

All in This Together? HRM and the Individualisation of the Academic Worker

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In the context of neoliberal government policymaking in the UK, universities have become increasingly managerial in their approach. Growing market pressures and a commodification of higher education (HE) has had a significant effect on the work of academics, as producers and providers of HE. Human Resource Management — a management tool that focuses on individual performance — has increasingly been deployed in universities to monitor and direct the work of academics with the aim of ensuring consistency in their standards of educational delivery. This paper considers the impact of such an approach and draws on the results of a case study that investigated the deployment of HRM in three English universities. Although variable in its impact, the use of HRM raises serious questions concerning academic freedom, autonomy and identity.

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Introduction

Policy and market imperatives have increasingly caused universities worldwide to challenge long-established traditions and practices in an attempt to ‘modernise’ themselves and become more ‘business-like’ in their affairs, evolving from the ivory towers of the Donnish Dominion (Halsey, 1992) into the ultra-modern, customer-focused model following the blueprint of the McUniversity (Parker and Jary, 1995). The highly competitive, market-led, customer-driven model that currently characterises the UK higher education (HE) can thus be seen as the product of neoliberal policymaking that is constituted by a ‘hegemonic discourse of western nation states’ (Olssen and Peters 2005, 314).

A consequence of such neoliberal-inspired marketisation of HE is that students have increasingly come to see themselves as consumers of educational products and services, with academic staff becoming ‘purveyors of commodities within a knowledge supermarket’ (Winter 1995, 134). Such characterisations of HE have been actively stimulated by policymakers in the English system.¹

For instance, the UK government in 2009 recommended a system of course labels (BIS, 2009), somewhat like supermarket food labels, to assist students when choosing from the vast array of educational products on offer in England (Waring, 2010). Consequently, in 2011, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) announced that universities would in future be required to provide such labels in the form of Key Information Sets (KIS) (HEFCE, 2011). The purpose of the KIS is to provide product information for students on each programme offered by a university, such as staff/student contact hours, levels of student satisfaction and likely employability following completion.

Such consumerist conceptualisations have inevitable implications for the academic workers who must service the student customers. Performative university managers, anxious to prove the efficacy of their organisations, are increasingly aware of the important role played by ‘front-line staff’ in terms of service delivery and institutional reputation manifested in a variety of league tables.² The Shanghai Jiao Tong and the *Times Higher Education* World University tables are probably ‘the most globally influential [university] rankings’ (van der Wende, 2007, 280). University management teams take a significant interest in their league table rankings, which often figure prominently, if selectively, in their promotional materials. Also, in the United Kingdom, the National Student Survey (NSS) (<http://www.thestudentsurvey.com>) has rapidly established itself as the leading measure of students’ university experience and has become highly influential, despite a number of methodological concerns regarding its validity and design of the survey (Swain, 2009).

As a consequence of such changes, lecturers now find themselves ‘re-worked as producers/providers’ (Ball, 2003, 218) and routinely judged not only on their academic credentials and skills but on their customer service skills and ability to satisfy the student consumer. University managers have increasingly turned to modern management technologies designed to enable them to direct the work and monitor the performance of front-line academics to ensure consistent standards of service delivery (Waring, 2009). Universities now routinely deploy a variety of controlling management tools in order to actively manage the performance of their academic workforces, especially in the ‘customer-facing’ environment of teaching. ‘Human resource management’ (HRM) is an ideologically driven management technology that UK universities have adopted in order to facilitate the management of individual performance and to ensure standardisation, conformity and compliance with corporate goals.

HRM is an inherently individualistic approach to managing people (Guest, 1997; Storey, 2001; Armstrong, 2006) that originally emerged in the United States in the 1980s driven by a perceived need to improve standards of quality and meet the growing challenge of foreign competition, from Japan particularly.

It can be understood as a distinctive approach to managing people, which goes beyond traditional notions of Personnel management as a support function where the HR/personnel department fulfils a servicing role.

Now HR departments play a key role in developing strategies and associated policies to support overarching corporate strategies. The technology of HRM thus offers a more strategic approach to managing organisations. It has a principal aim of stimulating individual performance and as a consequence there is a particular focus on the relationship between individual workers and line managers. Line managers are legitimised to ensure the compliance of workers with centrally defined organisational objectives through the deployment of a variety of performance management techniques.

As Watson (2010) reminds us, HRM has much in common with the sociological principle of bureaucracy, leading many to question its place in universities, which have increasingly come to resemble large corporate bureaucracies with an 'industrial-capitalist architecture' (Boden and Epstein, 2006) and associated controlling management technologies. Such an individualistic approach does not intuitively sit comfortably in an academic environment once characterised by democratic and collegiate values, including academic freedom. Academics have long valued academic freedom and autonomy, the search for which 'may be at odds with HR practices that potentially infringe that autonomy or freedom' (Edgley-Pyshorn and Huisman, 2011).

