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Can we get more satisfaction? Improving quality of working life survey results in UK universities

ABSTRACT

The quality of working life (QoWL) has preoccupied practitioners and management scholars since the 1960s (Grote & Guest, 2017), while satisfaction (Bray & Williams, 2017) and occupational stress for professional and academic staff in universities (Tytherleigh, Webb, Cooper, & Ricketts, 2005) are issues of growing concern amidst a context of poor student mental health literacy (Gorczynski, Sims-Schouten, Hill, & Wilson, 2017). The enhancement of QoWL has become increasingly difficult to achieve, especially within the UK higher education (HE) sector, with constant external and internal reforms (Bessant & Mavin, 2016), the "tyranny of metrics" (Muller, 2018), and the continuous decline in QoWL survey results, which has become an issue for many UK universities (Denvir, Hillage, Cox, Sinclair, & Pearmain, 2008). Furthermore, there is little understanding of how university HR departments enhance QoWL in universities (Yeo & Li, 2011). In this paper, we present a new perspective by looking at the role of HR in addition to the role of management in achieving QoWL in the UK's HE sector. The incongruity between strategic human resource management (SHRM) metrics in the HE sector to measure employee wellbeing and self-reported employee satisfaction has a significant influence on student satisfaction and, therefore, needs to be taken seriously, particularly in large units such as business schools where large financial returns are generated. Drawing on secondary data, we contribute to debates on current challenges faced by UK universities. We offer practical suggestions to improve QoWL survey results based on employee engagement and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Assuming we are not facing terminal decline, we call for further research on the role of university HR practitioners in enhancing reported satisfaction in UK QoWL surveys.

Keywords: Quality of working life; UK higher education; human resource management policies; management practices; satisfaction surveys

INTRODUCTION

Despite UK universities' contribution of £95bn to the country's economy (Bothwell, 2017b), there are increasing external pressures on university staff to do more with less public funding (Hall, 2018) and higher expectations of their contributions to the UK's industrial strategy through UKRI and its challenge fund (UKRI, 2018).

The UK HE sector has a total number of 419,710 employees (HESA, 2018), with a recent increase in retention levels at an overall rate of 8.9% (HESA, 2018). Gander (2018) states that "professional staff overall are satisfied in their roles" although they would like more organisational support to achieve the job promotions they expect. Nevertheless, QoWL surveys (http://www.qowl.co.uk/) which are carried by HR departments every two years in UK universities have revealed that both support and academic staff are becoming increasingly dissatisfied (THE, 2015) and there is a continuous decline in commitment levels (Reisz, 2017), even before the full consequences of Brexit referendum results that were announced on 24 June 2016 are fully realised.

In May 2016, the UK government published the Higher Education White Paper, *Success as a Knowledge Economy* (BIS, 2016)*,* which resulted in creating uncertainty in the sector. Despite deregulation in the UK University sector with the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, it is clear that the government continues to force regulations and pressures on universities, such as regulatory interference in performance metrics and government reforms (Boxall, 2016). Quality assurance agencies, for example, were nonexistent twenty years ago but are now widespread (OECD, 2003). Furthermore, there is a sense in the sector that the government has commercialised university education (Oshagbemi, 2000), making the HE sector slowly lose its value, with a knock-on effect for university staff, with their expertise being devalued (Finn & Finn, 2018) in a "post-truth" **a**ge. These changes have led to the need for universities to create spin-offs, engage within industry, create enterprise activities and seek financial independence (see Figure 1).
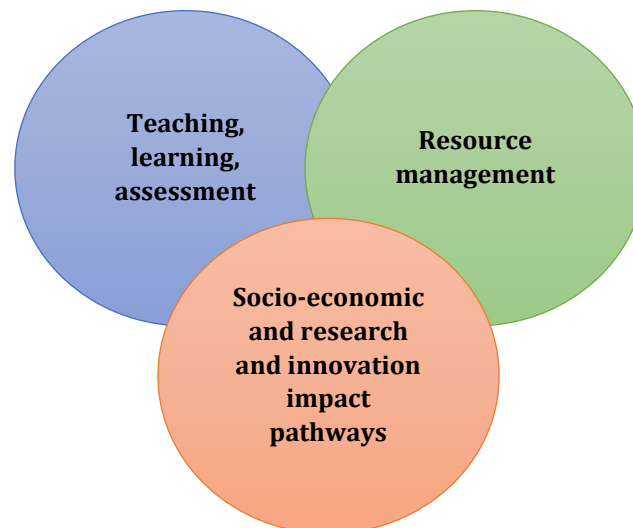

