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The future higher education workforce: work and HRM practices (0115)

Programme number: L1.1

Research Domain: Higher Education Policy

The paper explores the changing nature of work, the workforce and human resource management (HRM) practices in UK higher education in the next twenty five years. It does this by drawing upon scenarios of what the higher education sector as a whole may look like and by using further contextual factors specific to shaping the world of work in the sector, including what have been termed HRM 'modernisation' agendas. The paper identifies key questions about employers, the employment relationship and contracts; about the split between core and peripheral workforces; the anchors for staff allegiances and loyalties; what careers will look like; skills and knowledge required for jobs; and work performance issues. It speculates about what future changes may mean for the aspirations, careers and values of staff working in higher education, and about the human resource management practices required to recruit, retain and motivate staff in the sector.

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Work in the higher education sector of the future

There are various scenarios which can be drawn upon to enable insight into higher education work in the future, with both UUK (2008) and Boxall and Lambert (2009) identifying potential forms of institution. However, the five scenarios of Blass et al (2009) explore the state of the sector as a whole, and so provide a useful basis for envisaging whole sector workforce issues. Their 'leading knowledge creation' scenario indicates considerably less work and less staff in higher education, with high differentiation between academic work, which will be heavily research-oriented, and other supporting work. The exception may be the creation of a new professional role of highly qualified staff whose job it is to understand and communicate the work of researchers to the outside world.

Their 'responsive knowledge creation' scenario suggests a dual labour market, with a relatively small proportion of academics undertaking pure research, and a much larger proportion of staff involved in applied work and knowledge generation, with blurred distinctions between occupations. In their 'regional conglomerates' scenario, work will be highly collaborative within a region, characterised by cross-functional and cross-institutional teams who create and disseminate knowledge of benefit to the future sustainability of the region.

Blass et al (2009) also identify a scenario of 'no government funding', a largely privatised sector in which work is highly individualised, with value attached to those who can sell the value of their ideas and knowledge in an open market, and establish their personal credibility in this way. Finally their 'total government funding' scenario suggests a focus on providing a broad education, with all work functions integrated to support teaching and related knowledge development.

Contextual factors influencing work and employment

Consideration needs to be given to the role of the state and the extent to which the state directly provides services and employment, or is 'hollowed out' (Clarke and Newman, 1997; Flynn, 2007). Changes to the status of employers will likely lead to different employment contract and pay determination processes. There are also considerations about the forms of funding services and therefore jobs, through from directly state funded, to funding based on the open market (Flynn, 2007); about the expectations of relationships with service users and wider beneficiaries, ranging from collaborative forms to those of pure customer models (Skelcher, 1993); about the nature of government emphases on particular aspects of performance, which have varied over the years through the three 'E's of economy, efficiency and effectiveness (Flynn, 2007); and also about the impact of an ageing population on work structures, retirement ages and pensions provisions. In particular, the nature of reforms to public sector pensions schemes and the impact on the psychological contract for public sector workers, with additional relevance to a relatively ageing workforce in the higher education sector specifically (HEFCE, 2008).

HRM practices

HRM practices include job design, recruitment, contract, employment relations, pay, performance management, appraisal, training, and career development and these can be understood in terms of relative roles of those defining and undertaking the practices (centralised sector and institutional level players, human resource management departments, line managers), and the relative emphasis with which they are undertaken (the use of so-called 'hard', utilitarian and 'soft', longer-term developmental and trust-based HRM approaches) (Storey, 1992; Legge, 2005). In contrast to traditional public sector employment characteristics, Philpott (2004) and Beaumont et al (2007) have documented reforms to work organisation practices, and Farnham (2004) and Bach et al (2005) the 'modernisation' of HRM practices. Although higher education has experienced a range of HRM initiatives in the last decade (the Bett Review of 1999, the 2003 JNCHES framework agreement, and the Rewarding and Developing Staff (RDS) initiative), arguably, higher education has been largely untouched by the majority of HRM reform measures experienced by the wider public sector (Shelley, 2005), including its nearest neighbour the Further Education sector (Mather et al, 2007).

There are therefore significant questions about the nature of future HRM reform in the sector. These include the following. What the mix of employers in the provision of higher education will be, including the extent of sub-contracting and privatising; the extent of core and periphery workforce split; and associated issues of control and quality. What the significant pulls for staff allegiances and loyalties will be (discipline, student, research, practice and organisations, region, institution, work colleagues). What careers will look like (including movement within the sector, institution and cross-occupation; and the extent of movement in and out of the HE sector). The extent and nature of skill and knowledge involved in, and qualification required for, jobs. The nature of the employment relationship as being one based on a permanent broad job, to one which consists of contracts for specific tasks, fragmented with multiple timescales; and the nature of associated pay and performance practices.

Conclusion

These questions provide a useful starting point to consider how far modernisation may continue in the future, and what form it might take, with a 'hard' HRM focus prevailing where drivers are for cost reduction and restraint, whereas a 'softer' HRM approach may emerge in scenarios driven more by long-term service delivery and quality strategies. It will also be important to consider whether such modernisation may be particular to the higher education sector, whether it will apply in different ways to different occupational groups, whether it will be scenario specific and whether there will be general changes regardless of scenario. The next stage is to further develop scenarios that depict what work may be like, what working experiences will be, and what these may mean for staff attitudes towards their work; particularly important when considering what will attract and motivate the higher education workforce of the future. From this we may begin to see how HRM practices may turn out in twenty five years time, but also to be aware of how changes in HRM practices may enable or inhibit development of various HE scenarios during the course of time.

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