
Stream: Where is Critical HRM?

Does HRM Fit in Higher Education?

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Over the last twenty years in a globalised society under conditions of neo-liberalism, there have been considerable changes to the nature of work, which has significantly altered the experience of work for many across private and public sectors. It is now largely accepted that there are greater pressures on individuals to perform, according to prescribed corporate objectives, and that work is an increasingly insecure activity. The Higher Education (HE) sector has not been immune to the changes, as governments worldwide recognise the significant role of universities as knowledge disseminators, and ‘where higher education is increasingly seen as an industry for enhancing national competitiveness and as a commodity that can be sold in the global marketplace.’ (Naidoo 2003:250) Universities are coming under increasing government pressure to adopt market principles of cost-minimisation, flexibility, and quality-enhancement, such is the significance to national economies, with the total volume of the global education market estimated at around US$30 billion (van der Wende 2003). In this new corporate world of academia (Wright 2004) there is a growing feeling amongst university managers that greater control over the management of academic labour is required, and that a system based around HRM is the most suitable method of monitoring individual performance.

It was this notion that inspired the Higher Education Funding Council for England (Hefce) to launch an initiative called ‘Rewarding and Developing Staff in Higher Education’ (R&DS), following the Dearing (NCIHE1997) and Bett (IRHE1999) reports, both of which highlighted the need for better leadership and a more effective approach to people management in universities. The idea was that a percentage of universities’ funding would be contingent upon the production of a detailed HR strategy that identified specific, costed HR objectives. It was for institutions themselves to determine priority areas, but Hefce identified six key areas (1) which had to be covered in the strategy, including a focus on individual performance management. In the first period 2001-02 to 2003-04, £330 million was set aside (around 4.95% of the total funding for universities in England), with a further £167 million made available to maintain the progress made through to 2006. It was always Hefce’s intention R&DS would have a finite timescale and that from 2006 all funding would be returned to the core. By then, it was envisaged that the HR values promoted by the initiative would be sufficiently embedded in the strategy of universities and would ultimately become self-supporting.

Universities have always been particularly unique institutions with distinctive values and traditions and even within the sector there is quite a degree of diversity. So the attempt to introduce such a homogeneous system as HRM into the sector is liable to meet with a number of ideological challenges, potentially generating tensions and conflicts. The ‘rhetoric and reality of HRM’ debate has been well rehearsed (Legge 2005) and the more insidious aspects examined thoroughly (eg Willmott 1993; Keenoy 1990). However, the implementation of an HRM led strategy which is ‘individualistic rather then collective in its approach to employee relations’ (Armstrong, 2006:11) strikes at the heart of those traditions of collegiality, collaboration and collective decision-making, and thus challenges the very values upon which universities were originally founded.
In order to gain a better understanding of the situation I will consider three questions in this paper: The first is to discover what are the broader origins and the key influences driving this government strategy. The second will evaluate why the particular technology of HRM was chosen, given the apparent ideological tensions. Thirdly, given those tensions, how is the HR strategy implemented and what is the impact on the academic staff?

The paper will be structured around the following sections. The first section will begin by placing the developments within a wider societal context of neo-liberal agendas and will draw on Beck’s (2002) concept of individualisation, where collective notions of society have become redundant, in order to provide the theoretical context to interrogate this phenomenon. Section two will provide a brief outline of the changes that have taken place in the higher education sector over recent years. Section three is the main part of the paper in which I will discuss the qualitative data arising out of my fieldwork, and in section four I will concentrate on the research questions and the central issue of whether HRM does actually fit in HE.