Figure 1. Universities' mission

The 2017 Higher Education Research Act introduced the most significant regulatory reforms in the HE sector for twenty five years (Finn & Finn, 2018; UUK, 2017) with the creation of the Office for Students (OfS) as the primary regulator. The OfS promotes choice and considers different stakeholder interests, such as the student, employer and taxpayer (Gov.uk, 2018) its role in considering employee interests, however, appears to be lacking. Such reforms indicate the need for changes in management style to increase satisfaction levels, meet teaching quality standards, and to ensure the UK HE sector remains globally competitive. Other pressures in the UK include the creation of Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) (Pells, 2018). The UK HE sector is also facing a relatively tough period for employment relations. Sector-wide strikes over proposed changes to USS pension schemes took place in early 2018, and the possibility of further industrial action, as well as wider concerns over pay and conditions, continues to loom. Industrial action has also been taken at a number of institutions in response to redundancies, e.g. the University of Manchester.

The purpose of this paper is to draw attention to the importance of QoWL in UK universities and identify scope for improvement. We reflect on questions about how management and HR policies and practices can enhance satisfaction, commitment and retention levels for both academic and support staff. Our paper starts by exploring the meaning of QoWL, focusing particularly on QoWL in the UK HE context. The paper explicates the role of HR policies and management practices in HE with real-life examples. Finally, we suggest practical

recommendations to enhance the overall QoWL in UK universities, more specifically in business schools.

QUALITY OF WORKING LIFE

Definitions of QoWL vary from one person to another, organisational context, and industry sector. Sirgy, Efraty, Siegel, and Lee (2001) define QoWL as the need for satisfaction based on job requirements, work environment, supervisory behaviour, development opportunities and organisational commitment. QoWL is thought to be a combination of positive experiences and policies which are implemented that lead to the employee being happy in their workplace and their work conditions, which are measured using factors such as perception of financial rewards, job security, job autonomy, career progression, work-life balance, stress and time pressure (Beham, Präg, & Drobnič, 2008). It might be argued, however, that workplace happiness does not always equate to greater productivity, according to Wright, Cropanzano, and Bonett (2007) psychological well-being is more likely to generate increased productivity. In fact research has shown that there is no discernible relationship between job satisfaction and job performance for employees with low well-being.

Between September and December 2016, more than 2,900 staff across the UK from 150 higher educational institutions completed the Times Higher Education Best University Survey (THE, 2016). Feedback indicated that around 50% of professional and support staff reported that they are proud to work at their current university. This compares favourably with 25% of academics who responded positively to the same question. The survey also revealed that many academics felt overworked and taken advantage of, reporting lower satisfaction with their working lives when compared with support staff. According to Parr (2015), this is mainly due to the challenges which universities face in promoting employee voice. Additionally, research has shown that the UK HE sector is one of the most stressful sectors to work in (Shin & Jung, 2014).

UK universities continue to witness an increase in suicide from both students and staff (Weale, 2018). The recent tragedy that occurred at Cardiff Business School, where a 48-year-old business lecturer committed suicide for being 'overworked and under pressure' (BBC, 2018) exposes the extent to which university staff feel overwhelmed in their job roles. This is where low QoWL has proven to have a negative impact on university staff, and therefore universities need to look into improving and maintaining the QoWL of their employees. A 2017 study by the Times Higher Education revealed that academics face higher mental health risk than other professions (Else, 2017). This is closely linked with the UUK's #stepchange campaign based on its guide on student mental health. This explains the relationship between staff mental health and wellbeing and the positive or negative impact it may have on students (UUK, 2015).

