015). Second, there is a concept of employee development that is almost the same as training because both concepts concern work performance improvement. However, development can be regarded as a broader and comprehensive concept. It is a long-term learning intervention intended to broaden individuals through acquiring various types of knowledge, skills, and behaviors.

Succession planning is a strategic approach that is intended to act as a plan to replace important leadership roles within a company (Griffith, 2012). A comprehensive definition of this practice suggests that succession planning involves various efforts to predict leadership requirements, recognize candidate pool, develop and improve leadership competencies and capabilities through planned organizational programs (Hor et al., 2010). The significance of succession planning in today's competitive business environment is that it helps to ensure leadership continuity and avoid transition challenges when an experienced leader decides to leave an organization (Hills, 2009).

To manage employee work performance, organizations often use performance management. Performance management refers to a structured goal-oriented process whereby individual goals are linked with organizational objectives (Mondy, 2008). Performance management is regarded as an integral and essential component of talent management and it is usually guided by a performance management policy (Erasmus & Swanepoel, 2014). The primary activities of this practice help to ensure that organizational objectives are constantly being met effectively and efficiently.

According to Meyer and Kirsten (2005, p. 219), compensation refers to "the total sum of financial and non-financial extrinsic rewards that an employer offers to an employee for his or her services". These include intrinsic rewards that are self-administered and mainly linked to the job itself: for

instance, employee recognition, accomplishing career personal goals, etc. Conversely, extrinsic rewards comprise direct compensation, non-direct compensation, as well as non-financial rewards. Reward management is a way of developing and implementing various methods and policies to reward employees based on the contributions they make to an organization (Armstrong, 2000). Rewards address the specific needs of employees. In other words, rewards refer to compensation entitled to an employee in exchange for services he or she provides (Jiang et al., 2009). Since employee rewards are perhaps the most essential aspect of talent management, it is critical to ensure that they are fair, equal, and consistent (Schlechter et al., 2014).

According to Bussin (2014), talent retention includes employer attempts to keep valuable staff for an extended period. An expansion of this term includes organizational initiatives to limit voluntary turnover (Jackson & Schuler, 2004). To retain key employees, Bussin (2014) suggests that employers need to develop a retention strategy that focuses on the following core items: attractive compensation packages, conducive and congenial work environment, adequate training, and developing programs that can enable employees to grow and develop their careers. In addition, employers need to create a relationship between management and employees that enables employees to feel a part of an organization, and management needs to support employees on how they do their work.

Talent management is also associated with employee value proposition (EVP). EVP is a unique set of benefits that attracts new workers while also keeping those who are already employed by an organization (Bussin, 2014). Furthermore, these traits and benefits tend to characterize and separate an organization against other competing organizations (Minchington, 2006). Kochanski (2004) states that a distinguished EVP has the potential to add and strengthen employer brand since it describes the desired organizational state concerning strategic goals and desired culture. Therefore, this suggests and calls for talent management practitioners to design a unique EVP that can support employer efforts in attracting and retaining applicants.

2. METHODS

The study was subject to a mixed-methods approach within the interpretive and positivist research paradigms. The use of mixed methods facilitates the removal and elimination of potential gaps, which might be present during the collection of data if one method is used (De Vos et al., 2011). Furthermore, the study applied a case study research design to investigate the talent management phenomenon within its real-life settings (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

The sample was chosen using probability and non-probability sampling approaches. On one hand, academic staff members were selected using a “simple random sampling technique where each element had an equal chance of being selected” (Brynard & Henekom, 2006, p. 57). The sampling group was made up of a total of 153 participants who completed the designed talent management Likert scale questionnaire. On the other hand, the study interviewed 7 non-academic staff responsible for talent management using purposive sampling. The study triangulated the data by consolidating mixed methods used to generate a holistic assessment of the data analyzed.

