

# **Conceptualisation of a new ‘Early Careers Talent Pipeline’ Framework: Enhancing Organisational Sustainability via Feedback-Seeking Behaviour**

**Dr. William E. Donald** <sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Southampton Business School, University of Southampton, Hampshire, UK

<sup>2</sup>Ronin Institute, Montclair, New Jersey, USA

w.e.donald@gmail.com

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## **Author Biography**

Dr. Will Donald is a Research Scholar at the Ronin Institute (USA) and a Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Southampton (UK) as a guest of Professor Yehuda Baruch. Will is a Fellow of the Learning and Performance Institute, a Member of the National Council of Psychotherapists, and an Affiliate of the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services. His research interests include the university-to-work transition and sustainable careers. For more information please visit: <https://drwilldonald.wordpress.com/>

# **Conceptualisation of a new ‘Early Careers Talent Pipeline’ Framework: Enhancing Organisational Sustainability via Feedback-Seeking Behaviour**

## **Abstract**

*Purpose:* The purpose of this paper is to conceptualise how organisations can use feedback-seeking behaviour via Counter Signals from micro placement participants to improve the signalling process throughout their Early Careers Talent Pipeline (ECTP).

*Design/methodology/approach:* The paper follows a conceptual approach to develop a new ‘Early Careers Talent Pipeline’ conceptual framework that addresses four salient phases of attraction, selection, micro placement, and retention.

*Findings:* For each of these salient phases, a discussion is provided of the challenges faced by the Early Careers Recruitment Team (ECRT), why these challenges are important to organisations, and the opportunities that feedback through Counter Signals can provide to enhance Sustainable Early Careers Talent Management Signals (SECTMS) and future talent pipelines.

*Originality:* Signalling theory is advanced by introducing SECTMS and by the application of Counter Signals as feedback to a new domain. The practical implications can support the ECRT within an organisation in the enhancement of their ECTP as a means for organisational sustainability, leading to increased levels of productivity, competitive advantage, and profitability. Opportunities regarding future empirical research agendas that bridge the vocational behaviour and human resource management literature streams are also discussed.

**Keywords:** Signalling theory, micro placements, talent management, sustainability, conceptual

## **Introduction**

Organisations rely on talent management strategies within the wider context of Human Resource Management (HRM) for competitive advantage and sustainability (De Vos *et al.*, 2020; Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2013; Illes *et al.*, 2010). An Early Careers Talent Pipeline (ECTP) is a proactive strategy to organically grow a pool of talent to meet the business demands of future graduate headcount (Donald *et al.*, 2018). The creation of an ECTP plays a significant role in accessing and securing talent for the organisation. For example, 73% of Investment Banking, 70% of Law, 58% of Banking and Finance, and 50% of Oil and Energy graduate roles in the 2020/2021 recruitment cycle were filled by individuals who completed work placements with the organisation (High Fliers, 2021). In this paper, the term work placements encompass placements and internships. Organisations continue to look for innovative approaches to talent management, particularly due to the disruptive impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic as a global chance event (Akkermans *et al.*, 2020). This has seen an acceleration in the prominence of micro placements whereby organisations offer short work experience opportunities of two-to-four weeks to university students, often in their penultimate year of undergraduate study (Kay *et al.*, 2019).

However, employers face multiple challenges in developing and maintaining these talent pipelines (Anderson and Tomlinson, 2020; McCracken *et al.*, 2016). For example, in the attraction and selection phase employers struggle to differentiate themselves from their competitors to operationalise diversity agendas (Cooke *et al.*, 2021). Following completion of the micro placement, employers face the risk of individuals initially accepting the contract for graduate employment but subsequently reneging and joining a different organisation. The Institute for Student Employers (2020) found that 8% of graduate offers were reneged by candidates in the 2019/2020 recruitment cycle with the most-cited reasons as job location, flexible working, salary, benefits package, career progression, and organisational prestige. This

creates an employability paradox whereby investment in human capital during placements can risk enhancing the organisational capital of rival organisations (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2020).

In response to these challenges, the purpose of this paper is to conceptualise how organisations can use feedback-seeking behaviour via Counter Signals from micro placement participants to improve the signalling process throughout their ECTP. This offers theoretical contribution by addressing a research gap identified by Taj (2016) in examining the role that Counter Signals can play as feedback in improving the overall signalling process of an aspect of an organisation. Signalling theory (Spence, 1973) is also advanced through the defining of Sustainable Early Careers Talent Management Signals (SECTMS). The creation of a new ECTP conceptual framework enables systematic investigation into how Counter Signals can enhance the salient phases of attraction, selection, micro placement, and retention. The practical implications can support the Early Careers Recruitment Team (ECRT) within organisations in the enhancement of their ECTP as a means for organisational sustainability, leading to increased levels of productivity, competitive advantage, and profitability (Bandyopadhyay and Srivastava, 2021; Donald *et al.*, 2020). This paper also acknowledges and explores the role that organisations play in creating an environment for facilitating and embracing feedback-seeking behaviour, which has been shown to moderate the benefits of the Counter Signals in employer branding research (Connelly *et al.*, 2011; Srivastava, 2001). Opportunities regarding future empirical research agendas that bridge the vocational behaviour and HRM literature streams are also discussed.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Signalling theory (Spence, 1973) explores the interplay of signallers, signals, and receivers to address information asymmetry. The signaller seeks to convey information to the receiver using signals. Spence (1973) originally positioned signalling theory in the context of recruitment