1. The Societal Context of Individualisation

The use of HRM initially came about as a response to increasing competitive forces in a more global environment, where business organisations sought to become more competitive by stimulating their workers to deliver higher quality though the use of ‘high commitment work practices’. Under such conditions according to Beck (2002), Western society has entered a ‘second-modernity’ that is characterised by ‘institutionalised individualism.’ This liberating process apparently sets people free from the traditional institutions of society – class, religion, gender-roles and family. Such collective notions are no longer relevant, coming as they did, out of the ‘modern’ era that was brought about by the growth of capitalism. Increasing individualisation, globalisation, under–employment and the worsening ecological crisis are global forces that require a fundamental questioning of the way we live. Individuals now exist in a society with few rules and an inherent short-termism, resulting in uncertainty. Giddens has previously noted the ‘reflexive project of the self’ (1991:5), where individuals are faced by a diverse array of lifestyle options, which requires a daily process of risk consideration in making choices. Risk is central to Beck’s analysis, and is firmly placed on the shoulders of the individual (Beck 2000). Certainly, for many, this is a common experience in the workplace, not least in the public sector, where there has been a concerted effort to drive down costs through the use of non-standard, flexible, and, therefore, more insecure forms of employment. Sennett (1998) also recognises the individualising trend under ‘flexible capitalism,’ and contends that as organisations become more transient, so to do the people who work in them. With organisations placing an emphasis on contracting out, and with projects replacing jobs - then short termism rules. Therefore, individuals do not put down roots, and begin to lead fragmented lives and must fend for themselves. Not all can survive without a strong network of support, and this gradual erosion of all that ties people together and out of which grows loyalty and sustainable collective spirit results in a ‘corrosion of character.’ (Sennett 1998:10)
At the organisational level there is evidence to suggest that employers have attempted to individualise contracts (Brown et al. 1998), whilst Kelly (1998) has argued against the decline of collectivism (and an increase in individualisation) and believes that there are signs of a resurgence in collective action within the labour movement. More recently, evidence suggests a revival of unionism (Nolan 2004) and a consensus is emerging, certainly from many industrial relations academics, that although the world has moved on and the nature and experience of work has radically altered, the essential tension and conflict at the heart of the struggle between labour and capital remains the same. Indeed, research by Brown & Oxenbridge (2003) found evidence that collective bargaining is still very much alive, and evolving in line with workplace developments. Whether or not we have seen a process of de-collectivisation, or individualisation, or whether we are about to see a surge in collective action, the fact remains that we have seen a transformation in the conduct of industrial relations (Millward et al 2000). Whilst the situation in the broader public sector has been widely researched (see for example Winchester & Bach 1999, Corby & White 1999 and Farnham & Horton 1996) so far, little empirical work has been carried out to evaluate the experience of academics. Arthur (1997) has previously considered the impact of HE reforms on collective-bargaining in the sector, and a survey carried out by Bryson (2004) provides some empirical evidence suggesting that at ground level there is not universally low morale in HE, but there is clearly a need to provide further empirical work, which is the purpose of my paper.

In the next section I will briefly outline recent developments in the UK HE sector before moving on to a discussion of my own fieldwork.

2. The Marketisation of Higher Education

The Education Reform Act of 1988 and the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 marked a significant turning point and totally transformed the landscape of UK higher education. A kind of quasi-market system was created, with competition between the new post-92 universities (formerly polytechnics and colleges of higher education) and the existing pre-92 universities. Whether or not a market system, which effectively turns knowledge into a commodity, is an appropriate method of HE delivery (Lynn-Meek 2000), is a source of much contention. Some writers have argued that a proletarianisation of academic labour has been taking place (Wilson 1991; Willmott 1995; Miller 1995; Farnham 1995). In this sense it has been suggested that the massification of HE has led to a de-skilling of academic work and a reduction in the 'prestige, salaries, autonomy, and resources' of academics (Halsey 1992:146). Wilson (1991) identified a number of trends in HE typical of proletarianised work:

‘..less trust and discretion, a growing division of labour; stronger hierarchies of management control; greater conflict; growing routinisation; bureaucratisation; worse conditions and facilities; above all a steep decline in relative pay.’ (1991:251)

Universities increasingly utilise staff on casual or non-permanent contracts, leading to the model of a 'flexi-university' (Farnham 1999:28), where institutions reduce their staffing overheads considerably, but the consequence for staff is a ‘fractionalisation of the academic profession where divisions of interest can emerge’ (Fulton 1996:29)
Academics have long cherished the ability to organise their own work - Wilson notes the similarities to Friedman’s notion of ‘responsible autonomy’, where academics effectively ‘control themselves’ (1991:253) - yet the increasing focus on HRM and a more assertive style of management is now challenging this autonomy. For Wilson (1991), the changes are threatening the traditional notion of universities as independent communities of scholars pursuing knowledge for its own sake. Willmott (1995) argues, that government policy towards HE has had the effect of intensifying and commodifying the work of academics, and the organisation and control of the work of academics ‘is conditioned, but not determined, by capitalist priorities and disciplines.’ (1995:1001) The most obvious mechanisms of control in this new audit culture (Shore and Wright 2004), according to Keenoy (2005) are the QAA (Quality Assessment Audit) and the RAE (Research Assessment Exercise). The changes have been so striking and the landscape of HE, within the context of late modernity has altered so radically that students now see themselves as consumers of educational services, where HE staff ‘are purveyors of commodities within a knowledge supermarket’ (Winter 1995:134) - these commodities are all available from the McUniversity (Parker and Jary 1995).

