

Exploring the Specificities of Human Resource Management in Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

Globally, the HEIs are undergoing fundamental transformations in response to the demands posed by growing competitions, globalisation and need for institutional autonomy. Accordingly HEIs are becoming more customer-oriented, cost-cautious and more strategically sensitive towards market changes. This transforms the HEIs to typically resemble business models of commercial enterprises. The most powerful assets that an institution could possess to fit in this competitive environment are its human resources. Consequently, the quality of human resources can be regarded as a critical success factor for driving organisation success in higher educational institutions (HEIs). However, the studies analysing the application of human resource management (HRM) practices in HEIs are meagre at global level and there is an absolute lack of such studies in Indian context.

The present study represents a modest attempt to explore the specificities of HRM practices in Indian HEIs. The study has a fundamental preposition that human resource development (HRD) as a sub-function of HRM signifies a crucial component of achieving and maintaining the competitive advantage of HEIs in India.

The paper proposes the universities need to create a dedicated HRD department which can exclusively cater to strategic management of their human resources. This pioneering attempt will expectedly advance the overall literature of HRM in HEIs and may serve as the basis of future research in this direction.

Keywords: Higher Education Institutions, Human Resource Management, HRD, Competitive Advantage

Introduction

Human resource management has transitioned from a merely a support function to becoming the strategic partner in businesses. There has been an increased recognition of the strategic role of HRM in organisations success. The ensuing result is that the HRD now facilitate the transition from a traditional training to learning organisations in order to foster continuous employee learning (Gómez et al., 2004; Sadler et al., 2001). The lifelong learning has not only become the new philosophy to establish performance expectations, address higher-level problem-solving skills but has also become a pivotal strategy to develop the workforce to embrace change (Hale, 1991). Strategic management of human resource is integral in steering the organisation through changing business environment, maintain commitment of employees and thereby secure the true competitive advantage.

The scenario of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is no more different from a typical company. With the establishment of HEIs on business model lines, the education in general is looked upon as more of business world over. Consequently, the HEIs have undergone immense changes due to globalization, stiff competitions, and ever growing demand for funding and institutional autonomy. Accordingly, the management of human resources in HEIs is just as challenging as it is in any typical business organisation. As a result, the effective

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management of human resources in HEIs demand greater managerial and leadership competences than ever before (Pellert 2007). This has led to remarkable shifts from administration to need for managing the staff within universities.

In response to the growing competitions, the HEIs adopt diverse strategies to better optimize their human resources. Arguably, since the investment in HR constitutes a larger portion of university expenditure, the people are regarded as most vital assets and acquire significant importance in university affairs (Evans & Chun, 2012).

In recent years, the HE policy at international level (including India) has seen a greater reliance on the projecting the university system as a modernisation factor. Accordingly, the stakeholders of HE sector have focused on a number of measures which arguably lead to modernisation of higher education sector. With emerging competitions through the entry of private players, the universities in general are supposed to become more customer-orientated, cost-cautious and more strategically sensitive towards meeting the socio-economic needs of countries and societies.

Globally, the approach of public authorities towards universities has changed significantly with a heightened focus placed on 'managerialism' (Enders, et al., 2005, Pellert, 1999) rather than administration (Enders, et al., 2005). Accordingly, there have been the emergence of newer ideas like 'academic capitalism' (Slaughter and Leslie, 1997) and 'entrepreneurial universities' (Clark, 1998) etc. Moreover, in India as well as in other regions of the world, certain essential transformation processes are being undertaken in the domains of research, innovation and teaching. This has shifted the focus from regulation to deregulation and from administration to management. Therefore, HEIs need the pool of competent human resources which are strategically managed to analyse and optimize the above trends.

The Indian system of higher education is predominantly controlled by the public authorities. As such, majority of the HEIs lack a dedicated department to strategically perform the various crucial functions of human resource management.

The Indian education system is amidst managing a host of challenges ranging from use of dated teaching methodologies to redesigning the course curriculum upon key market transitions vis-à-vis industry relevance. Further, burgeoning technology-induced skill gaps which the Indian economy is facing across diverse sectors throws major onus upon the Indian HE system.