whereby candidates as ‘*signallers*’ used their credentials during the application and selection process to ‘*signal*’ their suitability for employment to the organisation as ‘*receivers*’ of the signal. This application of signalling theory remains dominant in the vocational behaviour literature (e.g., Bridgstock and Jackson, 2019; Kalfa and Taksa, 2015; Rospigliosi *et al.*, 2014; Van Belle *et al.*, 2020; Weiss *et al.*, 2014). The HRM literature investigates how the signals by candidates can be decoded by organisations to identify suitable graduate talent (e.g., Anderson and Tomlinson, 2020; Tomlinson and Anderson, 2020).

However, the HRM literature also offers additional applications of signalling theory. For example, Yasar *et al.* (2020) focus on the impacts of signalling by the president of an organisation on market volatility. Cowan and Guzman (2020) explore the role that corporate social responsibility, reputation, and sustainability signals play in determining brand performance. Within an organisation, HR signals have been explored between line managers and employees (Guest *et al.*, 2020), along with their influence on the interlink between HRM and firm performance (Bandyopadhyay and Srivastava, 2021). Diversity signalling in the context of employee professional networks has also been investigated (Gutiérrez and Saint Clair, 2018). Additionally, HRM scholars have examined how organisations can use signalling within their brand marketing to enhance their talent management strategies (Ahamad, 2019; Chang and Chin, 2018; Gupta *et al.*, 2019; Pernkopf *et al.*, 2021; Vinayak *et al.*, 2017). Additional information on signalling theory is provided by Connelly *et al.* (2011) in the form of an extensive literature review.

This paper advances the application of signalling theory in the HRM literature by responding to calls by Taj (2016) to understand how organisations can use feedback-seeking behaviour via Counter Signals to enhance the overall signalling process. Furthermore, this paper advances signalling theory (Spence, 1973) by introducing Sustainable Early Careers Talent Management Signals (SECTMS). In this paper, SECTMS are defined as

the credible conveyance of information (the signal) by the Early Careers Recruitment Team (the signaller) as agents of an organisation to an individual (the receiver) regarding the benefits of the organisation to enhance the Early Careers Talent Pipeline and sustainability of the organisation.

Additionally, this paper defines Counter Signals in a new context of early careers recruitment as

A feedback mechanism in which a micro placement participant becomes the signaller and the Early Careers Recruitment Team as agents of the organisation become the receiver of the signal to enhance future Sustainable Early Careers Talent Management Signals.

Our focus now moves to micro placements as the context for facilitating feedback-seeking behaviour from placement participants via Counter Signals to enhance future SECTMS.

## **Context**

Work placements provide university students with the opportunity to combine work experience at an organisation with their university studies, traditionally via an eight-to-twelve week summer internship or for a year as part of a sandwich degree (Brooks and Youngson, 2016). Vocational behaviour literature predominantly focuses on the role that work placements play in enhancing the employability of university students from an individual agency perspective (e.g. Donald *et al.*, 2019; Heyler and Lee, 2014; Jackson and Wilton, 2017). Although there is an acknowledgement that participation in work placements alone may not lead to an increase in full-time graduate employment outcomes (Jackson and Collings, 2018; Kinash *et al.*, 2016). The literature stream also focuses on the need for careers advisors and lecturers to support students in securing placement opportunities (Donald *et al.*, 2018), and subsequently to facilitate individual reflection to maximise the value gained from the experience (Heyler, 2015). The organisational perspective is often only discussed briefly in the introduction and the practical implication sections of these papers. However, a common concern is that proactive

students are more likely to secure placements than less proactive students (Crawford and Wang, 2016; Donald *et al.*, 2019). This negatively impacts organisations as proactivity can often be a manifestation of knowing what to do via the accumulation of social capital, resulting in barriers to diverse talent participating in placements and securing graduate roles (Kalfa and Taksa, 2015).

The concerns of organisations from the vocational behaviour literature are also reflected in the HRM literature. The COVID-19 pandemic has shone a spotlight on the need for innovative HRM strategies addressing diversity and inclusion agendas (Cooke *et al.*, 2021). Diversity within talent pipelines offers a sustainable competitive advantage because in highly turbulent markets diversity is associated with increased innovation and creativity (Li *et al.*, 2017; Sung and Choi, 2019). Furthermore, the traditional placement formats are a challenge for Small-to-Medium-Enterprises (SMEs) as they have to consider if the significant investment in time and money is worth the risk that the participant will ultimately use the experience to secure graduate employment elsewhere (Holden *et al.*, 2007; Rodrigues *et al.*, 2020).

