

HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT (HRM) STRATEGIES AND ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT IN UK UNIVERSITIES: REFLECTIONS ON AN ACADEMIC-PRACTITIONER STUDY

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Abstract

In this paper we present and discuss findings from a small-scale mixed methods study exploring Human Resource Management (HRM) strategies and academic engagement in six universities in England. A collaborative academic-practitioner model of research was adopted, with the explicit intention of generating research findings of interest and value to HR practitioners, managers, and researchers. Key findings included: a) some recognition by HR directors that the profession has been slow to provide metrics to evaluate/demonstrate HR 'added value'; and b) a perception by academic staff of HR as part of 'management armoury', and the means by which unpopular initiatives are implemented; rather than a strategic driving force. Our identities and synergies as reflective practitioners and reflexive researchers are an important aspect

of our academic-practitioner model. We will therefore reflect upon the meaning of these findings with regard to evidence-based HR practice. We argue that reflective practice is important both for the role of HRM in the management of toxic emotion in the workplace, and the potential for the development of ethical HRM practice and organizational compassion.

Background to the study

The initial impetus for our research was Guest and Clinton's (2007) study into HRM and university performance in the UK. Their study was carried out in the context of two UK government-led initiatives. The first was a financial incentive scheme, offered to universities if they could demonstrate progress in the development of an HR strategy. The second was a review of employee engagement, which also made the case for establishing causal links between high levels of employee engagement, individual well-being, and organizational performance (MacLeod & Clarke, 2009).

Through their HR strategies, developed under the government's financial incentives, many universities in the UK located the leadership of staff development, engagement and organizational commitment initiatives in their HR departments.

In organizational performance terms, it was crucial that HR departments ‘deliver’ in terms of reaching the staff (the key drivers of organizational performance). Guest and Clinton’s research used survey and focus group methods with a sample of predominantly HR Directors. They found no direct association between measures of HR activities and a variety of standard indicators of university performance such as financial indicators, student satisfaction scores and research ratings.

Our study examined Guest and Clinton’s findings further with a sample of senior university leaders, Heads of Department (HoDs), academics and researchers. The research aims were to: a) explore the degree of engagement of academic staff with universities’ HRM strategies and associated HR-driven initiatives; and b) ascertain reasons for the levels of engagement reported.

Theoretical and organizational context

The organizational context of this study was HRM in UK universities, where Ulrich’s (1997) ‘business partner model’ has gained prominence. HR business partnering is a process whereby HR professionals work closely with business leaders and/or line managers to achieve shared organizational objectives. In particular this involves designing and implementing HR systems and processes to support strategic business aims. This may involve the formal designation of ‘HR business partners’; HR professionals embedded within the business, sometimes as part of a wider process of restructuring of the HR function (CIPD, 2012). Ulrich’s model represents a shift from an administratively focused personnel function, to a more

business-like HR function and associated notions of employee engagement (Alfes, Truss, Soane, Rees, & Gatenby, 2010; Pynes, 2009).

For the purposes of our study we initially defined engagement as the alignment and ‘connectivity’ of HR function and academic functions relating to leadership, staff development, recognition and reward. However this functional, operational definition is also located within a broader theoretical context of employee engagement, which is gaining critical importance; particularly in the domain of positive organizational psychology (POP) (e.g., Bakker & Leiter, 2010; Sweetman & Luthans, 2010). The emphasis in POP is on positively oriented human resource strengths and psychological capacities that can be developed and managed effectively. Alfes et al. (2010, p. 5) define engagement as: ‘being positively present during the performance of work by willingly contributing intellectual effort, experiencing positive emotions and meaningful connections to others’. Ironically though, as Shuck and Reio (2011) note, when practitioners turn to academic colleagues for strategies to develop an engaged workforce, ‘they are increasingly met with a gap in research to help guide their practice’ (p. 421).

Academic-practitioner research

In an attempt to bridge this gap in research a collaborative academic-practitioner approach was adopted in order to do research that would have practical relevance for HR practitioners and academics. In Work and Organizational Psychology (WOP) the notion of a gap is often seen to lie between academic scholars and practitioners (Anderson, 2007; Gelpert,

2006). Our approach was slightly different. We took the view that *individually we each brought different and unique blends of academic-practitioner skills and experience*. In other words we did not simply see one of us as ‘the academic’ and the other as ‘the practitioner’. Our identities and synergies as reflective practitioners and reflexive researchers are important aspects of our approach to academic-practitioner research, which we define further below.