Arguably, the strategic management of human resources within HEIs would enable the country to produce a workforce well suited to meet the demands of industry and thereby can bridge the skill gap in the labour market. Thus, the capacities, competencies, skills, and the quality of human resources define the educational institution results. In this context, developing human resources is an essential complex, continuous and high responsibility process for any organisation, which involves actions and activities to select and train new staff and to retain existing one (Popescu & Crenicean, 2011). Therefore, the success of any educational institute is supposed to depend on chiefly on the quality of its human resources and its consideration of HRM as the heart of the educational administration (Jones & Walters, 1994).

Theoretical Background

The studies analysing the specificities of HRM in HEIs are meagre. However, there have been modest attempts to explore the different aspects of human resources management in HEIs (Teir and Zhang, 2016; Hartshorne, 1992; Hyslop, 1986; Smith & Schalekamp, 1997). Nevertheless, the focus of majority of these studies has been on identifying the characteristics of human resources rather than the actual HRM practices in HEIs.

According to Popescu and Băltărețu (2012), the optimum utilization of HR in universities not only includes the appropriate use of the teaching, and administrative but also their role in the development of other resources in the institution. Furthermore, for the sake of achieving competitive advantage at national and international levels, the development of HEIs requires the HRD concerns to be institutionalised, a task for which higher forums such as the ministry of higher education is responsible (ibid). The effective management of workforce is found to contribute to fulfil the fundamental objectives of quality, profits and customer satisfaction, thereby leading to sustainable competitive advantage for organization (Noe et al., 2004).

A few empirical evidences found that the implementation of quality management in HEIs is significantly influenced by a host of variables which inter-alia include the 'involvement of external consultants', 'institutional reputation', leaders commitment to the implementation process, and bureaucratic and political decision-making processes followed in HEIs (Csizmadia et. al., 2008). Likewise, it was also empirically revealed that HRM practices have a positive impact on the perceived performance of university faculty (Shahzad et al., 2008). Further, the establishment of Strategic Human Resource Management practices positively impact the individual performance, organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and the resultant organizational performance (Green et al., 2006).

Likewise, it was strongly argued by (Teir and Zhang, 2016) that for an educational institute, it is imperative to establish development strategies. Such developmental strategies are arguably shall include a host of HR functions rang from induction study to informal means of lifelong learning. However, regardless of the approaches adopted for career development, the HEIs must place the educational actors at the heart of educational service. Thus, managing the human resource strategically will better enable the HEIs to gin high levels of competitive advantages and will facilitate their growth and sustenance in the long run (ibid).

Human resource development

There are diverse definitions of HRD proposed in the literature. Consequently, the focus, purpose and goals of such discourses differ as per the specific context in which the term HRD is used. However, there has been a significant consensus achieved over HRD concept as spanning over tow threads. Firstly in a broader sense, HRD is referred to as the systematic process to develop people's "knowledge, expertise, productivity and satisfaction, whether for personal or group/ team gain, or for the benefit of an organisation, community, nation, or ultimately, the whole of humanity." (McLean & McLean, 2001). Secondly, HRD in a narrow sense is interpreted as the planned activities of an organisation to develop the professional qualifications of its human resource (O'Donnell et al., 2006).

However, irrespective of the context in which HRD is used, HRD has been recognized with three distinct functions i-e; training and development, organization development and career development. These three chief functions of HRD perfectly illustrate that HRD as a system encompasses not only the development of human resource but the development of organisations as well (McLagan, 2011). Consequently, HRD provides opportunities for employees to enhance their skills as well as fosters the efficient utilization of them in order to achieve organisational objectives. Thus, it is accorded that HRD facilitates the mutual gain of both the organisation and its human resource (O'Donnell et al., 2006).

Human resource development in the university context

Based on the investigations into the roles of HR department in HEIs, the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR) have proposed set of guidelines of practices that must be

carried out in HEIs as part of HRM. The guidelines pertain to major HRM functions inter-alia include Employee Benefits, Diversity and Respectful Workplace, Global Human Resources, Performance Metrics, Recruitment/Selection/Termination, Risk Management, Safety, and Health, Wage and Salary Administration, Employee Compliance – Legal Matters, Employee Relations – Labour Issues, Information Systems and Technology, Employee Leave and Holiday, Payroll, Training and Development.