In response to these challenges, organisations have looked at innovative approaches to offer placements (Kay *et al.*, 2019). One such approach is the micro placement whereby an individual joins an organisation for a period of two-to-four weeks, usually during the summer between the penultimate and final year of their university degree. Whilst micro placements emerged in 2019, their prevalence and the interest from organisations in providing such opportunities accelerated due to the COVID-19 pandemic as a global chance event (Akkermans *et al.*, 2020). Thus, this paper offers one of the earliest insights into how organisations can adopt feedback-seeking behaviour via Counter Signals from micro placement participants to inform future SECTMS. Such HRM strategies can lead to an enhancement of the ECTP and organisational sustainability (Donald *et al.*, 2020). The process for collecting the feedback could include self-reporting questionnaires or could involve either the ECRT, managers of early

careers talent, or recent graduates conducting interviews or focus groups. The choice will be determined by the specific needs of the organisation offering opportunities for a tailored approach as this can positively moderate the benefits of Counter Signals (Connelly *et al.*, 2011). The next section of the paper develops an ECTP conceptual framework and explores each of the salient phases of attraction, selection, micro placements, and retention.

### **Early Careers Talent Pipeline Conceptual Framework**

The ECRT are responsible for developing an ECTP for the organisation. The vocational behaviour literature has tended to adopt an individual agency perspective to understand how penultimate year students can signal their employability during the selection process (e.g. Jackson and Wilton, 2017; Van Belle *et al.*, 2020). The beneficiaries of the talent pipeline are positioned as the student and the university through employment outcomes and league table rankings (Donald *et al.*, 2018; 2019). The vocational behaviour literature also addresses the massification of higher education participation and the need for a candidate to stand out from the crowd in a highly competitive graduate labour market (Bridgstock and Jackson, 2019).

The challenge presented by the volume of graduates transcends into the HRM literature as the supply of graduates exceeds the demand for graduates resulting in many applications per vacancy (Tomlinson and Anderson, 2020). Consequently, the SECTMS from the ECRT needs to attract high-quality applicants rather than a high quantity of applicants (Anderson and Tomlinson, 2020). The selection phase needs to be streamlined to identify high-quality candidates quickly ahead of competitor organisations, whilst being robust and guarding against the risk of inherent bias negatively impacting diversity outcomes (Adeosun and Ohiani, 2020; Cooke *et al.*, 2021). Organisations continue to use SECTMS during micro placements to engage participants and to examine the person-organisation fit (Rani and Samuel, 2016).



The SECTMS sent by the ECRT and received by the individual during the attraction, selection and micro placement phases play a crucial role in securing talent ahead of competitors. This is because the top candidates often receive multiple offers of employment and their experience during the talent pipeline influences their decision-making process when choosing which organisation to join (Institute for Student Employers, 2020). Once an individual accepts a contract for a graduate scheme the focus of the ECRT shifts to the retention phase of the ECTP. The aim is to minimise the risk of an individual reneging on their contract and opting to join a competitor organisation in the twelve months between signing the contract and joining the organisation whilst they complete the final year of their university degree (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2020). Concurrently, the review and planning phase for the next recruitment cycle begins.

This paper proposes that feedback from micro placement participants via Counter Signals can inform strategies and approaches to enhance SECTMS in the following recruitment cycle. Feedback-seeking behaviour by organisations from micro placement participants is particularly beneficial since the feedback provided is specific to the organisation, evidences the lived experience of the talent pipeline from the individual perspective, and provides timely feedback which can be actioned ahead of the next recruitment cycle. The feedback via Counter Signals should address both positive and negative experiences from the SECTMS to inform strategic planning for the next recruitment cycle. Iterative improvements to SECTMS based on Counter Signal feedback can provide the organisation with a competitive advantage in the war-for-talent and enhance organisational sustainability (Donald *et al.*, 2020; Taj, 2016). Figure I presents the Early Careers Talent Pipeline (ECTP) conceptual framework. The focus of this paper now moves to the four salient phases of the talent pipeline to discuss the challenges faced by the ECRT, why these challenges are important to organisations, and the opportunities that feedback through Counter Signals can provide to enhance SECTMS and future talent pipelines.