The national student survey (NSS) plays a fundamental – though controversial – role in the process of determining university rankings; although this has improved the responsiveness to students' views: students in the UK are more likely to recommend studying in the UK than those in other nations, such as the US, Germany, Canada, Australia, and the Netherlands. In fact, the UK is ranked as number one in terms of satisfaction of overseas students (Bothwell, 2017a). However, concerns regarding introducing quick fixes that may lead to higher ratings in the short-term may become problematic (Bishop, 2014) and there are worries that the UK is losing its edge to Australia as the second most popular country after the USA for international students (Marginson, 2018).

So, why does quality of working life matter? High QoWL has been proven to impact significantly on employee performance levels, i.e. productivity levels increase (Ramstad, 2009). Nevertheless, there are examples where productivity levels are high despite low satisfaction, such as in Singapore (Jingwen, 2017). In the UK, regulatory changes have required universities to concentrate on quality and ranking measure outcomes, with universities to excel in terms of research, reputation and teaching (Bishop, 2014).

Evidence demonstrates positive impact on both academic and support staff when positive QoWL policies and procedures are implemented in UK universities, which consequently enhance students' learning experience. For example, students at the University of Buckingham, the Royal Veterinary College and the University of St. Andrews all achieved 94% student satisfaction levels (THE, 2017b). These institutions illustrate possible links between high staff QoWL and high NSS scores. Edge Hill University is a very interesting example of a university where both student and staff satisfaction levels are high. This relatively small institution was named the 2014 Times Higher Education University of the Year. Nearly 70% of professional and support staff and 55% of academics at Edge Hill University stated that they felt proud to work at their institution (THE, 2014). Despite this, many universities struggle to establish a happy working environment according to the UK's survey results of staff satisfaction in universities. Workload was an important factor, with the majority of academic staff reporting working more than 60 hours a week, which is more hours than they are contracted (UCU, 2015). The Best University Workplace Survey (2014) reported significant concerns about universities failing to give staff a "voice"; according to the Times Higher Education (2015), 40% of respondents in QoWL surveys said that they felt unable to make their voice heard within their institution. At times when we are told that students are becoming happier, university staff seem to be more miserable. Research and surveys conducted by the Times Higher Education present a serious issue in the UK HE sector in relation to the continuous decline in staff satisfaction levels (Else, 2017; Reisz, 2017).

HUMAN RESOURCE POLICIES IN HE

There is a strong case to be made that university HR professionals play a vital role in establishing policies and practices that work as a support mechanism in fostering a better working environment. HR practitioners and senior managers in universities need to drive change to develop professional and academic managers to support them to cope with the constant change the HE sector is currently facing. A good example of this is University of Huddersfield, where it is a requirement for all senior leaders to undertake a Chartered Management Institute (CMI) certificate in strategic leadership to facilitate discussions about the University's continued success and to encourage employee engagement (CMI, 2018). It is argued that managers now take on many HRM related duties (Muller, 2009). According to King (2011) HR has moved from being a service-driven sector to a process-driven department and finally to today's insight-driven service. King (2011) continues to argue that HR professionals are not decision-makers, but they are often trusted advisers to management, therefore, they fail to be proactive in providing adequate services to employees. Despite the fundamental role that HR departments could play in universities and the UHR (University HR Director s) forum (UHR, 2018) they are not recognised as a category in the Times Higher Education awards (2018), which indicates their lack of significance in HE institutions – and indicating the scale of the challenge in seeking to have their potential role recognised.

According to Bessant and Mavin (2016), HRM has a strategic role in improving and developing managerial skills which positively influence organisational performance. They argue that line-managers have a fundamental role in implementing effective HR policies (Brewster and Larsen, 2000). This is hugely influenced by development and training practices which are carried out by line-managers. However, it has been evident that heads of departments (HoDs) rarely have the right skills to manage and lead training and development conversations (Shepherd, 2017). This is mainly due to the fact that line-managers and HoDs do not have the appropriate training to hold such conversations with their employees. Where many argue that senior academic positions should be appointed on the basis of strong academic backgrounds (Goodall, 2007; (Smith & Adams, 2008), some may suggest that academics are not effectively equipped to carry out managerial and leadership responsibilities where there is a conflict in demands between being an academic, engaging in research and teaching activities, as well as being a manager.

