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The Intra-organisational Power of the Personnel Department in Higher Education in the UK

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Abstract

Personnel departments in general have a poor reputation for power and influence, although little is known empirically about their position in Higher Education institutions (HEI). There are various factors in the HEI context that suggest that the department should be important but not necessarily powerful. Therefore, by applying existing theory (strategic contingencies theory) to examine the determinants of power and the perceived level of power of the department, a more detailed view of the power of the Personnel department in Higher Education (HE) can be observed. The strategic contingencies theory model proves to be a reliable approach to apply in this context, and demonstrates clearly how the Personnel department is consistently rated lower than other administrative departments on the indicator variables.

However, in order to go beyond the static picture of structural power sources sketched from strategic contingencies theory, institutional theory is drawn upon to try to understand how the current situation of low power has arisen. Particular elements of the institutionalised HEI context are explored to discover their effect on both the determinants and levels of power. These elements include the historical status of institutions, the extent of professionalism in departments, and the sophistication of use of information systems in service delivery; all factors discussed in existing institutional theory arguments.

Based on 144 questionnaire responses from a total of 73 HEIs across the UK, the quantitative analyses show differences in the power of Personnel departments in institutions with different historical characteristics, however professionalism and the use of information systems do not show clear relationships with power. Further qualitative data collection from seventeen interviews with HEI senior managers highlights how professionalism in the HEI context has a much broader definition than professional qualification and identity for the Personnel department. The use of information systems is also shown to be equally primitive across institutions in the current HEI context, preventing an evaluation of sophistication of use from yielding conclusive results.

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Notation

The following list explains the notation used in the presentation of the statistical analysis of the quantitative data.

Symbol	Description
α	Significance level set for a test to avoid a Type I error
n	Number of cases from the sample included in a test
df	Degrees of freedom for significance tests
F	F-statistic for the ANOVA test
χ^2	Chi-square statistic for the Kruskal-Wallis test
t	t-statistic for the t-test
U	U-statistic for the Mann-Whitney test
r	Pearson correlation coefficient
ρ	Spearman correlation coefficient
z	z-score for skewness and kurtosis calculations
L^2	Likelihood ratio for logit analysis
λ	Wilks Lambda statistic for canonical correlation and discriminant function analysis
Sig.	Significance of a particular statistic in a test (probability of finding a given result due to random sampling error alone)
SD	Standard deviation
R^2	Sample variance explained by variables under consideration used in tests of statistical power