**Figure I: Early Careers Talent Pipeline Conceptual Framework**

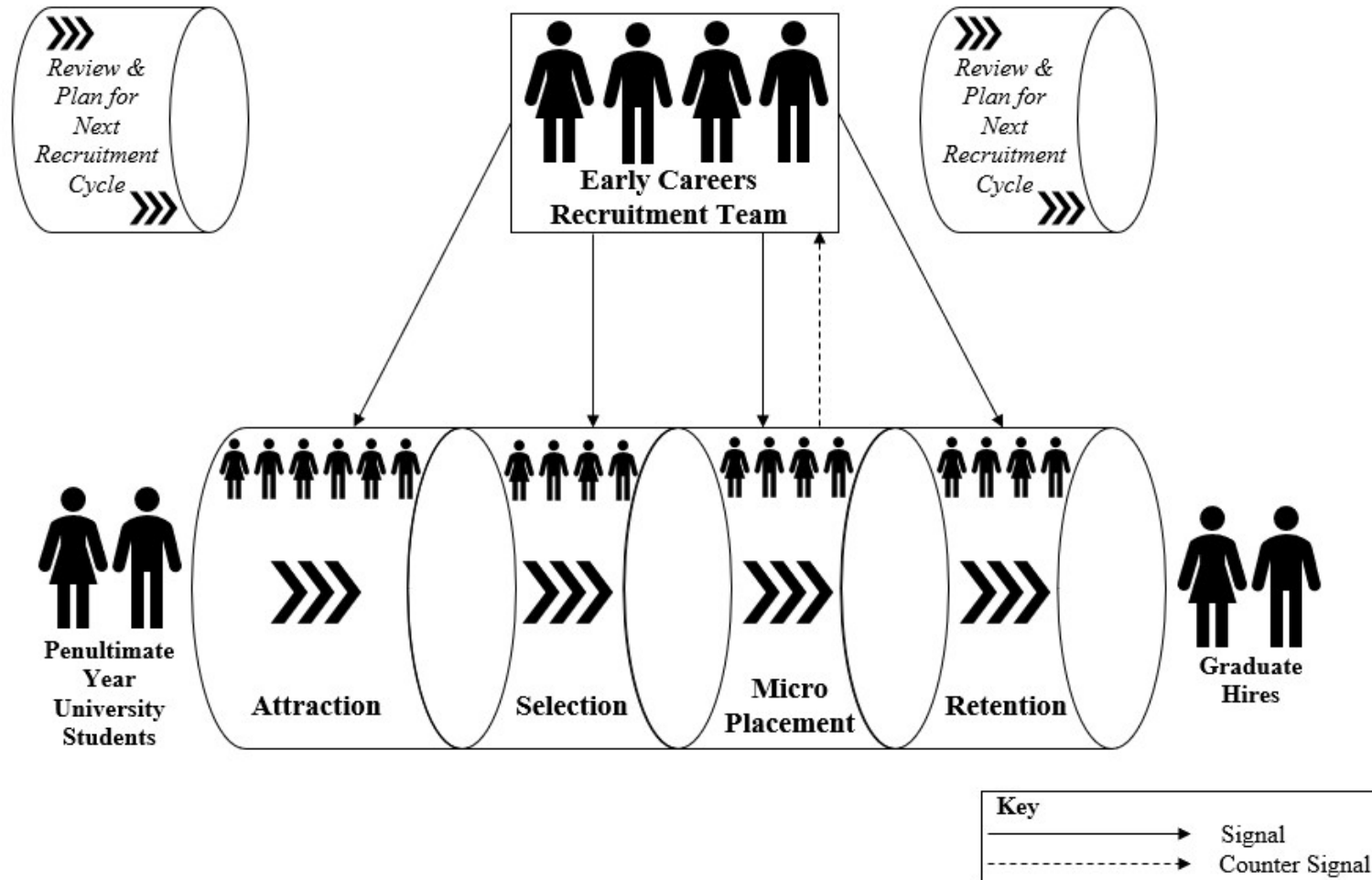


Figure I presents the Early Careers Talent Pipeline (ECTP) conceptual framework which indicates how counter signal feedback by micro placement participants can inform the signals sent by the early careers recruitment team throughout the recruitment process.

## **Talent Attraction**

### ***Challenge I: Differentiation via Employment Branding***

The ECRT face the task of differentiating their organisation via SECTMS from competitor organisations in the war-for-talent (Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2013; Illes *et al.*, 2010; Taj, 2016).

#### *Why is it Important?*

The attraction phase is often the first contact individuals have with the ECRT and forms the initial implementation of a proactive strategy to organically grow the pool of early careers talent (Donald *et al.*, 2018). Differentiation via employment branding in the attraction phase of the ECTP can also offer a competitive advantage by increasing the chances of a penultimate year university student applying for a micro placement at the organisation (Gupta *et al.*, 2019).

#### *Counter Signal Feedback*

Feedback from micro placement participants via Counter Signals can investigate what aspects of the attraction process were appealing, what aspects were not, and what innovative approaches other organisations successfully used via in-person and virtual offerings to promote their brand.

#### *Opportunity to Enhance SECTMS*

The ECRT can keep aspects of the attraction process which provide positive SECTMS and look to remove the aspects that provide negative SECTMS. They can also learn through the Counter Signal feedback from approaches taken by other organisations and incorporate these into their attraction strategy for the next recruitment cycle. Micro placement participants may also be willing to become brand ambassadors for the organisation. This could help to maintain a physical presence on campus by overcoming the temporary barriers in conducting in-person activities due to the COVID-19 restrictions.

## ***Challenge II: Diversity of Applicant***

The COVID-19 pandemic has shone a spotlight on the need for innovative HRM strategies addressing diversity and inclusion agendas (Cooke *et al.*, 2021). For example, 23% of employers survey by the Sutton Trust felt that the pandemic would make addressing social mobility challenges more difficult (Holt-White and Montacute, 2020).