3. RESULTS

The research population consisted of 59.5% of academic staff that were permanently employed, of which 47.7% were lecturers. Furthermore, 39.9% were of Black descent, and 19% were White, 30.1% were Colored, and 11.1% were of Indian descent. The majority (51%) were from the Faculty of Business and Management Sciences. The majority of the participants (39.9%) were in the age group of 30–39 years old, followed by 40–49 years old (34.0%), 20–29 years old (10.5%); a total of 9.8% were participants between 50–59 years old and this was also the same for participants between 60 years and older. The participants of the study were predominantly male (57%). The majority (60.8%) of participants indicated the master degree as their highest level of qualification. 35.9% of participants indicated they had been employed 0–3 years with the current employer, followed by 23.5% who indicated they had been employed between 7–10 years, 21.6% – more than 10 years, and 19.0% – employed

4–6 years with the current employer. The findings in Table 1 show that the majority of the participants were in their infant stages of employment with their employer.

Table 1. Demographic information of quantitative data

Item	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	87	57%
	Female	66	43%
Race	Black	61	39.9%
	White	29	19.0%
	Colored	46	30.1%
	Indian	17	11.1%
Age	20–29	16	10.5%
	30–39	55	35.9%
	40–49	52	34.0%
	50–59	15	9.8%
	60 years and older	15	9.8%
Qualification	Diploma	2	1.3%
	Bachelor degree	16	10.5%
	Honors degree	11	7.2%
	Master degree	93	60.8%
	PhD	30	19.6%
Employment	Others (please specify)	1	0.7%
	Permanent employee	91	59.5%
	Fixed contract employee	50	32.7%
Number of years employed by the current employer	Temporary employee	12	7.8%
	0–3 years	55	35.9%
	4–6 years	29	19.0%
	7–10 years	36	23.5%
Faculty	More than 10 years	33	21.6%
	Faculty of Applied Sciences	6	3.9%
	Faculty of Business and Management Sciences	78	51.0%
	Faculty of Education and Social Sciences	18	11.8%
	Faculty of Engineering	21	13.7%
	Faculty of Informatics and Design	19	12.4%
Position	Faculty of Health and Wellness Sciences	11	7.2%
	Junior Lecturer	39	25.5%
	Senior Lecturer	29	19.0%
	Lecturer	73	47.7%
	HOD	9	5.9%
	Admin staff	3	2.0%

In terms of qualitative data demographics, the sample was composed of 7 non-academic staff. Three participants were females and four were males. Furthermore, 6 participants were of African descent and only 1 was of mixed race. The majority of the participants (6) were human resource busi-

Table 2. Standard deviations and means for WP, CR, SP, RS, PM, TD, and TR

		Group statistics						
		Workforce planning	Compensation and rewards	Succession planning	Recruitment and selection	Performance management	Training and development	Talent retention
N	Valid	153	153	153	153	153	153	153
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		2.90	3.62	3.79	2.65	2.47	2.21	3.25
Standard deviation		.703	.955	.847	.620	.747	.896	.902

ness partners and only one was a talent management specialist. All the participants indicated that they had university tertiary qualifications linked to their roles. Only 1 participant indicated the lowest length of service (5 months) while the majority of the participants had more than 3 years of experience while working at the investigated HEI.

Table 2 shows a summary of statistics that presents standard deviations and means of the main categories of the questionnaire. To present item statistics, the study made use of standard deviation and mean as measures of central tendency and measure of the dispersion from the data collected. The larger the standard deviation, the larger the variance in the data set. Averages of the items in each group were calculated to create new variables that represent main categories.