Such developments have created an employment relationship of evermore complexity and diversity, with an increasingly managerialist tendency emerging (Deem et. al 2001), as managers seek to impose new control mechanisms on the work of academics. Interesting to note is the similarity of experiences in both pre and post 1992 universities. Although sectoral differences in working conditions persist, the post 1992 national regime ‘has created and reinforced pressures for convergence which arguably bear considerably more strongly on individual academic staff than they do on their institutions.’ (Fulton 2001) It is also rather ironic that the very values which traditionally existed in universities, are those that HRM seeks to engender – harmony and unity of purpose – and that these have been eroded by the approach taken by management in HE. With the growing emphasis on the need to quantify performance, for instance in the form of university league tables to provide information for ‘the customer’, it is perhaps unsurprising that HE management has attempted to implement some form of individual performance management system. It has become almost an imperative that some measure of performance is devised in order that institutions can attract the essential extra funding for research, consultancy and other income generation activities. There is nothing inherently wrong with the idea of performance management - if the motivation is to actually improve performance. The problem seems to be that in many organisations ‘people performance is vitiated by the obsession with control and therefore is liable to undermine, rather than contribute to, performance.’ (Hendry et al 2000:46)

Clearly, university managers have quite a challenge to counter the perceptions of control and to demonstrate a genuine commitment to improving individual performance. In the next section I will discuss the results of my fieldwork before moving into the final analysis of whether HRM does actually fit in HE.

3. People Reform or Re-forming People?

In the course of my research I visited four universities, two pre and two post-92, over an eighteen-month period (2005-07) to gather data. This paper is based on a preliminary analysis of the data in which I will concentrate on three of those
The study was limited to England where the Hefce R&DS initiative was implemented. I interviewed staff at all levels and the main methods of data-collection used were interviews (mainly one-to-one semi-structured, but also some telephone interviews), observation and documentary analysis. A theoretical sampling frame was initially applied to generate the first wave of interviewees and from here an element of snowball sampling to identify the next wave. The initial sample included the HR director; a member of the senior management team (either deputy or pro vice chancellor depending on context); the chief academic union negotiator (at that stage either Natfhe or AUT); Deans/Chairs of faculty and then Heads of Department/Institute in the pre-92s; Heads of School/Department and then Section Heads/Line managers in the post-92s.

The three institutions have been anonymised and given a pseudonym, and a brief outline of each is provided below.

**Dartmoor:** Initially established as a teacher training college, Dartmoor became a college of higher education in the 1970s and was granted university status comparatively recently. Dartmoor enjoys a reputation for being a small, friendly, student-focused teaching institution with particular strengths in vocational subjects.

**Wormwood:** Established in the early twentieth century, Wormwood is situated in a large city and has an international research reputation, being a prominent member of the Russell Group of universities. The university is renowned both for the quality of its teaching and research and achieved several 5* and 6 ratings in the 2001 RAE exercise.

**Parkhurst:** Also a prominent member of the Russell group, Parkhurst was established in the early 1960s and has an international reputation for innovation in research. It has academics of world-class standing in its many 5* and 6 rated departments.

Five key themes emerged in the fieldwork, which are used to structure this section: modernisation; management reorganisation; the role of the head of department; HR strategies and appraisal; and collegiality.

**Modernisation**

Modernisation was the unifying, and indeed, dominant theme that emerged across all three institutions. It was manifested in a variety of different ways and was progressing in a variable manner according to institution. In all cases there was an underlying current of change, creating an atmosphere of instability and uncertainty. This was most apparent at Dartmoor, which was embarking upon a huge expansion plan that included the building of a new campus. All interviewees at Dartmoor acknowledged the need to expand research and consultancy work and to grow student numbers. The challenge to their key strength, as a student-focused teaching institution, was recognised by all. Some of the newer appointments expressed a concern that they had been appointed on the basis of their research profile in line with the changing university mission, but were still required to carry out significant
teaching loads. Change was apparent at Wormwood, which had major expansion plans for its campus, and Parkhurst was also involved in substantial capital investment plans to upgrade and replace a number of its buildings.