### *Why is it Important?*

Encouraging diverse applicants to enter the ECTP of an organisation offers a sustainable competitive advantage because in highly turbulent markets diversity is associated with increased innovation and creativity (Li *et al.*, 2017; Sung and Choi, 2019). The attraction of diverse talent can also help to attract additional diverse talent in future recruitment cycles because students see people like themselves as part of the organisation (Donald *et al.*, 2018).

### *Counter Signal Feedback*

Micro placement participants could be asked for feedback on which organisations they perceived as diverse within the sector, why they perceive these organisations to be diverse, and how the ECRT could improve engagement with diverse talent during the attraction phase.

### *Opportunity to Enhance SECTMS*

The exposure of the micro placement participants to the attraction strategies of competitor organisations provides a learning opportunity for the ECRT to incorporate best practices when reviewing ways to enhance SECTMS during the attraction phase. Micro placement participants may also be willing to share contacts at the university from specific student societies that represent diverse groups of students. Access to these groups can facilitate targeted attraction strategies to differentiate and source diverse talent for the ECTP.

### ***Challenge III: Volume versus Quality of Applicants***

The COVID-19 pandemic saw a 65% reduction of year-on-year job vacancies and 61% of the employers surveyed had cancelled some or all of their placements (Holt-White and Montacute, 2020). This has led to a 41% increase in the number of applications per vacancy as the supply of talent exceeds demand (High Fliers, 2021). Therefore, the ECRT needs to attract high-quality applicants whilst discouraging low-quality applicants (Anderson and Tomlinson, 2020).

#### *Why is it Important?*

Attracting high-quality early careers talent offers the organisation a sustainable competitive advantage (Bandyopadhyay and Srivastava, 2021; Donald *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, a high volume of applicants can negatively impact the diversity and quality outcomes of ECTPs as shown following the 2008 financial crisis (Holt-White and Montacute, 2020).

#### *Counter Signal Feedback*

Micro placement participants could be asked what competitor organisations do in the attraction phase to signal to students their desire for high-quality applicants. Additionally, participants could be asked where the stronger performers on their degree course look to apply to, and why?

#### *Opportunity to Enhance SECTMS*

The ECRT can use this Counter Signal feedback as a learning opportunity to modify their SECTMS to attract high-quality students. The ECRT could offer financial incentives to micro placement participants in exchange for referring high-quality talent to the organisation. Micro placement participants often have access to a diverse range of peers via clubs, societies, and other social activities who might otherwise be overlooked. The student recommendations could be flagged in the Applicant Tracking System and prioritised for the ECTP selection phase.

## **Talent Selection**

### ***Challenge IV: Diversity Drop-Off***

The selection process usually involves multiple stages which require significant investment by the organisation in terms of time and money (Anderson and Tomlinson, 2020). However, each of these stages can result in a drop-off of diverse talent in the ECTP due to unconscious bias or diverse candidates doubting their capabilities with each subsequent stage (Berry, 2020).

### *Why is it Important?*

The Equity Effect Report (2021) found that the recruitment of diverse early careers talent leads to an average revenue increase of 58% for the organisation.

### *Counter Signal Feedback*

Micro placement participants can be asked to share their experiences of the different stages of the selection phase. Diverse participants could be asked what barriers they faced during the selection phase, where they felt unconscious bias could be a risk, and how the selection process could be modified to make it feel more inclusive.

### *Opportunity to Enhance SECTMS*

The ECRT can incorporate the feedback with additional metrics from their Applicant Tracking System as part of the review process for the next recruitment cycle. Each stage should be checked to see if diverse talent is being disproportionately lost from the ECTP. The ECRT can then look to modify the phase, replace it with an alternative phase, or remove the phase completely from the selection process if it is deemed not to be fit-for-purpose. For example, if diverse talent is being lost during the 1-2-1 interview stage due to unconscious bias then the use of a diverse recruitment panel to conduct the interview may be more suitable.

### ***Challenge V: Providing Feedback***

Candidates who are rejected during the selection process desire feedback to enable them to learn and improve their performance next time (Donald, 2020). However, a 41% increase in the number of candidates per vacancy in the latest recruitment cycle makes this a timely and costly exercise for the ECRT (High Fliers, 2021).

#### *Why is it Important?*

Candidates who receive feedback share it with their peers, the university careers service, and lecturers which can help to enhance the quality of candidates to the organisation in future recruitment cycles (Donald, 2020).

#### *Counter Signal Feedback*

Micro placement participants should be asked what the brand impact to an organisation is of not providing feedback and how feedback can be provided in a useful way. These views can be informed by their peers or from their personal experiences based on being rejected when applying to other organisations to secure a work placement.

#### *Opportunity to Enhance SECTMS*

The ECRT should look at the responses from micro placement participants to see if providing feedback offers an opportunity to enhance their brand and differentiate themselves from competitors. If so, how can the ECRT use positive SECTMS to deliver the feedback in a useful manner to the rejected candidate? Additionally, can the ECRT use self-selection filters during the application process to reduce the volume of applicants? Can technology be used to provide generic feedback to those individuals rejected in the early stages enabling the ECRT to focus their limited resources on providing tailored feedback to rejected candidates in later stages?