Shore and Wright (2000, 57) express similar concerns arguing that there exists a management agenda to impose on academics 'new norms of conduct and professional behaviour'. Further, some argue that academics have been shaped by a process of subjectification (Rose, 1996; Dean, 2007) and a growing managerialism (Deem, 1998; Deem *et al.*, 2007) that restricts their autonomy and changes the conditions under which they carry out their work to the point where the products of academic labour are irrevocably altered (Boden and Epstein, 2006).

Yet despite such concerns, HRM is increasingly ubiquitous across the sector and for many academics regular performance appraisal meetings with their line managers have become the norm. At such meetings, academics are required to agree quantifiable, or SMART, targets in line with corporate objectives for teaching, research and income generation. Assessment of teaching performance is routinely benchmarked against NSS statistics. Individual research performance is also closely monitored and is increasingly being driven by the periodic research assessment exercises (formerly the RAE and now repackaged as the Research Excellence Framework) that are used to allocate research funding to institutions.

Such an approach presents a significant challenge to many of the core values of the academy. While these changes have been explored at the general level, little work has been done on how these policies of marketisation and consumerisation

are shaped and implemented, and how they impact upon individuals. That is the purpose of this paper that seeks to address the following question.

What has been the effect of the implementation of HRM in English universities and the use of individual performance management systems to monitor and control the work of academics?

Accordingly, this paper has the following sections. First, the principles of HRM and its consequences for organisations are detailed and critiqued. Second, I provide a brief genealogy of the policy trajectory that has led to the current modernisation and marketisation strategies, explaining how HRM came to be adopted in English universities following a government initiative called *Rewarding and Developing Staff in HE* (RDS). In the third section, I present and analyse a case study of HRM in three English universities, showing what happened when HRM was introduced into an academic environment, considering how it was manifested and to what extent its consequences were realised. This is followed by some reflections.

Managing humans as resources

As the section 'Introduction' explains, 'personnel' (as a business function) and 'HR' or 'HRM' are often used interchangeably, but should be distinguished. HRM is a specific, and relatively modern, management ideology, which emphasises the need for a very close congruence between corporate objectives and strategies for managing employees, with the ultimate aim of achieving a highly committed, high quality and flexible workforce, thereby improving organisational performance (Guest, 1997). There is an underlying assumption that committed workers should be willing to 'go beyond contract' (Storey, 1992) and, as a consequence, become a valuable resource that enhances competitive advantage. Such an approach implies, and the influential Harvard School of HRM (Beer *et al.*, 1984) avers, that the management of humans as resources should be the remit of all managers, rather than the sole preserve of personnel departments (Armstrong, 2006). Consequently, under HRM, the work of managing the human resource is devolved to line managers, who assume a vital role in motivating staff to peak performance (Hope-Hailey *et al.*, 2005).

HRM's emphasis on the notion that both workers and management within an organisation need to be 'a team unified by a common purpose' (Fox, 1966, 2) implies a unitarist rather than a pluralist ideological position. In pluralist settings — 'a miniature democratic state composed of sectional groups with divergent interests' (Fox, 1966, 2) — heterogeneity between groups with regard to interests and opinions about the organisation's role, purpose and strategic direction is an accepted fact of life. Conflict is therefore to be expected and is positively viewed as a way of expressing opinions, airing differences and, ultimately, understanding,

learning and moving forward (Robbins, 2005). Monotheistic, unitarist approaches such as HRM beg the question of how, and by whom, the 'common purpose' is defined if it is not to be through some form of quasi-democracy. HRM's answer is that managers have the 'right to manage': it is they who set and enforce the common purpose of the organisation.

HRM deploys an array of tools to enable managers in this justified task of managing workers' performance towards the successful fulfilment of common organisational goals (as defined by the managers). Line managers, with their prerogative to manage, are empowered to drive individual staff performance through the use of measures such as high commitment work practices, performance monitoring and regular performance appraisals (Storey, 1992). Reward schemes under HRM are designed to promote a strong identity with corporate goals. A range of strategies are used, such as profit-related or performance-related pay, and competence-based schemes, which are designed to reward individual performance (Waring, 2007, 143).

HRM also deploys the soft language of staff 'development' and 'empowerment' necessary to legitimise claims that 'we're all in this together' — that both workers and management share common goals, hopes and expectations. Some see inherent and irresolvable conflict here, and conclude that HRM amounts to little more than a triumph of rhetoric over reality (Legge, 2005).

More theoretically nuanced critiques identify HRM as a Foucauldian control mechanism employing disciplinary and self-disciplinary techniques, such as performance monitoring and appraisal, to turn workers into objects of knowledge through a panoptical gaze (Townley, 2002). In such an analysis, workers are 'recast as a depersonalised unit of economic resource whose productivity and performance must constantly be measured and enhanced' (Shore and Wright, 2000, 62). Such resources are usually discarded when they are deemed to no longer *add value* to the productive process.

