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Graduate trainees' perceptions of their psychological contract: A case study

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Orientation: In response to South Africa's historical context and persistent social and economic challenges, many organisations recognise the importance of graduate programmes as instruments for cultivating technical and behavioural competencies to facilitate business development and sustainability. We assert that the psychological contract (PC) should be highlighted as a crucial foundation for promoting workplace success for both graduates and employers.

Research purpose: The purpose of this research was to understand the pre-entry expectations (anticipatory psychological contracts) of graduate trainees regarding employer-employee obligations, and to evaluate the extent to which these expectations influenced their experiences of the PC during the initial year of a graduate development programme (GDP) in a South African consumer goods organisation.

Motivation for the study: Despite recent interest in PC research, few empirical studies have investigated the pre-entry (anticipatory) PC among graduate trainees. Therefore, this research is salient in its potential to offer insights into the experiences of graduate trainees who intend to optimise GDP outcomes.

Research approach/design and method: The study adopted a qualitative case study approach rooted within an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) paradigm.

Main findings: The graduate trainees held rudimentary anticipatory PCs shaped by social and professional norms before entering a GDP.

Practical/managerial implications: The findings contribute towards best practices in effectively positioning and managing GDPs and the subsequent employment relationship between graduate trainees and employers.

Contribution/value-add: This research provides a critical basis for establishing fit-for-purpose pathways for graduate trainee skills development and meaningful return on investment for organisations.

Keywords: anticipatory psychological contract; employment; graduate; graduate development; graduate development programmes; graduate employment; psychological contract; South Africa.

Introduction

Given South Africa's complex history and its ongoing social and economic challenges, the role and value of graduate programmes as a strategic human capital investment have become increasingly relevant and significant (Sebola, 2022). Independent research conducted among 64 leading graduate employers in South Africa indicates a growing prevalence of graduate programmes (SAGEA Employer Benchmarking Survey, 2023), with projections indicating that the demand for such programmes will increase. Graduate programmes function as a talent pipeline, allowing organisations to develop agile talent for their operational needs (Handley & Den Outer, 2022). In order to support and sustain corporate growth, many organisations have placed this talent pool on an accelerated developmental trajectory.

The concept of the psychological contract (PC) has been widely recognised as a key framework for understanding employment relationships since its introduction by Argyris in 1960 (Ballas et al., 2024; Coyne, 2022; Han, 2024; Usmani & Khan, 2022). South African research on PCs, although limited, has gradually been expanding, focusing mainly on graduate recruitment strategies (Konyana & Mizpha, 2023), employability (Khan et al., 2023) and the effectiveness of internships (Pietersen & Malatjie, 2022). Although these foci have made important contributions to extending

our understanding of PCs, our analysis indicates that a more in-depth exploration of graduate trainees' pre-entry expectations or anticipatory psychological contracts (APCs), is essential, considering the significant implications for talent acquisition and retention.

Research purpose and objectives

This study aimed to examine the pre-entry expectations (APCs) of graduate trainees regarding employer-employee obligations, and the degree to which these expectations influenced their experiences of the PC during the initial year of a graduate development programme (GDP) in a South African consumer goods organisation.

Literature review

Graduate Development Programmes are structured initiatives designed as talent-sourcing tools, through which organisations source specific talent to drive innovation and growth and meet operational needs (Winiarska-Januszewicz & Winiarski, 2014). They are considered a gateway to enhance employability and facilitate the transition from university to work (Di Meglio et al., 2021). These programmes involve rigorous selection methods (Handley & Den Outer, 2022), and, particularly in South Africa, they are focused on increasing diversity in recruitment (Kim & Spencer-Oatey, 2021). Given South Africa's unique and challenging socioeconomic and educational landscape, GDPs remain central in addressing high unemployment and underemployment rates (Mncayi & Meyer, 2022) and broader systemic issues related to racial disparities, and in promoting a culture of continuous learning. However, various challenges hindering the effectiveness of GDPs in South Africa have been identified. These include a mismatch between graduate skills and those required in job placements (Mseleku, 2022), inequitable internship conditions, characterised by poor pay, excessive workloads and limited skills development, and unfulfilled expectations, resulting in job dissatisfaction, poor morale and low motivation (Pietersen & Malatjie, 2022). We view these challenges as opportunities for improvement aimed at better-equipping graduates and employers for more successful and sustainable outcomes.