### *Challenge VI: Acceptance of Offers*

High-quality candidates often receive job offers from multiple organisations (Anderson and Tomlinson, 2020). The challenge for ECRTs is to convince the candidate to accept the offer from their organisation rather than from a competitor organisation (Adeosun and Ohiani, 2020).

#### *Why is it Important?*

The ECRT need to communicate the brand and values of the organisation to enhance the ECTP (Bach, 2021). Securing high-quality early careers talent offers a competitive advantage, enhances the reputation of the organisation, and leads to organisational sustainability (Bandyopadhyay and Srivastava, 2021).

#### *Counter Signal Feedback*

Counter Signal feedback from micro placement participants should identify why an individual would choose one organisation over another. For example, what aspects appeal most from competitor organisations, and what aspects appeal most from the ECRT's organisation?

#### *Opportunity to Enhance SECTMS*

The ECRT needs to use SECTMS throughout the attraction and selection process in a way that encourages candidates to make the organisation their top choice. The Counter Signal feedback can help to identify alternative strategies for communicating the brand and values of the organisation. The feedback can also help to foster a two-way recruitment process whereby the selection phase incorporates opportunities for candidates to find out more about the organisation. For example, providing an hour for lunch at an assessment centre where candidates can talk to current graduates and their managers to gain deeper insights into the opportunities and benefits of working for the organisation.



## **Micro Placements**

### ***Challenge VII: Shorter Timeframe***

Micro placements are considerably shorter in duration than a traditional summer internship or year-in-industry placement (Kay *et al.*, 2019). Subsequently, the ECRT and the placement participants have a shorter timeframe to assess the ‘organisation-person’ fit regarding the offering and accepting of graduate employment opportunities (Rani and Samuel, 2016).

### ***Why is it Important?***

Converting placement participants into graduate hires is a crucial function of the ECTP (High Fliers, 2021). Furthermore, placement participants place significant emphasis on whether the SECTMS made during the attraction and selection phases align with the reality of their experience during a micro placement, particularly regarding diversity claims (Lee *et al.*, 2021).

### ***Counter Signal Feedback***

Placement participants should be asked for feedback relating to how the SECTMS made during the attraction and selection process compare to the reality of the placement experience. Where are there areas of misalignment? What positive aspects are undersold?

### ***Opportunity to Enhance SECTMS***

The ECRT can use the Counter Signal feedback to modify their SECTMS during the attraction and selection phases to increase the chances of converting high-quality talent from placement participation through to joining as a graduate hire. The ECRT also needs to increase their interactions with micro placement participants as the timeframe for assessment is shorter, although more candidates can be seen over the summer period to aid the identification of talent.

### ***Challenge VIII: Fostering an Environment for Feedback***

The ECRT needs to seek feedback but also create an environment in which the feedback can be provided openly and honestly and subsequently actioned to improve future ECTPs. Bach (2021) found that 75% of candidates had never been asked for feedback and that 90% of candidates would be prepared to provide feedback if asked by the organisation.

#### *Why is it Important?*

Organisations that request feedback are viewed by candidates as learning organisations leading to enhanced perceptions of the organisation's brand and reputation (Bach, 2021). Feedback can also inform strategies to attract, select, and retain high-quality candidates leading to competitive advantage, profitability, and organisational sustainability (Donald et al., 2020).

#### *Counter Signal Feedback*

Placement participants should use Counter Signal feedback to respond to questions from the ECRT such as what have you enjoyed about the micro placement, what have you found challenging, where could improvements be made to increase your satisfaction levels? Furthermore, the ECRT team should use this opportunity to find out what additional support candidates would have liked to enhance their employability during their degree studies.

#### *Opportunity to Enhance SECTMS*

The ECRT can use the feedback sessions to make candidates feel valued, to help sell the organisation as a place that encourages feedback and learning opportunities, and to embrace the two-way interaction between the ECRT and the candidate in the ECTP. The feedback loop can also help to identify where students feel they need support to enhance their employability. This can inform strategic planning for future recruitment cycles.

## **Talent Retention**

### ***Challenge IX: High-Quality Candidates Receive Multiple Offers***

Micro placements enable candidates to sequentially participate in two to four-week placements with multiple organisations during the summer between their penultimate and final year of study (Kay *et al.*, 2019). High-quality candidates are likely to receive multiple offers for graduate employment from different organisations increasing the war-for-talent (Berry, 2021).

#### *Why is it Important?*

Securing high-quality graduate hires ahead of competitors offers a competitive advantage and enhances organisational suitability (Donald *et al.*, 2020; Taj, 2016). The ECRT can also signal the appeal of the organisation as a ‘destination of choice’ for early careers talent in their branding and marketing strategies in subsequent recruitment cycles (Vinayak *et al.*, 2017).