All of the senior managers expressed the view that such developments are essential in the modern era of HE. All agreed that universities had no choice but to become more business-like, as it was seen as a matter of survival. As one pro-vice chancellor put it:

“...in the last twelve years we have completely evolved our management processes to ensure that we are a business. We are driven to make a surplus.”
PVC - Wormwood

All of the senior managers talked about the challenges of a market system which required a more strategic, corporate approach than in the past. Decision-making, they felt, had to be based on strong financial evidence and loss-making areas would inevitably be under threat. At Wormwood, for example, a strategic decision had been made following the last RAE, to withdraw support for research in a department of the Medical faculty and to concentrate purely on teaching.

Management Re-organisation

Re-organisation of management structures was seen as essential in all three institutions, in common with the hegemonic modernisation discourse. Wormwood had embarked upon a major reorganisation in 2001, that coincided with the arrival of a modernising VC, tasked with changing the culture of a very traditional university. The new structure strengthened faculties by devolving budgets to that level, to be managed by powerful executive deans, supported by a management team. The creation of these six cost-centres replaced what was seen as an inefficient and outdated departmental system, with a far more streamlined structure that was justified on grounds of economic and administrative rationality. At the time of the fieldwork a further reorganisation was taking place within two of the faculties to amalgamate a number of smaller departments into schools with a single Head of school and a management team that included a business manager. A similar reorganisation was taking place at Parkhurst, and at Dartmoor a new tier of management had recently been created within schools to support the head of department. These were usually principal lecturers (PLs) who formed a management team that also included a member of the support staff. One member of staff at Dartmoor spoke for many in expressing a view about this new tier of management:

“There is a lot of ill-feeling about this new line-manager role and most people think this is really a layer of management too far. Most people ignore them anyway, so what’s the point?” Senior lecturer - Dartmoor

All three universities had powerful executive steering groups based around the VC, D or PVCs, registrar and/or finance director and in two cases the HR director. These tended to meet regularly, at least once a week, and coordinated the day-to-day running of the university. This supports Smyth’s (1995) suggestion of a growing separation in HE between those who conceptualise and execute the work and that, in reality,
important decisions are made in elite policy-making units. At Wormwood and Parkhurst there was some concern expressed by lecturing staff, and some heads, over the degree of control given to administrators who were making decisions based on corporate, rather than academic criteria. An example given was the setting of increasingly high student targets on a MBA course, that was perceived as maximising revenue with little concern for academic standards.

No outright opposition was expressed towards the various management reorganisations and there was a general acceptance of the need for some sort of change and modernisation of management practices. Interviewees were certainly frustrated by some of the more bureaucratic processes and a culture of form-filling, but blame for this was targeted at external bodies rather than the university itself. There was a strong sense at Wormwood and Parkhurst, both research-intensive universities, that whatever management were doing, there remained a clear recognition of the primacy of research activity. As long as the academics felt they were able to concentrate on this, and most felt they still could despite the increased pressures, then they were prepared to tolerate, albeit reluctantly, an increasingly business focused culture. There are clear echoes here of Miller’s notion of bargained autonomy ‘whereby degrees of at least apparent control are retained by the individual on the implicit understanding that the targets of increased student numbers, more articles or more form filling are met.’ (1995:54)

Role of the Head of Department

Clearly, the role of head is a key one that has major implications for the experience of work for academics in a department. Many heads actually saw themselves as a kind of buffer between the university’s management and the academic staff. For one the role was about nurturing rather than managing his staff:

“Just about all the academics in my department are internationally recognised experts in their field so I do what I can to keep them happy – I’m just here to massage their egos.” Head of Department - Parkhurst

The rotational appointment system (2) was also coming under scrutiny. Several heads expressed frustration that their academic careers had to be put on hold for their three-year period of tenure, which was frequently described as ‘Buggins-Turn’. To some extent the creation of departmental management teams was a response to this, and at Wormwood one objective of the HR strategy was to identify potential leaders in order to groom them for future management roles. Academic staff recognised rotationality as a problem, but were strongly opposed to any notion of appointed managers. For them the virtue of the current system was that an academic voice remained at the management table. However, at Wormwood there was one example of an appointed manager being brought in to sort out a problem department (mentioned above).