Further it is argued that HEIs ought to take into consideration the examples of good emerging practices when framing the human resource policies and strategies (Gordon & Whitchurch, 2007). Therefore, the set of HRM practice that fetch greater value in terms of contribution to organisational performance should ideally be adopted by different organisations (Conway, 2004).

In an attempt to explore the current Practices of HRM in HEIs in Palestine, Teir and Zhang, (2016) argued that two models of HRM are found to fit the current situation of HEIs. i-e; CUPA-HR which includes 15 HRM practices and a model by Convertino (2008) which includes 5 HRM practices to be considered in organisations for the sake of attaining a competitive advantage. Based on the extant review of two models, Teir and Zhang, (2016) suggested 8 best HRM which are essential in the context of HEIs. These practices are: i) Recruitment, Selection and Termination ii) Professional Training and Development iii) Appraisal and Performance Metrics and Reviews iv) Human Resources Systems and Technology v) Risk Management, Safety and Health vi) Salary Administration vii) Employee Relations viii) Retirement. The authors revealed that the strategies and plans for effective HRM should be revisited to improve the quality of educational services, and therefore contributing to the overall national growth.

In spite of remarkably high expenditures of HEIs on the human resources, the processes of planning, management and development of staff within HEIs is poorly established (Pellert, 2007).

Since, universities differ from other organizations on account of being described as fragmented, loosely coupled organizations with a lack of shared institutional standards (Weick, 1976).

The HRD as a system is practised indirectly, intuitively and on more of ad-hoc basis. The stream of HRD activities like induction, training and development, potential appraisal, career counselling etc. are still performed on ad-hoc and informally basis through socialisation within the discipline (Pellert, 2007).

These academic conditions inter-alia other peculiarities, contradict the implementation of a HRD system strongly oriented towards the organization. Thus, the strategic HRD is found difficult to implement in a university set-up due to myriad of factors. Nevertheless, a growing number of HEIs are seeking to establish their own HRD units to adequately prepare their human resource for current or future roles.

The Indian higher education system

Indian represents a culturally rich society with diversity of religions and languages. While certain features of Indian educational system like distinguished diversity is emerging as a global competence, it simultaneously poses significant challenges for Indian higher educational system.

The higher education in India is governed through a network of giant government bodies like, All India Council for Technical Education, University Grants Commission, Indian Council for Agriculture Research, National Council for Teacher Education, Distance Education Council, Bar Council of India, Central Council of Homeopathy, Medical Council of India, Indian Nursing Council, Pharmacy Council of India, Dentist Council of India and Central Council of Indian Medicine.

However, due to factors like privatisation and globalisation, the Indian HE is struggling with various issues lack of quality education, corruption in education, poor value education, poor women's education, curriculum issues and other issues like distorted societal outlook etc. The approach of regulatory bodies has been presumably remained as least liberal with strong roots of regularization.

Furthermore, since majority of HEIs in India operate in the public sector, they moderately remain open to changes in external environment. Meanwhile, due to immense competitions emerging from globalisation and the entry of private players, the public universities are facing challenges with regard to maintaining the quality of their service. The government funding to state governed universities is also shirking and as such they find hard to economically sustain themselves. In consideration of aforementioned issues, the Indian HE system has failed to produce world class universities. Thus, HEIs are in absolute need to nurture a pool of competent HR to navigate the institutions amidst these challenges.

Directions to develop human resources in higher education institutions

HRD involves a myriad of functions in the corporate world. Nevertheless, in case of HEIs, the HRD functions need be modified to suit the demands of education sector. An examination of the crucial functions of HEIs reveals that HEIs basically strive for two core functions; research and teaching. Since HRD activities seek to enhance the competencies in individuals in a way that their tasks are strategically aligned with the direction of the organisation. In this connection, the application of HRD in universities should ideally strive to strengthen both the teaching as well as research. While there has been a heavy emphasis on the need of producing quality research in universities in recent years, this may degrade the essential and fundamental roles of HEIs in teaching. Therefore, it is imperative that the HRD systems must focus on the strategies to strengthen both the teaching as well as research.