#### *Counter Signal Feedback*

Micro placement participants should be asked what factors influence their decision when choosing whether to accept or reject any offer for graduate employment. They should also be asked what strategies they have seen other organisations use that have increased their interest in joining that organisation. Finally, what experiences during the ECTP have encouraged or discouraged them from joining the organisation if they were to be made an offer.

#### *Opportunity to Enhance SECTMS*

The ECRT needs to use the Counter Signal feedback as an opportunity to learn what works, what does not, and what strategies can be implemented to maximise the benefits of existing positive SECTMS and overcome the impacts of existing negative SECTMS.

### ***Challenge X: Reneging on Contracts***

The Institute for Student Employers (2020) found that 8% of graduate offers were reneged by candidates in the 2019/2020 recruitment cycle. This creates an employability paradox whereby investment in human capital during micro placements can risk enhancing the organisational capital of rival organisations (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2020).

#### *Why is it Important?*

The reneging on contracts can negatively impact the branding and marketing of an organisation due to negative signals suggesting that alternative employers are a better destination for early careers talent (Gupta *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, it may be difficult for the ECRT to replace the lost headcount if the selection process has already closed for the recruitment cycle or the high-quality candidates have already secured job offers elsewhere (Donald, 2020).

#### *Counter Signal Feedback*

Micro placement participants should be asked what activities they would like the organisation to provide to keep them engaged over the 12 months between completion of the micro placement and starting as a graduate hire. Additionally, how frequently would they like contact from the organisation, and what form of communication would be most beneficial? Finally, what could the organisation do to increase the chances of an individual honouring a contract?

#### *Opportunity to Enhance SECTMS*

What new 'keep warm' strategies can the ECRT implement to reduce reneges and maintain their ECTP by signalling the value of graduate hires? For example, providing mentoring during their final year of university study, providing a development plan, making them brand ambassadors for the organisation, or running quarterly in-person networking events.

## **Conclusion**

### ***Theoretical and Practical Implications***

The purpose of this paper was to conceptualise how organisations can use feedback-seeking behaviour via Counter Signals from micro placement participants to improve the signalling process throughout their ECTP.

The theoretical framework advances signalling theory (Spence, 1973) by responding to calls by Taj (2016) to examine the application of Counter Signals as feedback to a new domain within HRM literature. The term ‘Sustainable Early Careers Talent Management Signals’ (SECTMS) was introduced and defined in the context of this paper along with ‘Counter Signals’. The new domain for the application of Counter Signals is micro placements which emerged as a new type of placement opportunity in 2019 (Kay *et al.*, 2019). Interest from organisations to provide micro placement opportunities accelerated due to the COVID-19 pandemic as a global chance event (Akkermans *et al.* 2020). Thus, this paper offers one of the earliest insights into how organisations can adopt feedback-seeking behaviour via Counter Signals from micro placement participants to inform future SECTMS.

Furthermore, the creation of a new ECTP conceptual framework enabled systematic investigation into how Counter Signals can enhance the salient phases of attraction, selection, micro placement, and retention. For each of these phases, a discussion was provided of the challenges faced by the ECRT, why these challenges are important to organisations, and the opportunities that feedback-seeking behaviour via Counter Signals can provide to enhance SECTMS and future talent pipelines. Whilst the focus of this paper is on organisations the challenges and opportunities identified transcend the HRM literature and vocational behaviour literature streams (Bandyopadhyay and Srivastava, 2021; Bridgstock and Jackson, 2019; Cooke *et al.*, 2021; Donald *et al.*, 2020; Lee *et al.*, 2021). Opportunities for future empirical research

agendas that bridge these two literature streams are discussed in the 'Directions for Future Research' section of this paper.

From a practical perspective, this paper highlights how the ECRT within an organisation can use micro placements for feedback-seeking behaviour via Counter Signals to enhance SECTMS. Organisations rely on talent management strategies within the wider context of Human Resource Management (HRM) for competitive advantage and sustainability (De Vos *et al.*, 2020; Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2013; Illes *et al.*, 2010). However, employers face multiple challenges in developing and maintaining these talent pipelines (Anderson and Tomlinson, 2020; McCracken *et al.*, 2016). Organisations that request feedback are viewed by candidates as learning organisations leading to enhanced perceptions of the organisation's brand and reputation (Bach, 2021). Feedback can also inform strategies to attract, select, and retain high-quality candidates leading to competitive advantage, profitability, and organisational sustainability (Donald *et al.*, 2020). Yet, 75% of candidates have never been asked for feedback despite findings that 90% of candidates would be prepared to provide feedback if asked by the organisation (Bach, 2021).

The process for collecting the feedback could include self-reporting questionnaires or could involve either the ECRT, managers of early careers talent, or recent graduates conducting interviews or focus groups. The use of recent graduates to run focus groups may encourage micro placement participants to speak more openly and to share a greater depth of feedback than they might feel comfortable doing in the presence of the ECRT or their managers. The format and approach for feedback-seeking behaviour should be determined by the specific needs of the organisation offering opportunities for a tailored approach as this can positively moderate the benefits of Counter Signals (Connelly *et al.*, 2011). Organisations should thus use micro placements to create an environment for fostering feedback-seeking behaviour to inform future strategic decision-making and enhance the reputation and sustainability of the

organisation. Furthermore, micro work placements can also fill the majority of graduate hires for the following recruitment cycle, particularly in areas such as Investment Banking, Law, Banking and Finance, and Oil and Energy (High Fliers, 2021).