The relationship between graduate satisfaction and positive perceptions of their PCs is well documented in the literature (Herrera & Las Heras-Rosas, 2021; Elsouk et al., 2021). Graduates who are satisfied with their PCs tend to display loyalty and higher levels of commitment to their organisation, and they are less likely to quit their jobs (Herrera & Las Heras-Rosas, 2021), potentially resulting in enhanced job performance and job satisfaction (Elsouk et al., 2021). Psychological contracts have been linked to several advantageous organisational and individual outcomes, including organisational commitment and employee performance (Sachdeva, 2022), and employee retention and motivation (Donkor et al., 2024).

Graduate Development Programmes not only offer workplace skills and experience vital for securing employment and fostering professional growth (Mseleku, 2022), but they also create a strategic opportunity for organisations to cultivate a pipeline of future leaders (Handley & Den Outer, 2022). When integrated effectively, GDPs can enhance the PC of graduates, aligning their expectations with organisational goals, thereby boosting commitment, performance and retention (Clark-Ambrosini et al., 2022).

The psychological contract

The concept of the PC has been instrumental in understanding employment relationships since Argyris first introduced it in 1960. Since then, the concept has evolved to accommodate changes inherent in employment patterns across the spectrum of employment relationships (Kraak et al., 2024). Rousseau's (1995) definition of the PC remains foundational on this subject, where he emphasises the subjective nature of the contract based on individual perceptions. Rousseau (1995) defines the PC as 'an individual's beliefs regarding the terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement between that focal person and another party' (Rousseau, 1989, p. 123). Rousseau (2001) explains that the formation of the PC occurs during four significant phases, namely (1) the pre-employment experiences, (2) recruitment practice and experiences, (3) early socialisations, and (4) later experiences (post-entry). Kappelides et al. (2019) suggest that it is generally accepted that PCs include transactional, relational and ideological elements. Transactional elements encompass the material or economic dimensions of an employment relationship, which include salary and benefits, as well as non-quantifiable factors, such as opportunities for training and development (Kappelides et al., 2019). Relational elements involve a socio-emotional dimension encompassing key aspects such as trust, loyalty and support. The ideological component signifies alignment between personal values and the organisation's mission (Kappelides et al., 2019). These elements collectively provide a foundation for a deeper understanding of employer-employee relationships.

Psychological Contracts, particularly APCs, represent complex and dynamic frameworks that profoundly affect the early experiences of employees in an organisation. Before employees enter the work environment, their anticipations greatly influence their understanding of their responsibilities, their interactions with the organisation and their overall level of engagement. Anticipatory psychological contracts can foster constructive behaviours and strengthen commitment; however, they are inherently fragile. Employees often have unarticulated and unconscious anticipatory expectations, which may diverge from actual workplace realities. This could lead to dissatisfaction or disengagement if not carefully addressed (De Vos et al., 2009; Zupan et al., 2018).

In the changing landscape of the workplace, driven by shifting trends and the dynamics of the labour market,

organisations need to embrace an agile mindset towards PCs, by consistently engaging with them and overseeing them, especially in the initial phases of employment. Engaging with and managing APCs allows organisations to align the expectations of new employees with organisational realities, thereby improving job satisfaction, retention and overall performance. This proactive strategy mitigates the risk of breaches and establishes a robust foundation for enduring, mutually advantageous relationships between employers and employees, enhancing workforce commitment and productivity (Carroll & Tribe, 2020).

We argue that expanding our knowledge and perspectives on APCs is necessary to foster improved alignment between the expectations of the employee and those of the employer and to ensure an effective transition into the workplace for graduate trainees. For example, Gresse and Linde (2023) make a case for using schema theory in understanding the pre-socialisation phases of employment. Their study found that the norm of reciprocity is already present in APCs, which suggests that prospective employees have mutual exchange as a pre-employment expectation of their prospective employer. Venkata et al. (2023) confirm that the PC formed before employment commencement may influence employees' tenure and experiences in subsequent stages of their employment. In addition, they posit that APCs significantly influence whether a prospective candidate accepts a job offer. Saxena (2019) asserts that APCs are directly linked to employee retention, as employees are more likely to retain their employment if their anticipatory expectations have been met. Janssen (2019) highlights the importance of managing expectations from the outset, in order to reduce the possibility of increased turnover. Stoilkovska and Markovic (2021) make a case for understanding students' APCs as a valuable tool for Human resource management (HRM) practices.