Reflective practice has many meanings, ranging from professionals engaging in individual introspection, to engagement in critical dialogue with others (Finlay, 2008). *Reflexive* research practice is about attending to thoughts, values, feelings, actions and identity, and their effect

on others. Being reflective and reflexive, and then describing it to others - as we are doing in this paper - is not necessarily easy. Waddington (2010, pp. 312-313, citing Cunliffe, 2003) identifies reflexive principles, which we embedded into our academic-practitioner model:

- Acknowledging the constitutive nature of our research conversations;
- Adopting multi-perspective practices;
- Questioning and challenging our own intellectual assumptions;
- Making sense of actions in practical and responsive ways;
- Constructing emerging practical theories rather than objective truths.

In practice, reflective and reflexive principles were used in a cyclical manner, summarised below in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Reflective and reflexive cycle



Study design

This was a small-scale descriptive research study that used a mixed-methods approach to collecting, analysing and integrating qualitative and quantitative data. Ethical approval was granted by City University London, and data collection took place between March and July 2010 with a representative sample of six universities. Kathryn interviewed six HR directors (HRDs) and Julie interviewed six Pro Vice-Chancellors (PVCs). In UK universities PVCs provide academic leadership in specific areas of strategy and policy (e.g., research and enterprise), and act as deputies to the Vice-Chancellor (equivalent to the European title of Rector). Interviews lasted 45-90 minutes and were digitally recorded and transcribed using high quality voice recognition software. Together, we carried out focus group interviews in five out of the six participating universities, each lasting 60-90 minutes and typically involving six to ten academic and research staff. In addition, an on-line quantitative questionnaire survey (which included opportunity for free text qualitative comment) was sent to 120 academic HoDs at the six research sites.

The qualitative interviews and focus groups took place during a field visit to each of the participating institutions. The online survey drew on Guest and Clinton's (2007) questionnaire, and qualitative find-

ings from our fieldwork, reflecting HoDs' impressions and opinions of HRM function and effectiveness. The survey was administered via email using the *Bristol Online Survey* tool (<http://www.survey.bris.ac.uk>), and consisted of a rating scale of 56 statements and three opened-ended questions relating to: a) HR policies and practices; b) HR effectiveness; and c) HR influence (see Waddington & Lister, 2010). Template analysis was used as a framework to facilitate the integration of qualitative and quantitative data. Briefly, template analysis is the process of organising and analysing data according to themes which are further refined as text is analysed (see King, 2012).

Summary of key findings

The full research report and results can be found in Waddington and Lister (2010). In this paper we summarise and reflect upon key findings and cross-cutting themes relating to: a) academic perceptions of HR; b) status, visibility and influence of HR strategy; c) academic values; and d) academic-practitioner crossover.

Results from the quantitative survey with HoDs indicated that HR practices such as appraisal, recruitment and staff development were generally perceived as effective. A notable exception was in the area of managing poor performance (see Table 1 on the next page).



Table 1: Perceptions of effectiveness of HR practices

Please give your opinion, as far as you are able to, of the effectiveness of the following broad range of HR practices with regard to the way they are currently implemented in your university			
Options were: not at all effective/not very effective/fairly effective/very effective/don't know			
	% overall not effective	% overall effective	% don't know
Recruitment and selection of academic staff	16	81	3
Ability to attract top quality staff	47	50	3
Staff development for academic staff	19	78	3
Academic leadership development	28	66	6
University leadership development	31	53	16
Appraisal	12	88	0
Processes of employee involvement e.g. consultation, staff surveys	31	69	0
Succession planning	56	31	13
Reward systems	47	44	9
Managing poor performance	72	22	6
Discipline	53	38	9
Attendance/absence management	37	50	13
Ability to retain top quality staff	34	63	3

However HoDs' perceptions of HR influence upon university performance supported Guest and Clinton's (2007) findings that

there is little association between measures of HR activity and standard indicators of university performance (see Table 2 below).