Further with the emergence of knowledge based economy, the demand for vocational and industry oriented education has amplified in recent years. Accordingly, a heavy emphasis has been placed on the need to produce knowledgeable and skilled workers in order to gain higher competitiveness and employment rates. This may potentially prove to be challenging for the university staff who are more accustomed in delivering the traditional academic education. Therefore, this rightly behoves the HRD professionals to orient the HRD mechanism in line to optimize this challenge for HEIs.

Conclusion

It is now significantly agreed upon that the HEIs are undergoing fundamental transformations in response to the demands posed by growing competitions, globalisation and need for institutional autonomy. Further, due to aforementioned factors, the HEIs are now more customer-oriented, cost-cautious and more strategically sensitive towards market changes. This transforms the HEIs to typically resemble business models of commercial enterprises. The most powerful assets that an institution could possess to fit in this competitive environment are its human resources. Accordingly, the quality of human resources is considered as a critical success factor in driving organisation success in case of HEIs. Therefore, the consideration of HRM as the heart of administration in HEIs is a must prerequisite for efficient management of HEIs (Jones & Walters, 1994). A typical set of HRM practices strive to transform the strategic goals of organisations into human resource policies and thereby aid in creating HRM strategies to gain better competitive advantage (Tyson, 1997).

The significance of HRD strategies for organisation success has already been acknowledged in a university context. Accordingly, a growing number of HEIs across globe are engaged in developing appropriate measures

of HRD for their organisations. Nevertheless, there has not been a satisfactory results achieved till date. The number of studies examining the peculiarities of HRD in university context is still meagre.

The present study thus represents a modest attempt to explore the specificities of HRD practices in Indian HEIs. The study has a fundamental preposition that HRD signifies a fundamental and crucial element of improving the quality of planning, organising and managing the competence of HEIs in India. This pioneering attempt will expectedly advance the overall literature of HRM in HEIs and may serve as the basis of future research in this direction.

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Arguably, the strategic management of human resources within HEIs would enable the country to produce a workforce well suited to meet the demands of industry and thereby can bridge the skill gap in the labour market. Thus, the capacities, competencies, skills, and the quality of human resources define the educational institution results. In this context, developing human resources is an essential complex, continuous and high responsibility process for any organisation, which involves actions and activities to select and train new staff and to retain existing one.

However, the specialized functions of HRD can't be accurately performed by typical administrators and academicians in Indian set up. There are no evidences of having specialised HRD department within Indian universities. This could possibly be attributed to the reason until the emergence of privatization, there were uniform policies spanning across all educational institutions in India. However, the Indian educational system is witnessing immense changes in its policies especially after the entry of private players in the sector.

Flowingly, there had been a significant realisation of importance of HRM in private educational institutes within India. Accordingly, a major portion of the private universities have started with the establishment of dedicated HRD departments which breaks the status quo of how the HRM functions are dealt in typical bureaucratic models of Indian HEIs.

The result shows that there are meagre human resource strategies adopted in Indian institutions and there is absolute dearth of studies investigating this potential area in Indian context.

The study outcome suggests that the public or state funded universities in India must revamp how they are handling HRM functions. It stands evocative that they need to create specialised HRM department to undertake crucial functions of managing their human resources.

Thus, HEIs are in absolute need to nurture a pool of competent HR to navigate the institutions amidst global challenges. The traditional administration function in Indian HEIs must transition from a merely a support function to becoming the strategic partner in institute's growth and survival. The outcome of the research has implications for stakeholders in terms of expanding their HRD focus to include both the research and teaching in HEIs. Ideally, it stands evocative for the universities to offer more of vocational and industry oriented courses. This will expectedly integrate the students in the university HRD system, which can possibly increase the attractiveness of their HRD mechanisms. The process of linking students in their HRD system, will serve as a useful innovation for HEIs.

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