4. DISCUSSION

With regards to workforce planning, seven items relating to workforce planning for talent management were included in this theme. A general pattern can be observed where frequencies moved from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. Table 2 provides a group mean and standard deviation of workforce planning. An aggregate average mean score of 2.90 as indicated reveals that workforce planning has been managed fairly by the institution despite having some gaps in the whole management of workforce planning. This is because it scored a low average mean slightly below the neutral point of 3.0 and a standard deviation of .703. On average, the participants perceived positive and relatively fair management of workforce planning practices. However, it was found that no retention strategy existed at the organization, there are no discussions in boardroom meetings about identification and retention of talent and finally, the institution needs to get rid of the current

workforce planning traditional practices because they are proved to be ineffective. These quantitative findings were further integrated with findings made in qualitative data. To back up quantitative findings, qualitative data revealed that participants' organizations do not have an employee retention plan. In addition, participants explained that there is also no formalized process for workforce planning in their workplace. To explain that, one respondent said "*I am not aware of a formalized process. Currently, it is done on an ad hoc basis...*". In addition, participant 6 indicated "*...we are just working with what we have, for example we take a look at the organogram and see if there is a standing position and fill positions as people resign, retire and that's about it...*". Therefore, drawing from the above feedback from participants 5 and 6, it seems the SA HEI does not have formalized application of workforce planning practices in this organization. Moreover, it is not done regularly. In addition, participants 1, 2, and 6 mentioned that a separate office of the institution (Institutional Planning Office) handles the workforce planning. Institutional Planning Office guides human resource business partners on how to implement workforce planning. However, this finding contradicts the literature. Specifically, Warnich et al. (2015) argue that human resource practitioners should be in charge of workforce planning since they must oversee the entire process. However, Van Zyl et al. (2017) suggested that human resource practitioners, employees, line managers, and other key organizational leaders should all take part in the formulation, planning, and execution of workforce planning.

Findings from the compensation and rewards management theme revealed a consensus amongst the participants, as they perceived their employer's compensation and rewards as unsatisfactory. This study complements and correlates with Department of labour (2016) and Theron et al.

(2014). However, the results contradict Nkomentaba (2014), who researched compensation and rewards. According to Table 2, compensation and rewards scored a group score of 3.62 on average mean and .955 on standard deviation. This means that there is a negative perception of compensation and rewards as indicated by the average mean that is above 3.0. Therefore, as explained earlier, employee rewards are perhaps the most essential aspect of talent management; a poor negative perception means employees are not happy with their remuneration. Accordingly, it can be viewed as the main reason for employees wanting to leave the SA HEI as supported by Nkomentaba (2014). However, this study found that the majority of academics (58.1%) are not looking forward to leaving their institution despite indicating dissatisfaction with their compensation and rewards packages. The talent retention theme expands on and provides more information regarding talent retention with specific reference to compensation and rewards.

Although a significant majority (57.5%) of the participants disagreed that their compensation packages are competitive when related to the labor market, the study found it interesting to note that participants positively indicated that their institution's compensation packages are competitive when linked to the labor market. The participants supported their responses with more substantial information thereby eliminating gaps left in the Likert scale questionnaire. In their words, participant 1 explained that *"we do compare each year's salaries using the REMchannel. Our institution participates in surveys of salaries via REMchannel... our institution's salary packages are competitive because right now I have a report that I received recently that indicates terms where we are in terms of competitiveness. Furthermore, participant 5 stated that "well, we are competitive. When you compare this university competitiveness using the REMchannel, you see that we are to a certain extent competitive against some local universities..."*

The research findings on succession planning items were consistently negative throughout the whole eight statements. Descriptive statistics were generally high and ranged between 3.46 on the average mean and 4.05 while standard deviation scored between .985 and 1.428 (Table 2). This means that there is poor management of poor suc-

cession planning at the SA HEI. The institution is facing challenges in facilitating the transition of junior-level employees to senior positions when senior members are leaving this organization. This contrasts with what the organization is ought to be done as discussed in the literature: an organization is supposed to be developing high potential employees within an organization with the idea to ensure continuity, avoidance of transitional challenges when experienced leaders leave an organization, and in doing so help to reduce cases associated with early promotions (Hills, 2009; Warnich et al., 2015). Therefore, the study argues that the institution poorly manages succession planning and there are talent management gaps.