In light of the above, we argue for critical engagement with APCs. This requires a considered shift from the instrumentalist views usually associated with APCs to a more nuanced engagement with the factors that collectively shape graduate trainee sensemaking and organisational behaviours.

Theoretical framework

The mental model of employment: Schema theory

This study adopted schema theory as the foundational framework to explore the formation of graduate trainee PCs upon organisational entry, as shaped by their APCs. Schema theory, initially developed by Frederic Bartlett in 1932, was originally intended to describe the mental structures that individuals use to organise and interpret information. Later expanded by Jean Piaget in the late 1930s with insights from cognitive development theories, schema theory conceptualises schemas as adaptive, dynamic structures that evolve in response to new information and experiences.

Schemas play a crucial role in shaping how individuals interpret and make sense of the world, as they store both declarative (what) and procedural (how) knowledge (Hampson & Morris, 1996).

In organisational contexts, schema theory has proven to be an effective framework for understanding the experiences of new employees, with particular relevance to APCs. Research highlights its applicability in examining cultural, neural, psychological and educational factors that influence workplace schema formation (Sharpe et al., 2021; Stoilkovska & Markovic, 2021). Recent studies, such as that by Basedow et al. (2023), have further validated schema theory's relevance, emphasising its utility in unpacking the cognitive structures that shape how newcomers mentally organise workplace expectations. Gresse and Linde (2023) argue that entitlement and reciprocity are critical to APCs. They suggest that newcomers enter with a preformed mental schema of the employer-employee relationship, embodying their expectations and anticipated obligations.

The implications of these insights are significant for organisations aiming to align management practices with the expectations of graduate trainees. Employing schema theory allows for a deeper understanding of how graduate trainees anticipate, construct and adapt PCs over time. It is a powerful tool for aligning organisational practices with trainees' pre-entry expectations, thus fostering a more supportive and effective onboarding experience.

Research method

Given our focus on exploring the lived experiences of graduate trainees, a qualitative exploratory research design was deemed most appropriate.

The study's primary data were gathered through face-to-face interviews with graduate trainees in their first year of employment at a single organisation. This approach constituted a qualitative case study, which examined a single organisation in-depth through an interview process (Hollweck, 2015). The desire to focus on a single case study was influenced by the need to study one group of people (graduate trainees) located within a particular organisation (Yin, 2011). According to Yin (2011, as cited in Gustafsson, 2017), if the intention is to study a single group with homogeneous characteristics, a single case study is the best data collection method to use. Company X is a consumer goods organisation that recognises graduate programmes as a talent-sourcing channel, and it has established a graduate programme focused on redressing employment inequality and affording employment opportunities to historically disadvantaged groups. The company's HR talent and acquisition team is responsible for the sourcing cycle, and it aims to recruit and fast-track graduates to meet business operational needs and contribute towards achieving employment equality in South Africa.

Purposeful sampling was used to obtain rich, in-depth information from the study's participants, given the need to select participants who met predetermined criteria. Given our aim to understand the formative stages of a set of expectations among newly hired graduate trainees, participants who met the following criteria were invited to participate in the study: (1) they had to be in their first year of the GDP; (2) they have obtained a relevant degree from a recognised institution of higher learning; (3) they are a South African citizen or have permanent South African residency; (4) they are between the ages of 20 years and 35 years and (5) preferably, they have not participated in another GDP. The final sample included three male and three female participants. Diversity in terms of race was achieved, with two white people, three black people and one Indian included in the sample, with the ages of the participants ranging from 22 years to 25 years. All the participants were in their first year of employment.

Once ethical clearance was granted and written permission from the organisation was obtained, prospective participants were invited to participate, and details about the study and all ethical considerations were shared. The final sample included six interview participants. This sample size was deemed suitable, as informed by Smith et al. (2009), who explain that interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) research studies commit to smaller and more concentrated samples. Interpretative phenomenological analysis centres on the subjective experiences of individuals particularly about how they perceive their world (Conroy et al., 2024).