We argue that university HR professionals cannot influence and have an impact on employee satisfaction unless there is constant communication and active collaboration between top management, HR and employees. According to the CIPD's engagement survey (2017), consultation on important decisions scored (-12), rather worryingly 18% of employees say their manager does not provide feedback or recognition at all and a minority of employees are given the opportunity to receive feedback from their line managers and have the opportunity to speak to them about learning and development needs. A recent survey by the CIPD (2017a), conducted on UK employees across sectors and professions, suggests that employees have noticed an increase in stress levels, feel less secure in their job roles and that they experience a decrease in overall morale (CIPD, 2017).

MANAGEMENT PRACTICES IN HE

An increase in neo-liberal policies and corporation in higher education globally has resulted in metrification based on multiple performance indicators. Academics staff are increasingly managed by tools and techniques based on their teaching and research resulting in them becoming subject to greater forms of managerialism as 'managed academics' (Winter, 2009). Arguably, this leads to university employees adopting more 'cosmopolitan' than 'local' behaviours (Parker, 2018), with greater allegiance to their disciplines and personal career mobility and less loyalty and commitment to their employer.

Tighter performance management regimes have been highlighted as one of the main reasons for greater academic dissatisfaction. Performance management is defined as the set of processes and activities that aim to maintain and enhance employee performance by aligning this with the overall organisational objectives (CIPD, 2017b). Cascio (2006a, 2006b) argues that formal performance management correlates positively with financial outcomes and customer satisfaction.

According to the Higher Education Workforce Survey (2017), an average of 92 lecturers left their job roles during the period of 2015-2016, demonstrating a high number in turnover over a short period of time. In order to address staff turnover, the first step universities need to consider is improving line managers' people skills" (UCEA, 2017: p.26). Hence, it is evident that managers play a fundamental role in employees' QoWL. Where many organisations may find this way of management effective, directive management suggests that employees in organisations work as agents. This does not apply to the HE sector where this may conflict with

the values and personalities of many academics who see themselves as stewards of knowledge and education.

Managers are often pressured by senior management to meet performance targets and overall objectives of the university, one view is that the same pressures which leads managers to treat students as consumers have shifted the focus of senior management away from their most valuable asset which is their employees, and solely focusing on meeting external measures such as ranking, reputation and student satisfaction which has resulted in neglecting staff needs. The view of universities as institutions in constant competition with one another and the rest of the world has trickled down to the departmental level, destroying any sense of collegiality. In the long run, if teaching is done by a body of demoralised and ever-changing academics, this can only be bad for staff and students alike (Bishop, 2017).

We suggest in this paper that HRM practices are not fit-for-purpose in an HE context. A mismatch between formal practices and the needs and expectations of employees is likely to result in employee dissatisfaction. The HE sector needs an ideological readjustment, where academics and professional staff can be encouraged to be risk-takers, innovators and are willing – and able – to go that extra mile to contribute to their fields of knowledge. The current underlying assumption which suggests that university employees need to be managed using directive performance practices appears to contradict the levels of self-determination employees prefer to achieve greater levels of satisfaction. However, as the source of the contradiction is rooted in sector-wide constraints, making changes at an institutional level requires great investment and commitment to improving and maintaining good working conditions – competing through an investment in employees, rather than through a race to the bottom through increased insecurity and targets.