HRM researchers have for some years focussed on the 'search for the Holy Grail of establishing a causal relationship between HRM and performance' (Legge, 2001, 23). This has proved elusive, perhaps because of the ill-defined nature of HRM, which Keenoy (1999, 14) has likened to a hologram that:

changes its appearance as we move around its image √ As a fluid holistic entity of apparently multiple identities and forms, it is not surprising that every time we look at it, it is slightly different.

Several comprehensive studies over the past 20 years have attempted to establish the link between HRM and enhanced organisational performance (see, e.g., Gibb, 2001; Guest *et al.*, 2003; Wright *et al.*, 2003; Hope-Hailey *et al.*, 2005; Boxall and Macky, 2009). However, the proof of this link remains elusive (Keenoy, 2007; Guest, 2011), and it has been suggested that the 'existing evidence for a relationship between HRM and performance should be treated

with caution' (Wall and Wood, 2005, 454). The reason for this failure may be because there is a lack of an agreed definition of HRM.

No consensus has emerged on what employee management activities should be in a comprehensive 'HRM checklist', since no widely accepted theoretical rationale exists for selecting practices as definitively essential to HRM. (Boselie *et al.*, 2005, 72)

This may also explain a growing acceptance of the so-called 'black box' (Purcell *et al.*, 2003)—the contents of which are a mystery, but which somehow hold the key to understanding the HRM/performance link. In the context of this paper, perhaps the most pertinent point comes from Boxall and Macky (2009), who argue that such is the complexity and variability between organisations; it cannot be possible to infer a clear link between HRM practices and improved performance.

In summary and for the purposes of this paper, HRM can thus be defined as a loosely defined set of ideological practices, which aims to create unitary organisations by aligning workers with the objectives of management. This is to be achieved through line managers deploying a range of specific (self-) disciplining technologies aimed at managing the performance of workers. The whole is legitimised via the soft language of 'development'. The extent to which HRM really can improve organisational performance remains to be proven.

Given all of this, it is perhaps surprising that HRM has taken root in HE, for its core individualistic values conflict with the traditional democratic and collegiate values of the academy. While it is possible to understand the need for universities to become more business-like in their approach to management, in the current competitive context such an approach is inherently problematic. For there remains a tension between, on the one hand, allowing academics the time, space and freedom to pursue the creative aspects of their work, while, on the other, managing the university as a commercial corporation with all the trappings of budgets and individual performance criteria.

Yet, university managers appear to reject such concerns for as Ball (2003, 216) explains there exists a performativity that can be understood as:

a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as a means of incentive, control attrition and change — based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic).

Over time, academics have become enfolded into such a managerial discourse raising concerns that any creativity or 'risk-taking' is gradually being crowded out, as academics must increasingly dance to the tune of managerially defined performance criteria.

The following section traces the policy trajectory that led to this situation in the United Kingdom.

The modernisation of the UK HE

The changes that have taken place in the UK HE system are best understood in the context of the powerful neoliberal discourse that has shaped HE policy. Underpinning neoliberalism is the belief that 'the processes and practices of government are concerned with shaping human conduct in a rational and calculative manner towards economic goals' (Boden, 2005, 78). Dean (1999) described these government processes as regimes of practice, which, crucially, 'are more than the actual actions'; they also include their sustaining discourses (Boden, 2005, 78). The dominance of such a discourse cannot be underestimated and its influence on the HE sector has been far-reaching.

But there is an inherent contradiction at the heart of the neoliberal discourse: although we may be encouraged to organise our own lives and make individual choices, those choices are constrained by conditions not of our own choosing (Rose and Miller, 1992). Thus, under conditions of 'governmentality', governments following neoliberal policies, on the one hand:

empower and activate forms of agency, liberty and choices of individuals, while, on the other, they set norms, standards, benchmarks, performance indicators, quality controls and best practice standards, to monitor, measure and render calculable the performance of these various agencies. (Dean, 1999, 165)

The UK HE sector has become heavily regulated (Deem *et al.*, 2007), illustrating the extent to which such a discourse has influenced its development and heralding 'a significant break with the principle of academic autonomy' (Shore and Wright, 2000, 68).

It has become commonplace to refer to universities as business corporations, competing in the education market to secure the custom of the student consumer. The ideologically driven conservative governments of 1979–1997 were hugely influential in promoting such an ideology. The Jarratt (1985) Report on efficiency in universities was published during this period. The managerial model it suggested was 'explicit in its managerialism' (Kogan, 1989, 75) and has now become the template for the modern university, leading to a shift in the balance of power away from academics to university managers.