Table 2: Perceptions of HR influence upon university performance

Please indicate the extent to which you consider the HR function in your university is able to influence the following			
Options were: no influence/small influence/sizeable influence/large influence/don't know			
	% overall little influence	% overall larger influence	% don't know
The quality of teaching	84	13	3
The quality of research	88	9	3
The quality of senior university management and leadership	63	34	3
The ability to retain staff	59	38	3
The university's financial position	59	34	7
The quality of the HR function	32	66	12
The quality of student outcomes e.g. grades, completion rates, employment rates	94	3	3

The survey response rate was low, at 27% (N= 32), which although disappointing, was not entirely unexpected, as all of the universities in the study had indicated they were also undertaking a range of on-line staff surveys. More generally, survey response rates are declining over time as a consequence of the increasing popularity and ease of electronic distribution of surveys (Anseel, Lievens, Schollaert, & Choragwicka, 2010).

Key findings from the qualitative data included some recognition by HR directors that the profession has been slow to provide metrics to evaluate or demonstrate HR 'added value' in core areas of university business. For example as one HR Director (HRD) reflected:

"I have been trying to provide a vehicle by which people become better leaders and managers but my knowledge of the deliverables around what makes a better teacher is non-existent... One of the failures that I have got is the inability to demonstrate what works; there is no good evidence that I have managed to have a 10% improvement in X or Y, I can't show that and that's is a failure and a disappointment to me". (HRD interview)

Some senior academics expressed a degree of concern about HR departments becoming populated by people who do not understand universities. For example during one interview, a PVC raised concerns about the relevance of Ulrich's (1997) 'business partner model':

"I have to say I have some concerns about this [the Ulrich model] because

I don't think HR issues in academic departments are functionally equivalent to HR issues in the service areas. And, I have to say, that I'm not sure that enough people in HR have much experience of academic departments and how they operate... leading academics is difficult for us as PVCs, and we are academics". (PVC interview)

Focus group data and qualitative comment in the on-line survey suggest that academics perceive HR as part of 'management armoury', and the means by which unpopular initiatives are implemented, rather than a strategic driving force. There was an underlying sense of disruption and threat. For example:

"I have heard people say that academic staff are an endangered species here, they are seen as a problem... there is a view that academics have become some kind of beast that has to be controlled by HR... and I think the reason for this is there was also a view that the HR function needed to be professionalised... and it now feels like HR is the tail wagging the dog... there's a bit of treading on toes, it feels like they are muscling in on areas traditionally held by academics". (Academic focus group)

"HR is not perceived in a positive light. The organization has gone through extensive change, which was not handled appropriately and proved to be extremely disruptive and has had a negative impact on how the organization is perceived from within. HR is valuable in as much as they provide a supportive/informative role, not a cen-

tral role to the organization". (HoD survey comment)

On the other hand, academics valued HR for its advisory/support role:

"HR has been my 'saviour' - I found myself managing a team that had been cobbled together by somebody else and there were a lot of issues and resistance in the team. I felt like I had been thrown in at the deep end but every time I needed help and they were there for me and enabled me to stay well and truly within the law". (Academic focus group)

We also asked HRDs and PVCs about the extent of collaboration between the HR department and academic HR specialists within their university. It appeared that collaboration was very rare, and a variety of reasons were given which included: academics not being invited to contribute; academics being invited to contribute, but not wishing to participate; academics interested in theory and not practice; HR not wishing to invite scrutiny which would delay implementation of pragmatic and timely solutions; academics consider it 'unseemly' to offer the advice within the institution that they may offer outside (to industry and commerce, for example):

"Indeed, when you have the leading X professor in the UK working for you and you're talking about the X position of British institutions, you know, he can tell you whether you're right or wrong in three minutes. Interestingly enough, they are not very often consulted by universities, their own experts, in that sense". (PVC interview)

"There is no evidence to me that 'Management' or 'Law' are managed any better because of their specialisation in management and law because of course they are specialisations are in the theory of it rather than in the practice of it". (HRD interview)

There were some notable exceptions, for instance where HR directors worked with and/or consulted with colleagues in HR related faculties/schools or vice versa. These collaborations tended to be based upon existing relationships and informal networks:

"There are some linkages so I know that I will phone somebody up in HR but that's more because I know that person and I have respect for them and I will say what do you think about? But I think I'm using her to test my idea ... and there are a few people in there [the business school] that we use as a sounding board because of their management experience and one of those is from HR". (HRD interview)

As the analytic template developed it became clear that certain integrative cross-cutting themes seemed to pervade much of the data. King (2012) suggests that one way to conceptualise integrative themes is 'as undercurrents running through participants' accounts; often, perhaps, not addressed explicitly but very apparent to a careful reader (p. 432, emphasis added). These themes and undercurrents became apparent in reflective and reflexive conversations (see Figure 1 above) that took place during data analysis. We also shared our reflections with the research steering group, and at conferences, as a means of 'exposing our thinking'.

There were two themes of particular interest to us as reflective practitioners and reflexive researchers working in universities. First was the lack of engagement between academics who generate research-based evidence in HRM and their practitioner colleagues. Second was the underlying notion of HR departments as repositories of toxic emotion (see Gallos, 2008). Therefore we now reflect upon the meaning of our findings with regard to evidence-based HR practice and the management of toxic emotion at work.

Reflecting upon findings

We have reflected (and continue to reflect) upon our research at many points during the study. We have had critical conversations about our engagement with each other as collaborative researchers, academics and practitioners, and about what impact the findings will have for HR practitioners. Our initial reflections at the beginning of the study were:

Kathryn: The bridge between research and practice should be strong enough to support two-way traffic and wide enough to give academics and practitioners space to stop, look, listen, think and talk together, and create shared understandings and measures of effective collaboration.

Julie: My primary interest is what research on bridging the academic practitioner divide can teach practitioners about the values and motivation of academic staff and the implications of this for leadership and management in higher education.

In our initial reflections we talked in terms of gaps and bridges, and this is mirrored in the literature (Anderson, 2007; Bar-

tunek, 2007; Gray, Iles, & Watson, 2011). Nevertheless we also take the view (as discussed earlier in the paper) that individually, we each bring different and unique blends of academic-practitioner skills and experience. Looking out from our individual perspectives, but looking together, we have been able to synergise theory and practice in: a) applied WOP, healthcare and nursing (Kathryn); and b) HRM, management, strategy and planning (Julie). Notably, evidence-based practice is central to both healthcare and HRM, albeit arguably more fully articulated and developed in the former (Guest & Zijlstra, 2012).

Evidence-based management generally, and evidence-based HRM specifically, is characterised by four key features: a) use of the best available scientific evidence from peer-reviewed sources; b) systematic gathering of organizational facts, indicators and metrics to better act on the evidence; c) practitioner judgment assisted by procedures, practices and frameworks that reduce bias, improve decision quality and create more valid learning over time; and d) *ethical considerations* weighing the short- and long-term impacts of decisions on stakeholders and society (Rousseau & Barends, 2011, p. 224, emphasis added). We will not focus in depth or detail on the current debates and discourses in the field of evidence-based HRM; nor is it our intention to focus on similar debates in the field of WOP, as others have addressed these issues comprehensively (e.g., Briner & Rousseau, 2011; Guest & Zijlstra, 2012). Instead, we reflect further upon the insights, paradoxes and puzzles that have emerged from exposing our thinking, revealing, challenging and unsettling our assumptions.

Reflecting further

In our reflections about reflective practice it became apparent that we were coming from different perspectives and assumptions. For Kathryn, as a healthcare professional and nurse, reflection is a core aspect of her academic and research practice (e.g., see Molloy & Waddington, 2011; Waddington, 2010). For Julie, as a HRM practitioner and academic, reflection is a relevant, but less prominent aspect of her practice. In order to try and articulate the reality of ‘doing reflective practice’ we will use the above points b) – systematic gathering of organizational facts, indicators and metrics to better act on the evidence; and c) – ethical considerations – as our starting points for further reflection in this paper.

Ethics and evidence in HRM

Because of the potential of HRM policy and practice to influence the lives and well-being of organizational members, the profession arguably has a special status which elevates the desirability of ethical, evidence-based practice relative to that of other managerial domains. A HoD referred to perceptions of HR in the following terms: *‘HR is essentially used to implement unpleasantness’*. They went on to talk about senior management *‘taking HR out of the drawer’* when there was something unpleasant to implement, then putting it away afterwards. This reflected an underlying perception and sense of HR as a *‘tool in the management armoury’*. An armoury is a supply of weapons for defence or attack, and this is a striking metaphor with which to think about notions of harm, minimizing harm, and ethical HRM.