“They brought in a sort of hired gun…” Union rep. - Wormwood

Interestingly, at Wormwood and Parkhurst, whatever the reorganisation, the academics felt a strong allegiance to their department, based as they are on disciplines. Whether the focus of the management structure was on faculties, or
merging departments into schools, the academics clearly identified closely with their department. Thus, attempts to alter the identities of academics through this strategy were met with opposition from the academics themselves, and on this evidence, by the heads of department too, in much the same way that Henkel (2000) has previously found.

**HR Strategies and Appraisal**

All three universities had a HR strategy in place. At Wormwood and Parkhurst the HR directors had been appointed around the time of the launch of the R&DS initiative and completion of the strategy had been their first task. All had come from other HE institutions and had significant experience of the sector. Awareness of the HR strategy in all three universities appeared to stop at the level of head of department. Apart from the union representatives, very few academic staff knew anything about it:

> “I know nothing about an HR strategy. If we do have one it has no impact on me.”  Senior Lecturer - Dartmoor

Although the strategies emphasised the values of communication and consultation with staff, the evidence suggests they had been written with little of either. At Wormwood it had been left up to Heads to decide whether or not to consult with staff. At Dartmoor the strategy had been discussed at various committees including the joint consultative committee, but not disseminated to all staff. At Parkhurst the HR director saw no need to involve staff in what he saw as strategic decision-making. Interviews with academic staff displayed an awareness of certain HR initiatives, but there was little, or no awareness of the strategy as a whole.

There was, however, significant awareness of staff appraisal, of which experience was variable, largely dependent upon the personality of the head. At Wormwood there was a requirement that heads should carry out annual appraisals but any records were kept in the department, so there was little to ensure that they actually took place. One head, who saw far more value in operating in an informal collegiate manner, where staff were free to come and see him whenever they wanted, did not bother with appraisals at all. Staff in the department confirmed this, but were concerned for the future, as this department was soon to be merged in the latest reorganisation. Parkhurst were in the process of moving from a fairly benign triennial review, to a more formal annual process of performance management. The three HR directors all recognised the potential for conflict in trying to quantify academic performance, but also believed it would ultimately provide a more structured career path. Responses in the Medical faculties were significantly different, as there is a far stronger tradition and, therefore, greater acceptance of performance review and evidenced based professional updating. However, at Parkhurst, the concern for some of the medical academics was the rather disorganised manner of implementing the new system, rather than opposition to the basic premise. There is certainly evidence to suggest that the effectiveness and, indeed, acceptance of appraisal systems is dependent upon the cultural background and traditions of particular disciplines. Also, as highlighted above, there is evidence that resistance to appraisal takes different forms and occurs on several fronts.
Collegiality

Notions of collegiality were explored at some length, and the extent to which this and an individualistic approach to people management can co-exist in a university environment. For one HR director there were far too many myths about the past in HE, and collegiality was all part and parcel of a general mis-perception of a supposedly glorious past. According to him, there was no alternative but to modernise and this meant replacing an outdated informality with formal processes and procedures that were ‘fit for purpose.’ In fact there were responses at all levels to suggest there might be a degree of harking back to the past with rose-tinted spectacles. However, there was consensus around the idea that collegiality was very much at the heart of a university’s ethos and also that it was coming under pressure from an increasingly corporate management style. Definitions of collegiality varied, but all centred around the idea of shared ownership, working together supportively, informality and a collective will. Most academics felt that it was important to maintain a collegiate approach but the following quote sums up the concerns of many:

‘Collegiality? I think we are being restructured away from that.’ Union rep – Wormwood

Collegiality was also discussed in terms of the informal social networks of the university, and there was a general feeling that the ability to meet informally was being eroded by time pressures; whether it was from teaching loads, meeting RAE deadlines or attending meetings. Many discussed a time, not that long ago, when everyone was able to meet for coffee or lunch in a senior common room and that it was here where valuable time was spent discussing and sharing ideas. Lack of time emerged as a key concern for staff at all levels and was largely seen as an inevitable consequence of the changes to the sector, but significantly was seen as gradually eroding that which was fundamentally part of the essence of a university.

