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Academic-Student-Practitioner Collaboration in HRM: An Emergent Case Study

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Summary

Two academics, an HR Organisational Development (HROD) practitioner, and a postgraduate student are jointly writing this developmental paper. It presents an emergent case study based upon: (i) student engagement, experience and learning in evidence-based practice, consultancy, and strategic HRM; and (ii) empirical findings from a small-scale qualitative research study exploring the theory-practice gap in HRM. Conceptually, the paper draws upon Cunliffe's (2016) approach to critical reflexivity, which is about being *self-reflexive* about our own beliefs, values and relationships with others; and being *critically-reflexive* about organisational practices, policies, social structures and knowledge bases. The aim is to illustrate ways in which we worked together in a collaborative and critically reflexive manner to integrate student insights and reflections upon HRM learning into OD practice in a UK university. The paper will report on work in progress, beginning with the background and context to the emergent case study. This will be developed further into a fuller critically reflexive debate, which engages academics, students, practitioners, leaders and managers. It will include findings from a small-scale qualitative study: 'The role of Business Psychology in overcoming the gap between theory and practice in performance appraisal/management'. The paper contributes to the HRM Track through innovative inclusion of postgraduate student perspectives and insights from Business Psychology.

Track: Human Resource Management

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The paper takes as its starting point Griffin's (2016, p. 6) practitioner-focused definition of OD which is: 'How an organisation develops and implements strategy with the full involvement / engagement of its people'. The paper is located in a university OD context, where we argue that full engagement must also include its students, and in particular students engaged in postgraduate programmes that lead to professional / academic practice in HRM. This reflects the concept of students as partners and co-creators, although this is more often viewed in a pedagogical context of learning, teaching and curriculum development (e.g. Barrineau et al., 2016). However in this developmental paper we will argue that students of HRM, and also related fields such as business, work and organisational psychology, have a potentially crucial role to play in, for example, shaping and implementing strategy. This will be illustrated through work-in-progress on a postgraduate programme, beginning with the background and context to an emergent case study.

Background and Context

The notion of a gap between theory and practice in HRM, and failures in developing evidence-based knowledge are not new, and are not going away (e.g. Gill, 2018; Gray & Watson, 2011; Rousseau & Barends, 2011). Yet students of HRM, who are arguably highly likely to become future practitioners and academics, will learn about a range of theoretical and practical skills, for example in evidence-based practice, strategic HRM and consultancy. This paper offers a different way of re-thinking HRM academic-practitioner collaborations, relationships and research by reporting upon work in progress in a UK university. This involves active engagement and collaboration between HRM academics, HROD practitioners and postgraduate students.

The conceptual framework for the paper is Cunliffe's (2016) approach to critical reflexivity, which begins with a crucial question to promote dialogue between students, academics, practitioners, managers and leaders: '*What does it mean to BE reflexive?*' (p. 741, emphasis in the original). More broadly, this involves examination of assumptions, actions, relationships and decisions that underpin organisational practices and policies. Clearly this reflects individual, team/group, and organisational levels of analysis, seen in a wider context of power, knowledge and social structures. Cunliffe therefore makes the differentiation between being *self-reflexive* at an individual and interpersonal level, and being simultaneously *critically-reflexive* about the wider context/s.

A Postgraduate Student Consultancy Project

Here we will outline an ongoing Postgraduate Student Consultancy Project, which forms part of a module that addresses evidence-based practice and the development of consultancy skills. Students are actively engaged in providing critically reflective feedback to the HROD team regarding evidence-based approaches to communication and staff engagement with organisational strategy. Students take on the role of 'internal consultant-practitioner' and use tools such as the focused conversation method (Spee, 2005) as frameworks to promote dialogue and reflective practice. By way of an example, the focused conversation method provides a means of enabling groups – i.e. students in a learning environment; employees in an organisational environment – to build agreement using four fundamental types of questioning, sometimes abbreviated as ORID:

- *Objective:* is about dealing with observable data;
- *Reflective:* is related to emotional responses, personal reactions and associations;
- *Interpretive:* is about personal meaning, significance, sensemaking and beliefs;
- *Decisional:* is concerned with individual and collective interpretations, decisions and actions

There are clear links here to Rousseau and Barend's (2011) early work around evidence-based HR (EBHR), which also combines four fundamental features:

1. Use of the best available scientific evidence from peer-reviewed sources;
2. Systematic gathering of organisational facts, indicators and metrics to better act on the evidence;
3. Practitioner judgement assisted by procedures, practices and frameworks that reduce bias, improve decision quality and create more valid learning over time;
4. Ethical considerations weighing the short- and long-term impacts of decisions on stakeholders and society.

However the overall conference theme indicates that ethical considerations in EBHR appear to have had little impact given the widespread damage inflicted on economies and individual lives in both organisations and nations. Therefore techniques such as the focused conversation / ORID method and EBHR should not be used in isolation. Rather they can - and will - be used as a basis for further reflection and critical reflexive dialogue using Cunliffe's (2016) question: *What does it mean to be reflexive?*

Initial Reflections and Future Directions

In our initial reflections upon the involvement and engagement of postgraduate students as future HRM academics and practitioners in this emergent case study, we were struck by the relative *lack* of involvement and engagement with students in 'real world' HRM case studies and consultations. This is at odds with the wider ubiquitous discourse of students as partners and co-creators in other areas of academic practice. Is this lack of engagement the root cause of the theory- / evidence-base- / research-practice gap in HRM?

Prior to presentation and discussion at the conference the Postgraduate Student Consultancy Project will have collected further student-led material to inform the university's organisational strategy and internal consultation process. We will also have engaged in further critical reflection with students, HROD practitioners, university leaders and managers, and have completed a small-scale empirical study into the theory-practice gap in HRM. We will outline the impact that has been created in the case study and the lessons that have come from the experience. In particular we will share plans for the development of staff development initiatives with Course Leaders in the area of compassion, an area of increasing interest for organisations and management in general, and Higher Education Institutions in particular (e.g. Poorkavoos, 2017; Waddington, 2018, 2019). We welcome the opportunity to present our combined academic-student-practitioner perspectives with the BAM audience, and engage in critically reflexive dialogue to explore how this kind of project can be most effectively implemented in our institutions.

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