Supported by qualitative research findings, 3 participants explained that SA HEI uses the New Generation of Academics and Khula Programs. The participants explained these two programs are government-funded programs that aim to attract and recruit a new generation of academic staff and researchers thereby replacing those who are going on retirement (DHET, 2018). Furthermore, 3 participants agreed that succession planning does not exist at all in their workplace due to a lack of an established internal succession planning system hence the reliability of the above-mentioned external programs. Due to a lack of an established internal succession planning system, the participants explained replacement challenges that have emerged at their institution. One of the participants explained that *"we don't have succession planning policy or structured plan for the institution hence we heavily rely on those two programs, Khula and New Generation of Academics Programs as I have mentioned earlier"*. Furthermore, another participant explained that *"the main challenge is that we don't have it at all. That's why we end up having problems when people retire because we end up not having people to fill their positions..."*. Therefore, the study argues that succession planning is poorly managed by the institution and there are poor talent management practices due to a lack of an internal succession planning system.

The overall remark that can be made from the results of the Likert scale questionnaire is that the participants agreed with five out of seven items for recruitment and selection. Descriptive statistics show a low but positive aggregate average mean

score of 2.65 and a standard deviation of .620 as presented in Table 2. Five out of seven items recorded a positive response while two items were negatively perceived by the participants. In general, this shows that the participants had a very favorable impression of their employer's use of recruiting and selection practices. For recruitment and selection activities to be effective, these activities should be guided by written policies and procedures (Kleynhans et al., 2006) while the organization puts a lot of factors into consideration when choosing the best candidates to fill vacancies (Louw, 2013). Therefore, based on the findings, this is what the institution is doing. Furthermore, the findings of this study support Louw (2013), who studied recruitment and selection practices despite participants indicating some negative responses in two areas.

Qualitatively, although the majority of the participants agreed that the current method of recruiting and selecting staff is mostly successful in attracting talents, some participants indicated concerns. On the one hand, the participants explained how the staffing practices adhere to and comply with the legislation. On the other hand, recruitment and selection are not always effective because it is strongly influenced and determined by the discipline of the position such as general position or scarce skills. In their words, one participant explained that *"effectiveness varies on the discipline, for example in engineering countryside it is a scarce skill. The few scarce skills that are there on the market are targeted by everyone. So, sometimes through these traditional ways of advertising, you don't get the people, and, in that way, we don't have a targeted way of sourcing candidates where you go and source candidates and convince them to apply..."*. Therefore, drawing from the quantitative and qualitative research findings, it can be said that the institution is doing well concerning recruitment and selection even though effectiveness depends on the discipline.

In terms of performance management, the literature is supported by the majority of participant responses (Louw-Potgieter, 2012; Hunter, 2012). Moreover, the findings of this study concur with Paile (2012) and Aguinis (2013). However, some of the findings contradicted Maimela and Samuel (2016) and Pienaar and Bester (2008). Seven items

were included in this theme. Despite recording one negative average mean score of 3.16, all the items were consistently positive as indicated by the group average mean of 2.47 presented in Table 2. This indicates a positive result in the performance management practices by the institution. However, through qualitative data, no positive feedback was noted from the participants. Firstly, three participants explained that no formalized performance management policy exists. To support this, one of the participants explained that *"we don't have a performance management system. It is currently being rolled out and it is called performance leadership. It is only being done on an ad-hoc basis"*. Second, another participant said that *"it is only implemented from grade 1 to 4 and it's not full implementation. Yet we have 18 grades. So, it's difficult to say something positive because it's not fully implemented..."*. Third, another participant said *"I don't think they understand the concept of performance management. They do it because they are required to do it. The line managers are the ones I feel like don't understand it..."*. Last, one of the participants explained that *"trade unions have not agreed to subject staff to performance management. So, it is not enforced on staff, but it is encouraged for developmental purpose"*.

Therefore, upon integrating quantitative and qualitative data about performance management, it could be observed that the institution is partly implementing performance management. Furthermore, there is no policy for performance management, no leadership competencies to conduct performance management, and inconsistency in the application of the performance management processes.