4. Does HRM Fit in Higher Education?

Overall, my research has demonstrated that there is a greater degree of HR activity in all three universities, but the extent to which that activity is improving the working lives of academics is questionable. With that in mind, I shall now return to the three questions posed at the start of this paper, drawing on the themes that emerged above.

Firstly, in terms of the origins and key influences on the government’s strategy the contention that universities ‘have’ to modernise, is in itself very revealing. This was the unifying theme across the three universities, and is perfectly in tune with the prevailing neo-liberal consensus that informs debate around higher education in the UK today. Modernisation has been central to the New Labour reform programme and for universities this has led to the creation of a policy narrative that presents the marketisation of higher education and its associated policies as the only way forward. (Wright 2004) Furthermore, as Reed explains; ‘...modernisation discourse is inherent in neo-technocratic managerialism...’ and ‘the organisational hybridisation that it has generated has relocated public service professionals in an evermore confusing, threatening and uncertain environment.’ (Reed 2005:slide 21) That paradox certainly seems apparent for those working in HE and has echoes in this research, but, as
Wright (2004) points out, this is now presented as the only solution to the problem and challenges to the dominant orthodoxy cannot be countenanced. I believe the seeds of this ideology are apparent in the Robbins Report of 1963 and are quite clear in the Jarratt Report of 1985 and the Fender Report of 1993.

The Jarratt Report produced for the CVCP (1985) into efficiency in universities, according to Kogan (1989:75) ‘is explicit in its managerialism’. It argued that the reason for universities’ inefficiency in the past stemmed from academics who saw their discipline as more important than the well being of the university. But as Kogan suggests:

‘The well-being of the institution is important only because it ensures the good work of the individuals who work in it. Any academic enterprise which does not have powerful academic departments and individual academics who cherish their academic discipline above all else, will be second rate or worse.’ (Kogan 1989:76)

This was a clear tension that emerged in my research, as each university sought to reorganise departments into business units, thus challenging the existing orthodoxy where academic disciplines dictate structure.

The 1993 report ‘Promoting People’ (CVCP 1993), also known as the Fender report, set out to provide a framework for the development of staff in universities, and like Jarratt, was heavily influenced by private sector management trends. A single pay spine was proposed (the genesis of the 2004 pay deal below) with an emphasis placed on rewarding individual performance. The tone of the report is extremely revealing, with notions of academia, as described by Kogan, implicitly dismissed as out of touch with the realities of a modern era. The Fender Report is perhaps not as well known as the Dearing and Bett reports that followed, but is important in that it signals a point where HRM rhetoric and managerialism really begin to influence the agenda and when the language of the market became the norm for those running the UK HE sector. By 1997, when the Dearing Report was published (NCIHE 1997) it was clear to see how there had been a fundamental shift in thinking, with an implicit acceptance of the fact that HE can be run along conventional business lines.

The 2004 National Pay Framework (JNCHES 2003) provides the most recent example of the government’s neo-liberal agenda. Here was a broad national framework for guidance, but, significantly, with the flexibility for substantial local negotiation. Despite much debate, although the agreement fell short of the existing system of national collective bargaining over pay and conditions, it did retain some element of national guidance and prevented a complete free-for-all in local pay bargaining, and was accepted by a majority of academic staff in a national ballot. Ultimately, through the decentralisation of bargaining, the government had achieved a further degree of individualisation at the level of the institution.

So in summary, the ideology that has informed the UK government’s HE reform agenda has had a long gestation. Under conditions of modernity and facing global competition, HRM is proposed as the only rational response to the challenges of the future. Measurement of performance provides control and accountability and, ‘in principle, the possibility of attaining complete certitude.’ (Townley 2002:565)
Therefore, given the national strategic importance of higher education outlined above, to use the words of one arch neo-liberalist, there is no alternative.

The second question is to consider why the particular technology of HRM was chosen by the government to achieve its aims. As stated above, universities are quite unique environments and, for many, this arises from the traditions of collegiality, another theme of this paper. However, attempts to impose control and order the work of academics through the use of HR strategies would seem to be challenging that norm. As shown in my research, the reliance on business led solutions and the associated control systems are a source of increasing frustration, but as Dearlove (1997:57) explains ‘good academics cannot be told what to do; they defy control; and the kind of creativity required cannot be commanded by an academic master.’. To paraphrase a question posed by Storey (1983); ‘is it possible to actually have a coherent people management strategy, that effectively harmonises with the other business strategies, in an area that is normally characterised by ad-hocery?’ (Hyman 1987:34) There is little consensus here except, perhaps, that the management of so-called knowledge workers is notoriously difficult, if not futile. As Hyman tells us:

‘The more complex and sophisticated the workers’ knowledge and experience, the more difficult normally for management to prescribe tasks in detail and to monitor closely their performance’ (Hyman 1987:39)

The extent to which HRM conflicts with the very essence of a university emerged in a number of my interviews and is well illustrated by the following quote:

‘I think this idea that it’s possible to project certain images of personnel management into a university that is not in accord with the way that many people feel about their employment…it just doesn’t fit. It’s a bit bizarre actually.’ Dean – Wormwood

In attempting to understand this situation, Townley’s (1993) Foucauldian analysis of HRM provides a useful starting point, as she considers the indeterminacy of an employment contract – the gap between what is promised and what is actually achieved – and how HRM and its various techniques attempts to reduce that space (and the individuals who inhabit it) and render it knowledgeable and governable. In this sense we can see appraisal systems as a means of turning the individual academic into an ‘object of knowledge’ which then renders them more manageable and easier to control. The appraisal forms one part of a management process that attempts to standardise and codify the performance of academics (as above, staff continually referred to audit trails and increased bureaucracy in the name of accountability). Time and again in my fieldwork, senior managers talked about the need to create systems of management that provided rationality and accountability. As Townley suggests, we can see this whole process as one that ‘acts to impose order on the inherently undecidable.’(Townley 1993:75) The individualising process that underpins this approach, therefore, acts as a controlling mechanism. This offers a different interpretation to that of Beck, who saw the process of individualisation as a liberating one that offered choices to individuals. Rather, it has greater resonance
with the work of Rose (1992) in his analysis of the mechanisms of contemporary political power. In this analysis of the governmentalisation of the state, although we are encouraged to make independent choices over the way we organise our lives, those choices are constrained by others. For Rose this is a very subtle process - ‘the delicate construction of a complex and hybrid assemblage...’ (1992:271) - where individuals construct their life-worlds according to a set of relatively standardised forms of individuality and personality. Although such ‘narratives and techniques of the self’ (1992:270) are clearly pluralistic and differentiated along various dimensions, nevertheless, under such conditions we all become neo-liberal subjects. The use of HRM in HE, therefore, can be seen as part of this much wider process, in that it offers a tightly constrained freedom that seeks to impose certain patterns of behaviour and modes of action upon the work of academics, but is justified as being the only possible, rational response to the demands of a globalised HE sector.

The third question considers the implementation of HR strategies. Given the importance attached to the modernisation agenda one might justifiably expect each university to strive for effective implementation of the HRM strategy. Yet whilst all three fieldwork institutions had invested a great deal of time and effort in drawing up their HR strategies, they were clearly only having a partial effect and were not penetrating all levels of the structure. The impression was of a sector in transition with some aspects of the modernisation agenda having a greater impact than others. As reported, there was no outright opposition to the various agendas, and in some cases support for the formalisation of processes and procedures in areas such as recruitment and selection, working conditions, equal opportunities and action to tackle bullying and harassment. However, clearly evident was a degree of frustration over ineffective implementation of policy. This does not support the findings of the two independent evaluations carried out on behalf of Hefce (Deloitte and Touche 2002; Office for Public Management 2002) which both concluded that there had been a strengthening of the HR function and that generally, universities were taking a far more professional approach to HR management. While my research does indicate a far greater level of HR activity, it does not support the claims of greater effectiveness. Whether this was to do with academics who were simply not competent in the role of line-managers, or if it was a more covert form of resistance is not clear, and was more likely to be a function of both. What was clear from my research was that the role of Head of Department, and their attitude to the implementation of the HR strategy, was a crucial one that affected the way academic staff experienced their work. There is support here for a recent study that demonstrated the relationship between the leadership qualities of front-line managers and individual staff commitment (Purcell and Hutchinson 2007). Certainly this was a key issue for many of the academics I interviewed and there was a general consensus that those line managers who demonstrated a strong allegiance to traditional academic values (collegiality, primacy of teaching and research) commanded the greatest respect.