Data were collected using an open-ended semi-structured interview guide. The interview schedule was piloted, and it was found appropriate for the aims of the study. Each participant completed an informed consent form before the interview commenced. The interviews were conducted at a time and place suitable for the participants. They were approximately 30–40 min long.

The data were transcribed verbatim. Data analysis was informed by the six phases of IPA identified by Smith et al. (2009). According to Smith (2003), IPA concerns individuals' subjective experiences and perceptions of their social world. As such, it explores in-depth individual experiences of a particular phenomenon to extract the attached meanings and understand how individuals make sense of their lived reality, that is, their personal and social environment (Lyons, 2007). This framework allowed for comprehensive engagement 'with the complex phenomenon', by 'exploring and interpreting participants' experiences from both the researcher and participant perspective' (Van der Neut, 2020, p. 49).

Stage 1 involved carefully reading the transcripts to encourage familiarity with the data. Reading the data was approached to capture words and phrases used by the participants that stood out within the text. Stage 2 involved extraction and formulation of emergent themes, as well as identification of interrelationships and patterns within the data. In stage 3, emergent themes were clustered and grouped into identified sub-themes. Stage 4 involved a process of grouping various superordinate themes. Smith et al. (2009) state that each superordinate theme is paired with respective sub-themes and coupled with relevant supporting quotes, alongside exploratory notes. The themes were then represented with excerpts from the transcripts, to ensure that they were grounded in the data. Stage 5 involved an interpretation process, which included bracketing, to pay attention to the ideographic nature of each account (Willig, 2013). In the final stage, emergent sub-themes and superordinate themes, together with the interpretations derived from each of the six interview transcripts, were compared, with the view of identifying patterns in the data. The results section below presents the findings of this interpretative process, as well as the identified main themes.

Various strategies were adopted to establish trustworthiness. Credibility was achieved through prolonged engagement with the participants and by allowing the participants to speak freely about their lived experiences. With regard to transferability, given the careful attention paid to recruiting participants who met specific criteria deemed appropriate for participation in the current study, we are confident that research would generate similar results if transferred to a different context. Confirmability was achieved by making concerted attempts to avoid personal bias and by keeping detailed records (audio recordings, interview transcripts and information sheets) as proof should evidence be sought. Finally, dependability was achieved by using a generic interview guide to guide the flow of the conversation between participant and researcher and also to ensure consistency regarding the key focus areas for exploration across the different interviews with the graduate trainees. Additionally, all ethical principles informing good research practice were upheld.

To ensure that ethical considerations were adhered to, the participants were required to provide their informed consent before the interview commenced. The informed consent included information about the study, the voluntary nature of participation and rights to confidentiality and anonymity and to withdraw from the study at any time without incurring any penalty.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC/00000322/2019).

Results and analysis

The study findings were grouped into four overarching themes reflecting the overall perceptions and experiences of graduate trainees as new employees at Company X.

Theme 1: Graduate trainees' pre-entry expectations regarding their employer's obligations

The graduate trainees identified their pre-entry expectations regarding Company X, highlighting key workplace satisfaction drivers, such as work-life integration, financial remuneration, career progression, cultural alignment and wellness. These expectations are consistent with the findings of current research (Amah & Ogah, 2021; Lemmetty, 2023; Ramnund-Mansingh & Reddy, 2021; Waweru et al., 2022), which indicate the importance of pre-entry schemas in developing APCs and their subsequent influence on graduate engagement and satisfaction.

Reasonable working hours were preferred, as indicated by the participant:

> 'Just walk into the office, a couple of hours - eight, nine hours. Done! You know?' (Graduate 1, White person, Female)

The value of flexibility was similarly highlighted by Graduate 2 who stated:

> 'It's a place of freedom, you know, because in the same breath, you are allowed to work from home … If you need to take some time off to handle things, go handle them. If you need to work from home because 123 is not alright, whatever, you can work from home. So, I feel like they are in touch with the employees, with the people, more than other companies.' (Graduate 2, Black African person, Male)

This pursuit of equilibrium corresponds with academic discourses emphasising work-life integration as a key expectation of graduates (Amah & Ogah, 2021). Further, the importance of adaptable working conditions is increasingly apparent in the contemporary workplace (Ramnund-Mansingh & Reddy, 2021), which suggests a changing employment landscape influenced by the need for flexibility and well-being (Waweru et al., 2022). The expectation of competitive financial remuneration was also underscored, as illustrated by Graduate 4:

> 'Besides working for a top agency, another factor for me [is] the money, the pay, and the benefits.' (Graduate 4, Indian person, Female)

Similarly, Graduate 3 (White person, Male) expressed the same sentiments, highlighting the importance of medical aid and pension benefits. These findings are consistent with research conducted by Donald (2023), which identified financial incentives as a significant factor affecting graduates' decisions, both as a catalyst for motivation and as an essential aspect of job satisfaction. The theme of career development emerged prominently, with the participants expressing a desire for mentorship and skills development. One participant indicated:

> 'I wanted someone to be active in my learning and development – a mentor, coach, who would show me a certain skill set that will help me progress in my career and in my life.' (Graduate 5, Black African person, Male)

Likewise, Graduate 4 stressed leadership development:

> 'I feel like in time, yes, we all want to become managers. However … I want to actually lead and actually manage. So, I felt that I need to have mentors, to be developed.' (Graduate 4, Black African person, Female)

Necessitated by the evolving employment landscape, graduates' expectations of career development have been highlighted in various studies emphasising lifelong learning (Kovacs & Kalman, 2022), opportunities for developing critical thinking and problem-solving competencies and leadership development and provisions for self-directed learning opportunities (Lemmetty, 2023). However, as revealed in participants' narratives, the aspirations of the graduates in this study extend beyond the desire for career progression to include, for example, skills development, guidance and support. This highlights the importance of proactive personalised guidance and coaching that enhances professional skills and competencies.

Additionally, the participants expressed a strong desire for a sense of belonging within the organisation, as indicated by Graduate 6:

> 'One of the biggest factors that I was looking for was culture fit. I really was looking for a place where I can fit in, a sense of belonging.' (Graduate 6, Black African person, Male)

While recent literature (e.g. Crowley & Jeske, 2021; Ellinas et al., 2022) views cultural fit mainly in relation to diversity and inclusion, the participants' perspectives reveal an additional, more personal dimension of this expectation. They noted that companies must foster emotional belonging and psychological safety, creating an environment where they feel recognised.

Well-being was another salient expectation, with the participants emphasising the importance of a supportive and healthy work environment. Graduate 1 expressed the desire for an organisation that cares for its employees:

> 'I was looking for a company that cared about their employees and have a system that was oriented around caring for employees.' (Graduate 1, White person, Female)

Similar sentiments were shared by Graduate 2:

> 'I just wanted a better working environment, like an environment that I feel like I enjoy, also from a mental health point of view.' (Graduate 2, Black African person, Male)

This is consistent with the findings of Amah and Ogah (2021) and Waweru et al. (2022), which highlight the increasing call from graduates for work environments that support their physical and mental well-being. The participants in this research argued that employee well-being should be incorporated into employee-centred policies that integrate well-being into an organisation's operational and cultural framework.

Rousseau's (2001) concept of an APC offers a framework for understanding graduate expectations. Anticipatory psychological contracts are conceptualised as foundational schemas formed before employment and modified as graduates enter the workforce. The participants' expectations reflect this anticipatory phase, where work-life balance, well-being, financial compensation and benefits, professional progress and cultural compatibility form the foundation for future PCs. According to Gresse and Linde (2023), schemas are essential in forming and evolving APCs, influencing graduates' views of and involvement with their roles and responsibilities. Schema theory emphasises that APCs are fluid, and thus highlights the importance of ongoing engagement and communication in sustaining and renegotiating these contracts (Coyne, 2022). For instance, providing mentorship opportunities could effectively align with graduates' aspirations for career advancement, while promoting an inclusive culture, which could fulfil their need for belonging. In this context, graduates' foundational schemas influence how they respond to their workplace experiences and perceive their employers' expectations. This is elaborated in Theme 2, below.