UK UNIVERSITIES

The 2015 Times Higher Education suvery revealed the top five universities in the UK where staff feel that their leadership teams were performing well (Figure 2). A more recent article by the Times Higher Education suggests that universities must train a new breed of leaders in order to enable universities to stay abreast of social developments (Ottersen, 2017). The Vice-Chancellor of Edge Hill states on their webpage that, "The job of the senior team is to help create, support and sustain that ethos and culture, to strengthen our sense of shared vision and strategy, to listen and to communicate effectively, and to utilise the strengths and value the contribution of each and every hard-working colleague." (Edge Hill University, 2015) Universities seeking to emulate similar statistics to Edge Hill University in terms of providing effective work-life balance and an enhanced employee QoWL need to understand employee aspirations in order to establish appropriate HRM policies and procedures for implementation. It is essential that such strategies have buy-in from senior management and employees and that there is a strategic alignment between departments to deliver and achieve the same objectives.
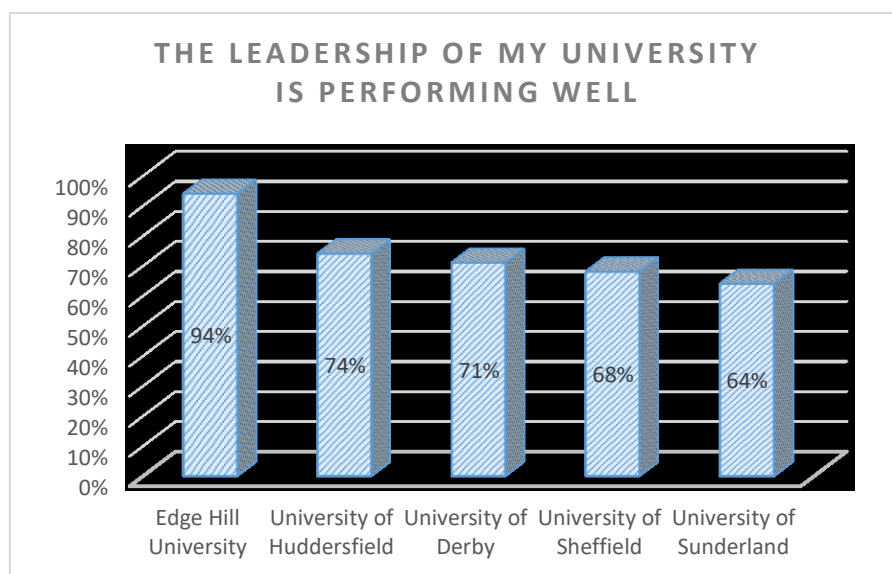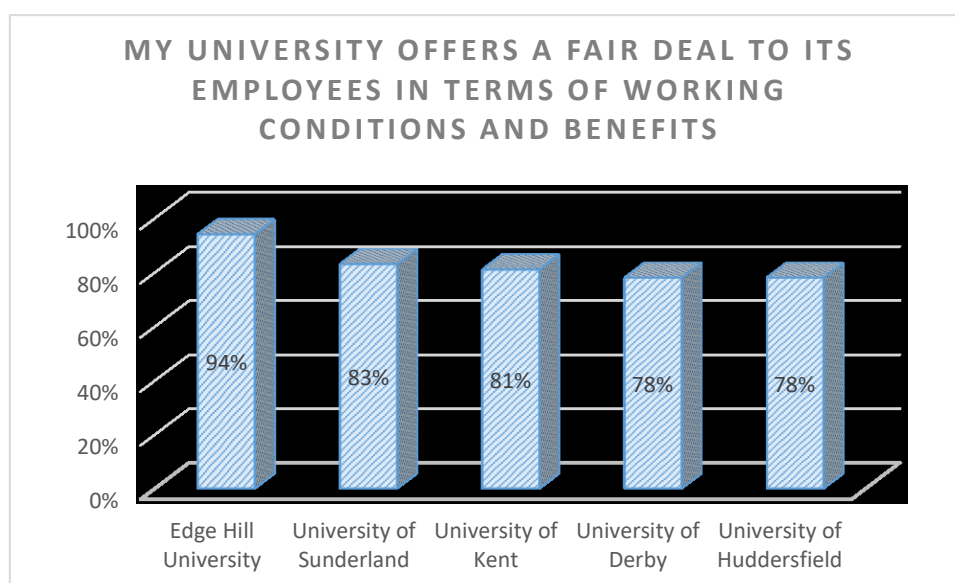
THE LEADERSHIP OF MY UNIVERSITY IS PERFORMING WELL

(Edge Hill University: 94%, University of Huddersfield: 74%, University of Derby: 71%, University of Sheffield: 68%, University of Sunderland: 64%)

Figure 2. Overall university performance (THE, 2015)

In another example, according to the QoWL (2015) survey report for the University of Huddersfield, overall satisfaction with QoWL at the university was 65%. Employees commented on six factors regarding their well-being, home-work interface, job career satisfaction, control at work, working conditions and stress at work. Employees voted the lowest on control over work and general well-being where both factors achieved a rating of 59%. This is still good when benchmarked with a sample of other universities. Nonetheless, the survey also reported low QoWL and higher stress amongst academics when compared with other staff members. Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Switzerland and Finland have been proven to be the happiest countries in the world, consequently having the happiest universities to study at (QS, 2017). This is mainly due to the fact that quality of life is good in these countries which has reflected on the quality of working life of academics and resulted in satisfied students (Collinson, 2018).