Following the recommendations of the Jarratt report, which argued that universities should resemble any other corporate enterprise, vice chancellors have been transformed into chief executives and heads of department have become line managers of business units. A whole tier of middle management has emerged that is accountable for meeting targets and delivering on budgets, while closely monitoring the performance of individual academics within departments. Such a model clearly resonates with the prescriptive elements of HRM, where line managers are given significant powers to

control and direct their subordinate staff in the pursuance of corporate objectives.

In their quest to develop more efficient and cost-effective working practices and operational processes, university managements have developed the type of systems and structures for controlling and monitoring the work of academics that would be familiar to Frederick Taylor ([1911] 2005). As Ball (2003) has previously argued, in the neoliberal university there is a perceived need to measure and quantify academic endeavour, which has led to an explosion of audit technologies (Power, 1997). Yet the very subjective nature of academic work does not fall into easily defined and auditable categories. The consequence, as Ball (2003) reminds us, is a system that manages only what can be measured and is not, therefore, a true measure of academic performance and harbours potentially dire consequences for 'intellectual production' (Strathern, 2000, 3).

Notwithstanding such concerns, the neoliberal discourse of modernisation and marketisation has become the taken for granted logic of the HE sector. University performance is now inextricably linked to national economic growth, with successive governments continually urging universities to forge closer links with business (Lambert Review of Business-University Collaboration, 2003; Leitch Review of Skills, 2006). The role of the modern university was clearly expressed in New Labour's vision for HE, the White Paper Higher Ambitions (BIS, 2009): to be responsive to student needs and to equip graduates with the kind of employability skills that business actually wants, in order that they become more employable and more productive and, ultimately, British business becomes more competitive.

Such changes to the UK system are the product of a broader global shift that has led to greater local competition and a huge increase in student numbers. In the context of such growth, it seems clear that some degree of change was necessary in the way that universities are managed and organised internally.

Yet the managerial, HRM-led model that has emerged does raise serious questions. The role of the academic has clearly altered and the Humboldtian notion of the university as a self-governing community of equal scholars (Deem, 1998) apparently consigned to history.

In the modern neoliberal university, an entirely new managerial discourse has emerged that challenges traditional democratic notions of collegiality, from which academics used to derive considerable status and authority. Management hierarchies have grown and bureaucratic processes increased as universities have attempted to become more strategic and business-like in their affairs. The corporate language of target setting and performance criteria is now commonplace and, Ball (2003, 218) argues, a whole new vocabulary of management-speak has emerged in the modern managerial university that is:

'peopled' by human resources which need to be managed [where] learning is re-rendered as 'cost-effective policy outcomes'.

According to such discourses, academics have been transformed into units of resource in an academic labour process of knowledge production and income generation. As a consequence, the academic voice has been marginalised and decisions concerning the role and purpose of the university are increasingly the preserve of managers.

HRM has emerged as a central element in this discourse where there is a fundamental belief that in order to improve the overall performance of universities there is a need to manage the performance of individual academic staff more effectively. HRM, it is believed, provides the tools to do just that.

HRM has been widely adopted in English universities following the 2001 RDS Initiative (HEFCE, 2001). RDS, very much a neoliberal product, was rooted in notions of individualism and demands for adherence to a standardised framework. RDS aimed to improve standards of people management and argued that if academics could be managed more effectively they would achieve their objectives more efficiently. Accordingly, a percentage of universities' government funding was made contingent upon the production of a detailed HR strategy, conforming to specific criteria, identifying detailed and costed HR objectives. Over time, it was envisaged that the HR values promoted by the initiative would become sufficiently embedded in the strategy of HEIs and would ultimately become self-sustaining.

Although there are still unassuaged doubts concerning the effectiveness of RDS in improving performance (Guest and Clinton, 2007; Waring, 2010), it has led to a number of generic changes across the HE sector. For example, it is now the norm for universities to produce comprehensive HR strategies (often published on their websites as an inducement to prospective employees) and a string of associated HR policies. Former personnel departments have in the main renamed themselves HR departments. Many perceive that there has been an associated increase in the number of HR personnel (Waring *et al.*, 2011). The strategic significance of HR departments has been enhanced, as HR directors have assumed an increasingly senior status within university hierarchies.

In the following section, I turn to my own study of three English universities and explore what happened following the attempted implementation of HRM.

HRM in the academy

This section draws on data gathered from fieldwork I carried out at three English universities following the end of the period of RDS funding in 2006. Two of the universities are pre-1992 organisations and the third is post 1992.

Each has been given a pseudonym, as have all the individuals referred to. The universities are:

Casterbridge: a prominent member of the Russell Group of universities with an international research reputation. The university was established in the early twentieth century.

Budmouth: also a prominent member of the Russell Group with an international reputation for innovation in research. Budmouth was established in the early 1960s.

Shaston: a small, student-focused teaching institution with particular strengths in vocational subjects. Shaston was granted university status comparatively recently.