This point is crucial when assessing the impact on staff, as the extent to which a successful internal fit was achieved was strongly contingent upon the line manager’s beliefs and attitudes and interpretation of the HR strategy. Where there was recognition of the need to maintain a focus on academic concerns, then the goals that an HRM approach aims to engender, including commitment and enhanced individual performance, were quite evident. Where there was a greater focus on a more rigid, corporate approach, there was a greater degree of dissatisfaction. The erosion of
autonomy and the perceived threats to collegiality and the democratic structures of the university were seen as a major concern by many of the academics that I interviewed. It is rather ironic that in certain parts of the private sector there is a recognition that the key to motivating and retaining knowledge workers is to flatten hierarchies and thus provide greater freedom to plan and work independently (Horwitz 2003). The inadequacy of a ‘one size fits all’ approach has recently been demonstrated in a study of Dutch academics, which demonstrated the need to vary the HR strategy according to the context – in this instance, different faculties (Smeenk et al 2006). However, in the UK HE sector, the continued reliance on such a homogenous system inevitably leads to varied outcomes, as lacking the unitarist conditions upon which HRM theory is based, and without the total commitment of staff at all levels, then such an approach simply cannot be implemented successfully.

In attempting to understand all of this, I believe the significance of individualisation within the context of modernity cannot be under-estimated. Individualisation has a dual effect on universities, as explained above; both at the level of the institution (the effect of neo-liberalism) and of the individual employment contract (the effect of HR strategies) and so provides a powerful context that legitimises discourses of management control. However, we are again reminded of Hyman who argues that emerging patterns of labour control contain their own emergent contradictions, and that new disciplines imposed on workers can be expected to provoke unpredictable and disruptive forms of revolt. (Hyman 1987:52) The recent industrial action (3) was an explicit and overt form of rebellion, yet the fieldwork in this research suggests that resistance usually takes a rather subtler form and is variable in its effect. Whether or not strength of opinion is such that it will lead to the mobilisation of more overt forms of resistance as suggested by Kelly above, remains to be seen. We have seen how there is greater acceptance of individual performance appraisal in medical faculties, yet in other areas we see that quite senior personnel are resistant to many of the overtly individualistic policies, and act as a kind of buffer between senior management and staff. Pressure on individual academic staff has increased, but does not seem to signal a transfer of risk in terms of decreased job security, although there is clearly a greater level of insecurity for contract research staff. There is certainly an indication of some of the more insidious aspects of HRM outlined above, where organisations become locked into a cost-reduction approach and seem to want ‘...workers to be both dependable and expendable...’ (Hyman 1987:43)

Conclusion

It has been argued that the UK government is attempting to re-shape universities into sites of knowledge production, by imposing ‘...an industrial-capitalist architecture of knowledge creation on the sector’ (Boden and Epstein 2006:225). In this context the use of HR strategies can be seen as an attempt to re-form academics into standardised roles and associated behaviours, by the use of individual performance management and bureaucratic control mechanisms. The evidence from my research suggests that if that is the intention, then the implementation of such a strategy has only been partly successful. There is no doubt that universities are taking a more corporate approach, and in that context the use of HRM offers the ideal solution for managers seeking to gain greater control over academic labour. However, attempts to implement the
various techniques of HRM have been met with a degree of resistance, both overt and covert, and at various levels of the hierarchy, which has clearly diluted its impact. Certainly, the recognition of the need to improve the effectiveness of people management in universities is welcome – a point made by many of those interviewed in this research – as is the greater awareness of certain key areas, such as equal opportunities. But it seems that the effectiveness of those who directly manage people has very little to do with the presence of an HR strategy, and is more about operating in a collegial way and upholding traditional academic values. So, by attempting to make HRM fit in HE, the universities are threatening to destroy the very values that would ultimately give them the competitive advantage they so desperately pursue.

Notes.

1. The six areas identified by Hefce were:
   a. Recruitment and retention
   b. Staff development and training – including management development
   c. Equal opportunities – including equal pay for work of equal value
   d. Review of staffing needs
   e. Annual performance reviews – includes individual rewards
   f. Action to tackle poor performance.

   (Hefce, 2001, 01/16)

2. In the pre-92 universities heads of department were traditionally chosen by democratic election involving all academic staff members. Appointments were usually made on the basis of a three-year rotational system.

3. In the summer of 2006 the two main academic unions (Natfhe and AUT) staged a joint campaign of industrial action over the annual pay claim. This included a one-day strike and then a programme of action short of a strike, which included an assessment marking boycott.
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