Despite the concerns highlighted in the survey results conducted by different institutions in relation to the overall QoWL of UK employee, the vast majority of support and academic staff acknowledge that their work gives them satisfaction (THE, 2015). While this may not sound impressive, UK universities are more satisfied than other countries such as the USA, according to the career happiness index teaching professionals are the 61st most contented professionals in the UK workforce (Bishop, 2014).

MY UNIVERSITY OFFERS A FAIR DEAL TO ITS EMPLOYEES IN TERMS OF WORKING CONDITIONS AND BENEFITS

(Edge Hill University: 94%, University of Sunderland: 83%, University of Kent: 81%, University of Derby: 78%, University of Huddersfield: 78%)

Figure 3. Working conditions (THE, 2015)

Some universities have developed talent management framework as a technique to retain talented individuals (UCEA, 2017). In order for such a framework to be effective it needs to be co-ordinated with school deans in order to establish appropriate policies that enable them to enhance QoWL. This could be done by collaborating with HR departments to establish and implement an effective recruitment and retention policy. Such policies can be designed to focus on fulfilling academics' research opportunities in addition to professional and personal development. Consequently, it is assumed that this will have a positive impact on employees' QoWL depending on teaching and administrative loads.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Following from our literature review, we make the following initial recommendations moving forward to enhance employee satisfaction reported in QoWL surveys in UK universities:

(1) Working environment – in order to achieve efficiency, effectiveness, productivity and the commitment of employees, university HR managers and line managers need to establish healthy communication channels with support and academic staff in order to understand the nature of their job roles; this needs to come from senior management as well. According to Hall (2017) VCs are too far away from the day-to-day reality as nearly half of university staff do not think their Vice Chancellor is an effective leader where they are too focused on lobbying and external relations with not enough time to spend understanding how the institution runs on the ground in order to foster a healthy working environment for staff. On that basis, HR policies and practices need to respond to the needs of employees, such as providing appropriate facilities and social space where employees can meet to discuss work-related issues, encouraging staff members to engage in conversations and to communicate verbally with each other, e.g. NESTA's Randomised Coffee Trials to encourage serendipitous intra-organisational networking (Soto, 2013) are being tried at Huddersfield Business School. As lack of voice has been identified as a key factor in dissatisfaction, it is also important to ensure there are robust and genuine mechanisms for staff to have their voice heard by management, this could be done by working alongside with trade unions to foster valuable two-way relationships. This enhances interpersonal relationships with colleagues and managers more broadly. More importantly, staff need to be offered secure contracts in order to enhance and maintain the overall morale of the institution. However, given the context of a gig economy and growing "precariat" (Standing, 2014), and a drive towards greater flexibility and cost savings, this is easier said than done. UHR has a major role to play in this respect in close collaborations with vice-chancellors; collaborations with trade unions could also be beneficial.

(2) Autonomy/freedom – we suggest HE managers avoid micromanaging. Employees need the opportunity to think for themselves and in a positive working environment where they do not feel that they are constantly being supervised. A strengths-based approach where university staff are able to play to their strengths rather than forced to be excellent in all metrics may be a way forward to allow for greater self-determination within organisational and political constraints. This may be achieved by recognising the value of providing good quality teaching-focused roles, alongside combined roles, potentially allowing institutions to build on and develop strengths, rather than diluting them by overstretching employees, or losing them through strategic restructures.

(3) Goal setting and rewarding achievers – while UKs' university culture and the environment are very dynamic and complex, both professional and academic staff need to be rewarded. An annual award ceremony may foster higher levels of productivity and enhance QoWL. Being recognised for a job well-done or the implementation of a more flexible workload model to reward strong performance in particular areas is an effective way to boost employee satisfaction. Similarly, managers need to be praised based on the satisfaction of their direct QoWL reports. Team working and recognition may also produce a more rewarding working environment.