Wilcox (2012) considers the potential for

moral agency in HRM practice, that is, an individual’s ability to make moral judgments based on some commonly held notion of right and wrong. She concludes that this ability to make moral judgements is contingent upon ‘managers being able to create for themselves relational spaces that allow for critical reflection and conversation’ (p. 95). Critically reflective conversations are an important element of professional/peer supervision (as distinct from managerial supervision), which Tehrani (2010) suggests may be helpful on promoting personal and professional development and growth.

However, the sensitivity and confidentiality of much that falls within the HRM remit may also constrain opportunities for such conversations. For example, as in a previous study by Tehrani (2011) an Absence Co-ordinator comments:

“Some managers do not see why I cannot tell them what is in a GP’s report, particularly where an absence is having an adverse impact on productivity, or there is a belief that the employee is “swinging the lead”. At times I feel totally alone, having to deal with difficult situations which I cannot share with anyone”. Tehrani (2011, p. 55)

Sensitivity of subject matter can mean that conversations have to take place ‘up’ the chain of command, where there is no formal supervision, or any other form of external support. HR practitioners may be reluctant to instigate such conversations because of the potential for conflict. That is, the person who is a source of support and guidance may also evaluate and judge the HR practitioner’s potential and

future career through appraisal and line management responsibilities. Perhaps this scenario implies a particular need for high-quality leadership and support within HRM teams as, uniquely, HR practitioners cannot take their concerns externally.

The potential for ethical and evidence-based HRM is dependent upon the organizational context. In other words the institutional features, organizational values, climate and core business. The organizational context of our study was universities, all of whom had business schools/management faculties where HRM was taught and researched. There was recognition by HR directors that the profession has been slow to provide metrics to evaluate/demonstrate HR 'added value'. Historically, HR has been perceived as having 'Cinderella' status – in other words not fully integrated into the core business (Pynes, 2009). Lack of power and influence, together with perceptions of HR as a 'tool in the management armoury' may also conspire against the best efforts of HR directors to implement what they know to be evidence-based practice.

HRM and toxic emotion

The undercurrent of some of the negative perceptions of HRM and its role in 'implementing unpleasantness' is an aspect of managing toxic emotions at work. In the current climate of austerity, HR practitioners are often 'bearers of bad news', and Gallos (2008) cautions:

“Handling strong emotions in the workplace—dealing over time with others' frustration, anger, and disappointment resulting from organizational life in a competitive world of scarce resources

and nonstop change—can be hazardous to body and soul”. Gallos (2008, p. 354)

Frost (2003) used the term toxic emotion to describe the ways that organizations, during their day-to-day course of conducting business, generate a certain amount of emotional pain or 'toxicity':

“The word *toxicity* may sound overly dramatic applied to aspects of organizational life, but in many ways it is uniquely appropriate. It suggests elements that can poison, whether a person or an entire system; toxins spread and seep, often undetected, in varying degrees”. Frost (2003, p. 5; emphasis in original)

HR practitioners handle toxic emotion, and this can come at a cost to their well-being. For example Tehrani (2010) examined the effect that working with distressed employees, clients and members of the public had upon practitioners working in HR, Occupational Health, Counselling and Police Family Liaison. Two hundred and seventy-six professionals completed the Goldberg short-form anxiety and depression questionnaire and the Carer Belief Inventory (CBI) (Goldberg et al., 1988; Tehrani, 2007; cited in Tehrani, 2010). The CBI measured four positive and nine negative attitudes and beliefs, using a five-point scale, with additional questions on supervision, other sources of support and coping strategies. Mean scores for positive items for the HR group were compared with the scores of the other groups 'which showed that they had a statistically significantly lower level of positive growth compared with other groups' (Tehrani, 2010,

p. 134). The study concludes that it is important to provide practitioners who deal with distressed or traumatised clients with the time and opportunity to reflect on their experiences: 'This reflection through professional or peer supervision helps them to learn and become more competent in their profession' (p. 137). The implications for practice are clear: meaningful reflection is crucial in order to instil compassion – the antidote to toxic emotion – into HRM practice.