Theme 2: Graduate trainees' perceptions of anticipated employer expectations

Most of the participants mentioned the importance of continuous learning and contributing to organisational goals. The following responses reflect the expectation of continuous learning:

'I want to surpass just learning. I wanna do. And that's what I'm acting towards, you know. That's what I do on a daily basis, not just learn, you know'. (Graduate 2, Black African person, Male)

'I'm expected to learn and to give my input and just contribute to the whole team dynamics, and that's what they want from our side: to not just be there for the sake of being there.' (Graduate 5, Black African person, Female)

'They expect me to perform but also learn [*and*] interact with the company, and not just be another brick in the wall. They expect all graduates to get out of their comfort zone and ask questions and learn and go into different functions.' (Graduate 3, White person, Male)

The graduates also reflected that working hard was one of their perceptions of employer expectations. Graduate 1 explained:

'In general, [*by*] working hard and contributing to the bigger organisation, even if you are giving a little bit, you know that that contributes to the bigger things – just loyal, ambitious and hardworking employees that are looking at contributing to the organisation's goal, not just their own.' (Graduate 1, White person, Female)

These reflections underscore a proactive approach to skills acquisition and professional growth, where learning is viewed as a dynamic process integral to their role within the organisation at the individual and team levels. The findings reveal that the participants generally viewed hard work and continuous learning as key expectations of their employer. We suggest that the concept of continuous learning inherently integrates the principle of diligence, which emphasises that developing competencies through sustained effort and self-discipline is critical. This perspective is supported by existing literature. Research by Cheang and Yamashita (2023) highlights that employers increasingly value employees being able to enhance critical competencies, such as communication, digital proficiency and problem-solving. Similarly, lifelong learning is widely regarded as essential for career success, as it fosters resilience and adaptability (Billett, 2023; Erguvan, 2024). The participants' schemas of continuous learning correspond with research on vital 21st-century competencies necessary for rapid technological and industrial transformation.

According to schema theory, mental models or schemas shape individual cognition and behaviour. In this study, it was evident that the participants' anticipatory schemas regarding expectations of Company X shaped their work ethic and motivated personal and professional growth. This alignment between the participants' schemas and their expectations of their employer seems to inform graduates' post-entry experiences.

Theme 3: Graduate trainees' post-entry experiences at Company X

Participants commented that the transition from university to the workplace was difficult, mainly due to the fast-paced nature of organisational environments. These were some of the reflections:

'There's a huge transition, because you have to keep up with the environment.' (Graduate 1, White person, Female)

'It was very scary in the beginning, because you had to come out of your comfort zone.' (Graduate 3, White person, Male)

The participants viewed organisational support as an expectation to navigate this transition. For example, Graduate 3 mentioned:

'If you make a mistake, you make a mistake. It's not the end of the road. They are willing to understand and help you fix that mistake and learn from it.' (Graduate 3, White person, Male)

Similarly, Graduate 4 commented:

'But where I currently work, my current manager supports me, checks in, making sure that I'm doing the right thing, guiding me along, and also challenging me so that I think bigger. That's the one person who actually supports me.' (Graduate 4, Black African person, Female)

Empirical findings support the view that organisations that recalibrate their approaches to provide early-career graduates with support, mentoring and development, accelerate trainee satisfaction (Kim & Park, 2021); skill development (Wilson & Berg, 2022) and generational inclusivity (Ahn & Jeong, 2022).

By contrast, Graduate 5 had the following view:

'They don't understand our generation. They think reading a textbook or a blog about how Millennials think is how they are

going to understand us. At the end of these two years, we're going to be pushed into a role that we're not fully prepared for … and it's another sink or swim situation.' (Graduate 5, Black African person, Female)

Graduate 5's narrative suggests feeling abandoned by senior employees who were expected would provide guidance, mentorship and structured support. This generational disconnect can manifest in various negative ways within the organisational setting. For instance, it can provoke poor communication; poor team cohesion and perceived unfairness (Rudolph et al., 2020); lower job satisfaction (Glass & Cook, 2021) and increased interpersonal conflict (Gursoy et al., 2021).