Quantitatively, the overall comment regarding training and development is that positive responses were indicated by the participants. They 'strongly agree' with the statements on the Likert scale questionnaire. The pattern was generally consistent throughout five items with a positive group score of 2.21 on the aggregate average mean score (see Table 2). Since the business environment is ever-changing, continuous investment in training and development becomes important (Beechler & Woodward, 2009). The reason is that it will result in the improvement of key competencies of the academic staff so that they can remain with relevant skills (Buthelezi, 2010).

Qualitatively, the study could not obtain participant responses regarding training and development as the participants explained it is not their responsibility. One of the participants explained that *“as Business Partners, we are just partially involved. The full responsibility lies with the Learning and Development Department”*.

In terms of talent retention, the research findings revealed that certain participants were slightly dissatisfied with the handling of certain talent retention elements (work environment, professional work development, and advancement opportunities, as well as compensation packages). The general agreement from the participants is that talent retention factors are poorly managed. It must be noted that all these three retention factors as indicated by the participants are factors that could encourage employees to leave if not addressed properly (Theron et al., 2014; Robyn & Du Preez, 2013). On the other hand, participants positively indicated that their jobs offer them reasonable and fair work-life balance options and opportunities, which is consistent with Hudson (2012), Miryala and Chiluka (2012), and Makhuzeni and Barkhuizen (2015). Interestingly, this study found that a significant majority (63.4%) disagreed that they are currently not looking for other jobs with similar compensation packages. These results indicate that majority of

academics are not looking forward to leaving their institution despite indicating dissatisfaction with their compensation and rewards packages. This study could not further establish the reasons why employees are choosing to stay in their workplace yet being not satisfied with their compensation packages as also acknowledged by Kontoghiorges and Frangou (2009). In this regard, the participants' consensus is that the institution is poorly managing certain factors that could encourage employees to leave as indicated by a negative aggregate group mean score of 3.25 as shown in Table 2.

However, using qualitative research findings, it appears that the institution is fairly doing well in managing employee retention given a lower turnover rate of 1.2% despite not having a separate retention strategy. To be specific, participants were asked to explain some of the strategies in place to retain experienced workers and participant 1 said *“...the only strategy we have now to ensure that we retain our key employees is through employee value proposition in terms of the institution's benefits, salary packages, promotion, and others though we do not have a separate retention strategy that will probably incorporate all these bits and pieces that we are doing in terms of the value proposition. I think our value proposition is working as indicated by our turnover rate which is at 1.2% for this period”*.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to identify poor talent management practices in a selected SA HEI. Results of the study indicate shortcomings in workforce planning, succession planning, and performance management. It became clear that these three talent management functions were poorly managed by the HEI. The study recommends the institution develop a retention strategy even though it was found that workforce planning is fairly managed by the institution. In addition, the institution needs to discuss talent management issues in boardroom meetings and this should be led by human resources practitioners in consultation with line management. Furthermore, it emerged in the research findings that the compensation and rewards of the employer are unsatisfactory. Therefore, the study recommends the institution look further into compensation and rewards as these have the potential to encourage employees to leave the institution.

The institution is not doing well with succession planning practices. Therefore, the study recommends the institution introduce a succession planning system within the institution, which needs to be applied to all the faculties and departments. The succession planning system will help in determining potential replacements of senior members of the institution. The study recommends the institution design a unique EVP that can support employer efforts in attracting and retaining staff. The EVP should mainly address issues related to compensation and rewards, work environment, professional work development, and advancement opportunities.

The study was confined to one SA HEI due to time and budget restrictions. In terms of future research, it is suggested that more SA HEIs should be included in talent management studies. In addition, further research could look into widening the scope of the study into developing a model or framework for talent management in SA HEIs or other HEI in the global fraternity.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization: Rhodrick Musakuro.
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Formal analysis: Rhodrick Musakuro.
Funding acquisition: Rhodrick Musakuro.
Investigation: Rhodrick Musakuro.
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Validation: Rhodrick Musakuro.
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