Strengths and limitations of the research

This was a small-scale descriptive study in six universities in the UK at a time of turbulence in the higher education sector caused by the economic downturn and cuts in public funding. Therefore, our findings may not be generalisable or applicable to European counterparts. In addition, the higher education landscape is a rapidly changing one, and this study may simply be a 'snap shot in time'. The sample was made up of HR directors, senior university leaders, academics, researchers and HoDs, and the voice and perspective of frontline HR practitioners is absent. It was an exploratory study, and does not make a significant contribution to measures of employee engagement or metrics for evidence-based HRM. Furthermore, some of the questions we needed to ask in order to 'get underneath' Guest and Clinton's (2007) findings – that there was little evidence of a positive link between HRM and university performance – might cause unease. Firstly, participants might have worried that they were exposing fissures between different groups in their university. Secondly, participation in the study could have been interpreted as an invitation to criticise the HR function. Both

of these factors could have been potentially divisive, serving to reinforce notions of an academic-practitioner divide.

Nevertheless we contend that the study has given a worthwhile insight into the perception of HR departments within universities. Participants raised some valid and interesting questions on the appropriateness of the Ulrich (1997) business partner model in universities, relating primarily to the nature of universities and the variable nature of academic disciplines and academics. We also suggest that our collaborative academic-practitioner approach has great value and relevance for the HRD agenda regarding role of 'scholar-practitioner' (Ruona & Gilley, 2009). This approach is also highly relevant in addressing the 'practitioner-researcher divide' in WOP and the incongruence between strategic management research undertaken by academics and that used by practitioners (Anderson, 2007; Bartunek, 2007).

Future directions for HR academic-practitioner research

We asked HR directors for their views upon the potential value and application of a collaborative academic-practitioner model, citing this study as one such example. Their views were unanimously positive and favourable, for example:

"I think it is a mustif you don't do it from that joint perspective, people with different perspectives between them and seeing what's between them joins up the whole I think is the way to go. I think part of my struggle is that I am doing it [change management] from HR perspective not from that joint

perspective and I think I would have a lot more credibility if I had a joint perspective". (HRD interview)

In particular, there is also potentially useful information within this paper that might enable HR directors and practitioners to:

- Develop innovative interdisciplinary ‘academic-HR practitioner partnerships’;
- Generate opportunities for research and evaluation;
- Enable HR practitioners to contribute to developing the theory, scholarship and evidence-base of HRM.

Arguably our findings run counter to the emphasis on positively oriented human resource strengths and psychological capacities found in the POP and employee engagement literature. On the other hand, our findings also reflect the realities of HRM where practitioners are indeed the ‘bearers of bad news’ and toxic emotion handlers. There is thus a need to design HRM strategies and interventions that address these darker issues, and which also instil compassion into HRM practice and research.

Concluding reflections

We conclude the paper with some reflections on the collaborative aspects of our work, and give a brief indication of the next phase in the study:

Kathryn: I think that one of the reasons the academic-practitioner approach to this research has worked is because of the relationship we have established over time. We first worked together at City University London when I was a HoD and Julie was working in HRM, so our col-

laboration in this study has strong roots. We trust each other’s judgement, respect each other’s perspective and experience and, paradoxically, feel comfortable with the discomfort of exposing our thinking and revealing and challenging our assumptions.

Julie: For me, this research is about connecting HRM practitioner and academic communities. Thinking now as someone with a presence in both of those communities I can see how challenging it can be from a practitioner perspective to have one’s thinking exposed and subject to scrutiny. But it is crucial for practitioners and the wider HR profession to create time and space for reflective practice and peer supervision in order promote ethical, compassionate and evidence-based practice.

Finally, we remain curious about the lack of ‘academic-practitioner’ collaboration between university HR Departments and WOP, and HRM academics. There is a paradox in that knowledge transfer in these fields has an external engagement, to industry and commerce for example, but the same knowledge is not transferred and often fails to engage internally. This is the focus of the second phase of our study, which involves exploration of the barriers and enablers to academic-practitioner collaboration, and identification of case studies of good practice.

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