The data was collected in 60 semi-structured interviews with staff from across the university hierarchy. Given the diverse nature of each university structure, I categorised staff into three levels: senior management, middle management³ and academic staff. I began by interviewing three key actors at each university — the HR Director, a member of the strategic management team and an academic union negotiator, followed by interviews with middle managers and then academic staff. Academic staff represented a broad mix of some newer and some more experienced employees. As a consequence, I generated a set of stories from different levels of the university hierarchy, which reveal various individual perceptions of the nature of HRM and the impact it has had following RDS.

Modernisation

... 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 ... not because we have shareholders but because that's the only way to be financially sound. We are not running deficits ... we are a lean, mean organisation financially.

Thomas, Senior Manager, Casterbridge

At one time, to hear such an overtly managerialist discourse being employed by a university manager such as Thomas might have been surprising. But in the market-led, commercial environment that characterises the UK HE sector today, such a narrative appears to have become the norm. All of the senior managers I interviewed argued that such was the degree of change, in the sector there was no alternative but to adopt a corporate model and attempt to become more business-like in their operations if they were to survive in the increasingly competitive HE marketplace.

The influence of neoliberalism — an all-pervasive belief that forms into ‘a collective mentality about how we should and do rule ourselves and conduct our conduct’ (Boden, 2005, 78) — should not be underestimated and clearly informed the views of senior university managers and the image in which they see themselves. This is important not only for the fact that modernisation was presented as an entirely necessary and rational development for each university, but it also helped to create the conditions that would ultimately facilitate the introduction of HRM.

Organisational restructuring

A belief in the need to take a more corporate approach had led each university to undertake a complete reorganisation of its managerial structures and operational systems. The traditional departmental structures that had grown up around academic disciplines were deemed to be too diverse, inefficient and simply ‘no longer fit for purpose in the modern economy’ (Henry, Senior Manager, Casterbridge)

A process of rationalisation in an on-going programme of change had led to smaller departments at each university being merged into larger business operating units run by line managers and supported by a management team that included a non-academic business support manager. Business units operated within tight budgetary constraints and were subject to regular monitoring and auditory control.

Senior managers argued that such restructuring would facilitate greater accountability and management control at all levels of the hierarchy, leading to more effective delivery of corporate plans, to the ultimate benefit of the student. It is difficult to refute the logic of such a reasonable discourse and avoid being characterised as anti-progressive (Clarke and Newman, 1997). But academics, while aware of the need to respond to the changing nature of HE, were concerned at the nature of that response which was becoming increasingly managerial in its focus.

Such structures are also a necessary prerequisite for the introduction of HRM. As the section ‘Managing humans as resources’ shows, HRM empowers line managers to monitor the performance of individual staff against corporate goals via performance appraisals. Hierarchical structures facilitate the process of goal setting and target allocation and enable managers at all levels to allocate responsibilities and to pinpoint areas that may be perceived as under-performing. Management control at each university was significantly increased, which accords closely with Townley’s (2002) depiction of HRM as a managerial surveillance technology.

There was a further significant element to the managerial restructuring. Although the formal collegiate structures remained as the ultimate

decision-making bodies — the Senate at Casterbridge and Budmouth and Board of Governors at Shaston — it was clear that significant power was vested in a small senior management executive, headed by the vice chancellor. Many of the staff I interviewed, at all levels, agreed that these small managerial elites were making the real strategic decisions that were effectively rubber-stamped by the formal bodies. Such findings are clearly consistent with notions of HRM as a bureaucratic control mechanism.

Bureaucratisation

Attempts had also been made to professionalise the administrative function of each university. This was mainly driven by the need to comply with the proliferation of external audit requirements that arise under conditions of governmentality. As a consequence, both the status and influence of the support functions had increased, creating something of a paradox for the academics. While they could see the benefits of freeing up time from administrative tasks, there was also an apparent concern that they risked losing a degree of control over their work by handing responsibility to administrators. It was generally felt that there had been a disproportionate increase in the use of bureaucratic systems that were questionable in their effectiveness.

I mean, QA systems are all very worthwhile in theory, but just so hugely time consuming . . . just to prove that you are doing what you are actually doing anyway!

Peggy, Middle Manager, Casterbridge

Some degree of dissatisfaction with bureaucracy is to be expected in most organisations, but the stories of the academics I spoke to suggest something a little more extreme. Just as organisational restructuring was justified as an entirely rational and necessary development, so too was the shift to a more bureaucratic systems-based approach. The danger being that such an approach provides the illusion of certainty and objectivity and threatens to supplant academic judgement. A further irony is explained by this senior manager:

This was always sold as having the benefits of freeing up staff . . . I think it's fair to say that the experience of most academics is that it does not appear to have had a major impact on their overall administrative workload.

Donald, Senior Manager, Casterbridge

This belief in a growing influence of the administrative function in conjunction with an apparent centralisation of power at the top of an increasingly

managerial hierarchy served to reinforce academics' feelings of marginalisation.