Organisation branding and other human resource processes were mentioned as aiding the transition and assisting in clarifying graduate roles and responsibilities. In this regard, Graduate 6 explained:

'I'm very honest about this, I didn't know anything about [*Company X*], the corporate company. I knew the brand. So, until they did the activation at University of Johannesburg, and then that's when I met them. And I developed a great liking for them. So, I was like "OK, cool."' (Graduate 6, Black African person, Male)

The participants' responses further highlighted the need for information and clear communication related to their expected roles. For example, Graduate 4 shared:

'I feel like the communication between the grad [*graduate*] coordinator and the actual business doesn't align. So, basically, [*while*] HR can set up this wonderful programme, I just feel as… like it is unstructured since I started working here.' (Graduate 4, Black African person, Female)

These insights highlight that for some graduates there is a disconnect between the HR-developed graduate programme and the organisation's operational needs. This suggests that for graduate programmes to be effective, collaboration and regular communication is necessary between HR and the operational teams, to ensure that the objectives of the GDP are met and the desired outcomes are achieved.

There was also evidence of the various roles of the organisational agents in transmitting contract-related information to the graduates. Some of the participants identified line managers as important exchange partners in the organisation, as reflected by the following response:

'My current manager from my current unit is very concerned about my development.' (Graduate 3, White person, Male)

Similarly, Graduate 6 reflected:

'So, I feel like that's what my line manager does right. [*She*] really gives us tasks, not just sloppy things – real activities. And, of course, she will be there for guidance. [*For*] the most part, she has really allowed me to sort of fledge, of course.' (Graduate 6, Black African person, Male)

The support received from second-year graduate trainees was experienced as a positive and valuable experience for the participants:

'Second-year graduates even, telling us what they had expected and how it really was for them, and how it's going to be like for you.' (Graduate 1, White person, Female)

A similar experience was reflected by Graduate 4:

'But currently in supply chain. And I find myself speaking to many of the second years a lot, just to guide me as to if maybe I'm overreacting or I need to work hard on this or how do I perhaps accomplish that type of thing.' (Graduate 4, Black African person, Female)

A structured onboarding programme is recommended to manage graduate expectations effectively.

These relationships are consistent with Rousseau's (2001) model of socialisation, where exchange partners provide critical information about organisational expectations and facilitate the adjustment process. The participants highlighted that line managers played a key role in setting expectations for the employment relationship, while experiences shared by senior graduates helped them navigate and make sense of the new organisational environment. This is in line with Kim and Moon's (2021) findings, which emphasise the importance of both supervisors and peers in shaping the PCs of newcomers. Positive interactions with these partners assist graduates in navigating their responsibilities and establishing effective employment schemas, which can potentially promote engagement and retention. Maia et al. (2019) stress that initial constructive exchange relationships can influence positive employment schemas. In South Africa, where disparities in workplace preparedness may be more evident, businesses should promote clear communication, mentorship and peer support to foster inclusive and engaging settings for graduate trainees.

Schema theory offers a valuable lens for understanding these dynamics. The participants' positive experiences, such as supportive line managers and guidance from senior trainees, facilitated the development of positive schemas, which enhanced their integration into the organisation. As Sutton and Griffin (2004) observe, the PC forms during socialisation and is shaped by newcomers' interactions and organisational experiences. This study confirms that structured support and transparent communication were critical during this period. Aligning recruitment, onboarding and role clarification processes with graduate expectations from the outset could facilitate a smoother transition and potentially foster a more balanced PC. However, unmet expectations and negative experiences, including unclear role communication and perceived generational misunderstandings, could contribute to the development of negative schemas, potentially undermining engagement.

Theme 4: Graduate trainees' perceptions of unmet expectations

The participants mentioned unmet expectations, particularly regarding continuous learning, as a key

contributing factor in their leaving the organisation. Graduate 1 shared:

'If I am in a situation where I am putting in my all and meeting all their expectations, they have of me, and I'm not getting those back, I guess I will look another way and go on a new venture. That's brutal honesty right there.' (Graduate 1, White person, Female)

However, some of the graduates viewed leaving as a last resort:

'And if I see that I have been doing enough to work hard for the role, and the role still doesn't come, then just do what everybody, every other normal human being, will do, which is, you know, maybe start to look elsewhere for that role.' (Graduate 2, Black African person, Male)

'For me personally, if [Company X] doesn't hold up the part of the deal, I'm gone. I'm not going to waste the time.' (Graduate 5, Black African person, Female)