(4) Timing – university managers need to tackle the issues which have been mentioned above in order to enhance retention and employee contributions and satisfaction. Strike action over pensions is causing further disruption (Weale, 2018). Timing in such situations plays a fundamental element of when the QoWL survey is distributed and completed by staff members.

(5) Acting upon QoWL survey results – HE employers need to recognise the importance of taking action once QoWL results have been revealed. Management needs to work on enhancing and improving the QoWL of its employees in order to see change in the future, especially in terms of performance levels and overall satisfaction. This can be done by enhancing employee voice and checking in on satisfaction levels between official survey deadlines. If staff satisfaction levels were incorporated into 'best university' rankings, then university rankings may well change dramatically. Similarly, as student satisfaction is incorporated in determining the ranking of a university, institutions dismissing staff to improve rankings may find their strategy backfiring.

(6) Identifying the role of university HR professionals – It is important to identify the essential role which the HR department plays within the HE sector. It is the role of HR to create a supportive culture that facilitates work-life balance, it is also the role of HR to make a convincing case to senior management on the impact of investing time and money in promoting, enhancing and maintaining high QoWL. This needs to be put forward to top management by the HR department. By proposing practical strategies, this will result in universities achieving an overall competitive advantage. Workplace policies and practices have a great impact on employees' feelings especially with respect to job security, satisfaction, and commitment. HR policies and practices seem to have two elements which can be improved which will have a positive impact on employees' QoWL: pay/reward, development and career progression in addition to fostering an organisational culture that encourages employee voice (Denvir et al., 2008). All of this feeds into QoWL elements, such as achieving a good work-life balance, high satisfaction levels, low retention, high levels of commitment and loyalty (Rose, 2005).

(7) Fit-for-purpose strategy – It is crucial to consider differences in perceptions when designing and implementing such strategies and policies. It is evident that academics, professional staff and university managers will view satisfaction elements differently depending on their years of experience, personal demographics, university's mission and resources. It is important that university managers pay attention to employees' strengths and try to develop apparent weaknesses, this is regarded as a crucial element in a competitive and international market (Verhaegen, 2005).

CONCLUSION

Forging a path to invest in employees and accommodate their QoWL within the increasing constraints of the marketised HE sector is no easy feat, but taking a high, rather than a low road strategic approach to managing people may reap significant benefits. UK university reforms and dramatic shifts continue to affect UK universities, leaving opportunities to build a better employer brand and diversify reward packages (UCEA, 2017).

Universities need to invest in supporting and providing excellent working environments for professional staff and professionalism amongst HR practitioners to retain their competitive advantage and enhance their employees' QoWL. This can be done by understanding the needs and expectations of professional staff and academics, by designing and implementing HR and organisational development strategies which best fit the HE sector, such as in 2017, when the University of Glasgow was rewarded for outstanding contribution to leadership development (THE, 2017a). The University has an Inspiring People strategy where support and development is provided for leaders. The University of Exeter won the 2017 UHR reward for its learning and organisational development strategy. Implementing such strategies appropriately can enhance positive QoWL results and overall staff satisfaction. The key, therefore, crucially lies in the successful implementation and utilisation of strategies and policies, rather than their existence.

For example, at Glasgow Caledonian University, an HR Values and Behaviours Framework was established based on the behaviours of integrity, creativity, responsibility, and confidence which helped to improve the staff QoWL survey results (GCU, 2018). According to the results in the staff satisfaction survey, the proportion of staff who said they would recommend GCU as a place to work rose from 49% in 2011 to 84% in 2016.

In conclusion, this paper highlights the need for UK universities, driven by HR practitioners, in conjunction with senior and line management, to refocus on meaningful activities which provide a good quality and competitive QoWL, which serves to add value and enhance staff satisfaction. We recommend further research drawing on qualitative interviews and vignettes particularly in business schools where anecdotal evidence suggests that satisfaction levels are lower than in other parts of the university. This should build on Gander (2018) study which suggested that professional staff in universities are seeking more career and promotion opportunities.

We welcome *Perspectives* readers to contact us as part of our longer-term project on the issues raised in this paper on the feasibility of helping UK university staff to get, or at least report, greater satisfaction.

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