Additionally, opportunities exist for organisations to supplement feedback from micro placement participants with data from other sources. This could include empirical data from the Applicant Tracking System concerning the application, selection, and retention phases (Holt and Montacute, 2021). Or feedback from employees involved in delivering the attraction and selection phases, or from managers in different areas of the organisation reporting satisfaction levels on their placement participants and subsequent graduate hires (Donald, 2020). This can be particularly useful for identifying strategies to improve the outcomes of diverse candidates during the ECTP (Gutiérrez *et al.*, 2018; Institute for Student Employers, 2020; Lee *et al.*, 2021; Li *et al.*, 2017). Organisations can also benefit from seeking Counter Signal feedback from external sources. For example, engaging with universities to seek feedback on how their students found the attraction and selection process and how these views compare to those of competitor organisations (Donald *et al.*, 2018). The ECRT can also share the feedback from micro placement participants with careers advisors and lecturers to foster collaborative opportunities. These partnerships can help to raise brand awareness and the reputation of the organisation offering a competitive advantage via access to talent and reducing the risk of renege of contracts in the ECTP (Li *et al.*, 2017; Sung and Choi, 2019).

Finally, organisations should engage in ‘keep warm activities’ with graduate hires during their final year of university study to guard against the loss of talent to competitor organisations. For example, through the creation of brand ambassadors, offering mentoring support, and hosting networking events (Holden *et al.*, 2007; Rodrigues *et al.*, 2020; Vinayak *et al.*, 2017). These can offer opportunities for the graduate hires to get to know each other and to meet the current graduate cohort and their graduate managers.

### ***Limitations***

The challenges discussed in this paper are deduced from the academic literature on vocational behaviour and HRM (e.g. Bandyopadhyay and Srivastava, 2021; Cooke *et al.*, 2021; Donald *et al.*, 2020; Lee *et al.*, 2021) and from practitioners (e.g. Bach, 2021; Berry, 2020; High Fliers, 2021; Holt-White and Montacute, 2020; Institute for Student Employers, 2020). However, this is not an exhaustive list of all possible challenges faced by the ECRT. Furthermore, Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Environmental, and Legal (PESTEL) macro external forces mean that the challenges faced by ECRTs will continue to evolve. However, this paper offers a framework for addressing additional and future challenges by using Counter Signals as feedback to inform SECTMS, leading to enhanced ECTPs and organisational sustainability.

Additionally, willingness to provide critical feedback to the organisation will be influenced by employment laws and cultural and social norms. Organisations that create safe and inclusive spaces where critical feedback is encouraged and actioned will see the greatest benefits from using the framework presented in this paper. Organisations who are not receptive to critical feedback will see the least benefit. Therefore, it is likely that the cultural and social norms will moderate the benefits and limitations of this framework for practitioners.

### ***Directions for Future Research***

Future research should empirically validate the practitioner-based findings that 75% of candidates had never been asked to give feedback on the ECTP and that 90% of candidates would be prepared to give such feedback (Bach, 2021). The perspectives of ECRTs should also be empirically investigated to understand if Counter Signal feedback from micro placement participants would be beneficial and actionable in informing SECTMS and enhancing their ECTP. This ensures that there is an appetite from both actors to engage in the process and to realise the associated benefits.



Furthermore, future research should look for opportunities to integrate the vocational behaviour literature and the HRM literature for the benefit of all actors operating within a career ecosystem (Donald *et al.*, 2020). This includes the shared challenges of employability, diversity, supply versus demand, and the interaction between individual agency and organisational factors. For example, university careers services could conduct surveys or interviews with final year undergraduates who have completed micro placements within a specific sector. This approach expands the application of the ECTP conceptual framework from an individual organisation to individual universities. The empirical findings from students could be combined with feedback from organisations to provide a richer understanding of the challenges faced. Career counsellors can then design and implement strategies based on informed and timely empirical data to enhance the employability of their students.

The opportunity also exists for universities and organisations to collaborate to realise synergy effects (Tomlinson, and Anderson, 2020). For example, can universities increase the employability of their students and their league table rankings to a greater extent through partnerships with other universities or organisations than would be feasible on their own? Can organisations work together to reduce the costs associated with their ECTPs whilst maintaining or increasing the overall quality of their early career hires? However, dialogue between the different actors will be essential and needs to be underpinned by robust empirical data for these potential synergy effects to be realised.

In conclusion, future research should empirically test and evolve the ECTP conceptual framework developed in this paper. The theoretical framework of signalling theory and the aspects of SECTMS and Counter Signals should also be explored further. Bridging the vocational behaviour and HRM literature streams can advance scholarly understanding and offer pragmatic opportunities for practitioners, leading to sustainable outcomes for all actors involved in the recruitment of early careers talent.

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