Many believed that managerial restructuring had led to a reduction in their ability to be genuinely involved in decision making and an increase in their administrative workload.

HR strategies and RDS

Such was the context into which RDS was introduced. From the outset, HR strategies and policies were associated with the kind of managerialism and bureaucratic processes that were the source of so much frustration to academics. Senior managers were generally supportive of RDS and the opportunity it provided to develop their HR function. New initiatives had been introduced, including assigning HR officers to particular departments and a raft of new policies. But neither academics nor heads of department were especially supportive of HR.

HR policies are probably the most managerialist in the whole of the university. They operate systems — they have to, to be legally compliant and accountable, and so most of the day-to-day element of HR work is incredibly bureaucratic, which is a huge source of frustration.

Warren, Middle Manager, Budmouth

Consequently, HR policies failed to penetrate what has previously been dubbed a ‘thick layer of cloud’ (Archer, 2005) and were not being effectively implemented at all levels of the university. The ideological buy-in to the unitarist principles of HRM, upon which its successful operationalisation is contingent was not, therefore, present. Despite an increased level of HR activity and the constant rolling out of new strategies, there was a suggestion that very little had changed for academics on the ground. The issues that really mattered to staff were not, in their opinion, being addressed. Equal opportunities, and bullying and harassment, were often cited as areas where little had changed, even though policies had been developed to tackle the associated problems.

Incidences of bullying and harassment had in fact increased at each university, serving to reinforce the notion that a more directive approach was emerging. For this is the reality of the rather insidious side of HRM (Townley, 1993; Legge, 2005). Management control is achieved by individualising the employment relationship, then closely monitoring the performance of individuals and singling out ‘underperformers’ for appropriate remedial action. Despite the ‘soft’ rhetoric of HRM, it remains a tool that is designed to maximise performance and increase productivity.

Equal opportunities is one of the priority areas originally identified by RDS, but many of the women academics in this study explained how gender inequality persisted in their institutions. This, despite the fact that each university had

done what was expected in terms of *inter alia* developing policy and undertaking equal pay audits. This particularly neoliberal response to a problem — the setting of benchmarks and criteria against which performance can be measured — allowed the universities to respond accordingly by creating the illusion of activity that actually masked a failure to genuinely tackle the issue at a more fundamental level.

As a consequence, many felt that the primary motivation behind developing these policies was legal compliance and conformity, rather than a genuine commitment to developing people.

Performance management

One of the principal aims of RDS was to raise standards of HE delivery by improving the quality of performance of individual academics. Universities were expected to tackle this key area by implementing a system of staff appraisal. This was always likely to be a contentious approach given its Foucauldian overtones, requiring academics to quantify their work by identifying specific and measurable performance criteria. Also, academics were supposed to demonstrate how such criteria contributed to the strategic objectives of the university. Significant concerns were expressed by academics who argued that the highly subjective and self-determined nature of their work simply does not lend itself to such an approach. The managers who were supposed to carry out the appraisals also doubted their efficacy.

I think academics are supposed to be, you know, free-thinking individuals who can push themselves and all the rest of it, and they don't really need to be managed like, you know have you done this, er, they're not working in cubicles like something in Dilbert.

Robin, Middle Manager, Shaston

I don't do appraisals at all, there's just no point to them in my opinion. Staff can fill in the paperwork if they really want to and I will look at them, but no, I believe it is far more important to talk to people. My door is always open and staff know they can come in anytime, and they do.

Mark, Middle Manager, Casterbridge

Such doubt concerning the value of appraisal led to an obvious variability in implementation between departments, and clearly diluted its overall effectiveness. Notwithstanding such concerns at the operational level, each university persisted in its efforts to implement HRM and to promote a performance-led approach to management. This raises questions as to why senior managers

were so determined to implement a system of people management, the value of which is still much debated and to disregard a growing awareness of the difficulties that arise when attempting to implement such a homogeneous regime into organisations that are characterised by complexity and variability (Boxall and Macky, 2009).

It was evident that for many academics and their immediate managers appraisal had become associated with precisely the kind of directive controlling approach that challenged their working conditions, grounded as they are in traditions of collegiality and academic autonomy. Such a degree of challenge was always likely to create the conditions for resistance to occur and so it proved.

Resistance

There was some evidence of overt resistance, including Mark (the head of department at Casterbridge quoted above) who refused to carry out appraisals. There was resistance too at Shaston, where a new tier of line managers had been created in one particular school. The academic staff refused to accept the authority of these middle managers and simply by-passed them by going direct to the head of school.

But resistance was not usually an overt process, as this HR director explains:

It's not necessarily active resistance, but it can be either passive or just not doing the job . . . you know, leaving a meeting having made a decision, and nothing happening, you know that sort of thing . . . although everyone was agreeing, they weren't really . . . they were only buying in to the consequence of agreeing it.