Rousseau (2001) highlights the salience of the evaluative aspect of the PC, where employees assess their post-entry experiences to determine the extent to which the PC has been fulfilled. Inherent in the evaluation of the PC is the process of adapting PCs to foster improved alignment between the employer promises and the employee expectations (Bester & Stander, 2021; Dhanpat, 2021). Adapting PCs is particularly important when considering the participant reflections regarding their unmet expectations, expectations for opportunities to better align and negotiate their expectations with organisational realities, and their considerations of exiting the organisation in cases of perceived breaches or violations. Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler (2002) posits that a successful exchange relationship is characterised by reciprocity, where employees exhibit positive behaviours (e.g. productivity), with the expectation of future advantages (e.g. developmental opportunities). This idea is consistent with schema theory, as the PC is a cognitive framework that directs expectations and behaviours. Meeting these expectations reinforces employees' existing framework, thereby promoting increased commitment. When their expectations are unmet, trainees may reassess their expectations or re-evaluate their position within the organisation, which shows the influence of schemas on the fulfilment or breach of PCs (Gresse, 2018). The conditional nature of the participants' commitment suggests that some aspects of the PC may be open to negotiation. By contrast, other aspects, such as learning and career development, are essential for employee retention.

Conclusion and recommendations

The findings suggest that the graduate trainees in the study had rudimentary APCs shaped by social and professional norms before entering the GDP at Company X. The study highlighted valuable insights and practical implications to inform best HR practices. Policies and procedures that speak to talent recruitment, compensation and benefits, and talent management are crucial in developing practices to manage GDPs effectively.

Firstly, stemming from Theme 1 and Theme 2, we recommend that APCs be engaged from the outset, so as to better understand graduates' expectations of what they should contribute to and receive from the employment relationship with their first employer, particularly in fixed-term arrangements such as a GDP. Schema theory provides a valuable framework for a deeper understanding of how graduate trainees forecast, establish and modify PCs over time.

This approach will inform best practices in effectively positioning and managing the GDP. In this regard, capturing graduates' PCs from the start will likely reduce graduate turnover by attrition. Therefore, ensuring an understanding of graduate expectations from the outset would better place organisations to address individual graduate expectations that influence their behaviour. Specific strategies may include structured pre-entry knowledge sharing and orientation which outline role expectations and career growth opportunities (De Vos & Freese, 2011) as well as capturing graduate expectations via questionnaires (Sutton & Griffon, 2004) and implementing early goal setting (Sturges et al., 2005).

Secondly, theme 3 offers insights regarding graduate trainees' experiences with early encounters (i.e. socialisation) in organisations. The study revealed how graduate trainees actively attempt to make sense of their early employment experiences, to confirm, negotiate or align their expectations with the organisational reality. This process is essential, given that sense-making, as a cognitive process, reveals an individual's attempts to make sense of themselves within their natural context. Thus, employers must seek to understand how pre-employment expectations shape graduate trainees' beliefs about their prospective employment and how they perceive themselves in terms of their contributions to their respective roles. Strategies to facilitate sense-making for graduates could include the implementation of peer relationships such as a buddy system and team-based learning (Lee et al., 2021); structured mentoring programmes (Wilson & Berg, 2022) and peer-led onboarding (Wong & Patterson, 2023).

Lastly, in keeping with theme 4, we suggest that the fierce competition for top talent in the labour market may explain the incongruence between information shared about GDPs and the actual experiences of graduates as they commence with the programme. Employers must carefully consider the role of the information about obligations that they share in shaping and informing graduates' beliefs and expectations. If obligations are perceived as promissory, prospective graduate trainees may expect these obligations to crystallise upon entry into the organisation.

In the South African workplace, where skills development and talent retention are critical, these findings underscore the importance of addressing graduate expectations, improving the onboarding process and sustaining transparent communication and relationships. This could involve

practices such as ongoing managerial feedback (Wilson & Berg, 2022), structured mentorship (Kim & Park, 2021), clear and transparent communication (Lee et al., 2021) and formalised peer support networks (Wong & Patterson, 2023). Organisations must also acknowledge the importance of providing developmental opportunities, clearly defined roles, employee well-being, flexible work arrangements and supportive exchange partnerships in order to align with graduate expectations and cultivate a committed workforce.

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Authors' contributions

C.M. collected and analysed data as part of a Master's research project. S.R. and S.B. subsequently drafted the manuscript and prepared it for publication submission.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, S.R., upon reasonable request.

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