Michael, HR Director, Casterbridge

This type of passive or covert resistance was apparent at all levels and demonstrates the difficulties that arise when attempting to implement a managerial culture and strategy into such a complex environment.

. . . policy from the centre faces quite a lot of hazards in getting down, it's still the heads of department saying this is the policy I've been told to . . . sort of distancing themselves from it, you know what I mean? So people like [HR Director] may make agreement but then have some trouble delivering it . . .

Charles, Union Representative, Casterbridge

Such were the difficulties faced by senior managers, for without the complete support of these key middle managers it was always going to be an uphill struggle to get their HR policies implemented. Although each

university had devolved greater power to people in these roles in accordance with HRM models and enhanced their status significantly, heads of department remained closely aligned with the traditional collegiate ethos of the academy rather than the managerially focused HRM agenda. As a consequence, HRM was unable to gain traction and penetrate to all levels of the hierarchy.

Academics themselves employed a number of strategies of 'playing the game' where forms were completed, or boxes ticked to satisfy administrative requirements in an echo of Miller's (1995) notion of bargained autonomy. Others simply employed a strategy of deleting emails and ignoring 'unnecessary' administrative requests.

Oh yeah, I mean I've always found that just ignoring things seems to be a pretty effective strategy. Everything comes via email doesn't it? So you just delete that and carry on as before [laughs].

Troy, Academic, Shaston

As a consequence, there was an evident frustration among senior managers at the failure of academic staff to fully engage with the modernisation agenda and the rather slow process of change.

Trying to get academics to engage is a problem because they don't want to do it, so there's loads of tensions. It's an uphill struggle.

Caroline, Senior Manager, Shaston

Caroline's frustration at academics' unwillingness to engage clearly illustrates the polarisation of the views of senior managers and the majority of academic staff I spoke to. For the former, changes to the nature and structure of HE led them to conclude that change, modernisation and the adoption of modern management practices were essential and inevitable. While academics recognised that some response to change was necessary, they did not accept the need for the kind of wholesale reorganisation that had led to massive changes in the structures and systems of university management and the way that people are managed. Lydia, a Casterbridge professor, reflects on the situation:

Overall, there seems to be a general feeling of frustration with the current system, and all the attempts to manage things more effectively seem to miss the essential point of HE. There's not a huge level of disquiet, and academics can see through most of the nonsense and treat it with disdain, while getting on with their own work as they always have done. All of which leads you to wonder . . . what on earth is the point? It all seems to be such a huge waste of time and effort.

Lydia, Academic, Casterbridge

Discussion

What then, as Lydia said, was the point of attempting to implement what is, effectively, a flawed system of management into an environment to which it appears fundamentally unsuited? And given such a lack of strategic fit, what was the impact on individual academic staff? Certainly, at face value, it would seem that, beyond an apparent level of frustration at the associated bureaucracy, the impact of HRM was minimal. Policy implementation was variable at best and was simply not penetrating throughout the hierarchy, partly due to the lack of ideological buy-in to HRM, especially among line managers. Such lack of support for policies from those who must implement them certainly does not augur well (Hope-Hailey *et al.*, 2005).

Also, on the evidence of this study, the more overtly managerialist and controlling aspects of HRM did not appear to have manifested themselves. Line managers routinely questioned the managerial discourses of senior managers and clearly allied themselves more closely with the academics. A growing distance between the modernising senior managers with their unitarist rhetoric and the wider constituency of academic staff was clearly evident. The latter had become resigned to the changes, but rather than mounting any serious challenge, they indulged in minor acts of game playing and passive dissent (Clarke and Newman, 1997), which satisfied the bureaucratic demands and allowed them to carry on as they always had.

Nevertheless, while it might appear that the introduction of HRM had been only partially successful, in fact, its impact was significant for a particularly complex and subtle transformation was taking place at each university. HRM was just one element of a process of change, driven and sustained by a powerful neoliberal discourse that was variable in its impact, but was gradually forming into a coherent and dominant narrative concerning the nature of HE and the role of modern universities. Rose (1999, 271) has previously considered this very gradual and ‘delicate construction of a complex and hybrid assemblage’, which almost imperceptibly draws people in and leads to change over a period of time.

Against a backdrop of neoliberal government policymaking leading to greater marketisation and consumerisation of HE, senior managers had themselves internalised such ideology and presented a strategy for change in their respective universities as an entirely necessary and rational response. Modernisation was presented as a virtuous strategy that would benefit students and ultimately the wider society. The power of such a discourse should not be underestimated and it was increasingly difficult to present alternative arguments.

Managers became increasingly confident in the logic and rationality of their own narratives, readily refuting alternative discourses, characterising their proponents as out of touch with reality and clinging on to an outdated image

of the academy, rooted in a collegiate past, the veracity of which was also questioned. Through repeated assertion of the benefits of HRM-led managerialism and its reinforcement by the deployment of such techniques, this powerful managerial discourse became increasingly dominant and ultimately self-fulfilling. Though many academics continued to advocate a more collegiate and democratic approach, the erosion of the very structures from which academics had traditionally derived significant power and authority made it increasingly difficult for their voices to be heard. They became increasingly marginalised as a consequence.

The fact that many HRM policies were failing to make an impact and were not fully accepted did not really matter. The production of HR strategies had been a pre-requisite to secure RDS funding anyway, so not surprisingly each university had complied with the government's requirements. What is significant is the fact that universities were also required to demonstrate to the government what progress had been made in implementing their strategies and how the money had been spent. Accordingly, university HR departments focussed their efforts on developing strong narratives to convey just how successful the implementation of their strategies had been and what benefits had accrued. Whether accurate or not, these narratives and the pointed concentration on the value of HR strategies over time led them to almost imperceptibly becoming part of the fabric of each university's operating processes.

The HRM drumbeat thus became increasingly insistent and formed an important element of the broader context of neoliberal managerialism. Heads of department found themselves in a particularly difficult position, as senior managers expected them to assume a more managerial approach and to justify their operations within the context of tight budgetary constraints. As a consequence, the pressure on heads to undertake staff appraisals in order to demonstrate that they were monitoring the performance of academics in their department grew. Although there was evidence of resistance to this at various levels of each university's hierarchy, including among heads themselves, appraisals were gradually becoming the norm for the majority of staff. The former collegiate relationship between head of department and academics was evolving into a far more directive, corporate line management model, creating a new frontier of control with the potential for tension and conflict.

The deployment of HRM and the associated rise of managerialism did then have a significant impact on each of the universities in this study and the academics within.

It was clear that academics were coming under increasing scrutiny through the use of HRM and its associated techniques, the consequence of which was the emergence of a complex and contested environment in which individual academics felt increasing levels of concern and uncertainty.

Senior managers did not accept that their institutions had become more managerialist, arguing instead that they were simply becoming more business-like and efficient — better managed rather than overtly managerial. They argued that it was possible to implement more effective systems of management while maintaining an essential collegiate ethos. This clear divergence in opinion is significant and indicative of a growing divide between an academic labour force and a neoliberal managerial elite, echoing previous analyses of a growing proletarianisation and commodification of academic work (Wilson, 1991; Willmott, 1995).

All of which is surprising when there is a growing awareness that homogeneous approaches such as HRM do not necessarily transfer to environments characterised by variability and complexity (Boxall and Macky, 2009). Indeed, a recent study raised questions concerning the viability of HRM even when it was introduced under ‘textbook’ conditions in a leading knowledge-intensive firm (Cushen and Thompson, 2012).

The effect of Performance Management on academics was variable. Younger staff especially came under significant pressure to meet ever more demanding targets. For them a performance-led approach was the norm. Women too suffered as the section ‘HR strategies and RDS’ showed. Academics generally were swept along in all of the change and were gradually becoming enfolded into the managerial discourse by complying with the various box-ticking and form-filling exercises, even though they continued to contest the validity of such procedures and processes. Performance appraisals did take place for the majority of academics who increasingly had to demonstrate their work in the form of quantifiable performance criteria. Such a process of individualisation is integral to HRM and is one of the most serious developments associated with the managerialisation of universities. The HRM imperative that requires individuals to link individual performance criteria to wider corporate aims and objectives presents a significant challenge to academic identities (Henkel, 2000; Berg *et al.*, 2004; Clegg, 2008). Such an approach constrains academic freedom and autonomy and individualises academics by turning them into ‘objects of knowledge’ through the ‘panoptic gaze’ of HRM (Townley, 2002).

The consequential marginalisation of the academic voice raises fundamental questions concerning the purpose of a university and its role in modern society. It appears that Humboldtian ideals and notions of learning as a social good have been subsumed into discourses of rationality and market logic. Yet if universities really wish to be seen as successful business enterprises operating in a global HE marketplace they surely need to recognise that a continuing erosion of academics’ core values and principles will not only lead to uncertainty and confusion for them, but also risks damaging the core of the academy itself.

Notes

- 1 In Wales, the Assembly Government is taking a different approach and is committed to a specifically planned rather than a market-led approach to the organisation of its higher education sector (Wales Government, 2009). In Scotland, the government has proposed that Scottish students will not have to pay tuition fees for studying at Scottish universities, but students from other parts of the United Kingdom will have to pay (Scottish Government, 2011).
- 2 See, for example, The Complete University Guide (<http://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk>), *The Guardian* (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/universityguide>), *The Times* (http://www.thetimes.co.uk/Good_Uni_Guide) and *The Sunday Times* (http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/University_Guide) in the United Kingdom.
- 3 It should be noted that 'middle-manager' is used here as a descriptive category and that people in this position were usually academics. Deem (2004) used the term 'manager academic' to describe this group that has emerged under conditions of new managerialism.

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