

The Devolvement of HR practices in Saudi Arabian public universities: exploring tensions and challenges

Abstract

This paper explores tensions and challenges in the devolvement of HR practices and processes as well as opportunities for strategic HRM alignment and how it will benefit Saudi Arabia (SA) higher education institutions. The research found high level of HR devolved to Deans, Heads of Schools and Colleges leading to power struggle, duplication and role ambiguity of HRM functions, loss of credibility and execution complications. These tensions have further been heightened by HR managers resistance to such changes due to uncertainties of losing their status and legitimacy. The lack of recognition and coordination between the HR unit and faculties points to limited evidence of strategic HRM. This paper supports the alignment and integration of HRM processes and practices within Saudi Arabia's higher education institutions. The findings are valuable for aligning strategic HRM processes and practices to build the human capital of Saudi higher education institutions.

Keywords: Strategic HRM; HR Devolvement; Higher Education, Saudi Arabia

Introduction

Strategic HRM became widespread within the resource-based view literature with its focus on HRM alignment with organisational strategy (Boon et al., 2019). HRM alignment supports a value-driven and integrative approach to HRM, a shift from traditional HRM – administrative, prescriptive and reactive in nature (Teo & Crawford, 2005; Zhu et al., 2008). Fundamentally, both the empirical and theoretical literature has widely adopted strategic HRM as a progressive approach to human capital development and utilisation in support of organisational

competitiveness (Ding et al., 2019; Muthuveloo et al., 2017; Reichel & Lazarova, 2013). The strategic HRM notion thus need to emphasize on a set of HRM integration and devolvement of HRM functions to achieve HRM alignment (Budhwar, 2000). According to Zhu et al. (2008, p.841), ‘strategic HRM has two important dimensions, i.e. vertically it links HR practices with the strategic management process of the firm and horizontally it allows HR practices to be integrated and supportive of each other’. Importantly, a critical perspective of current strategic HRM literature is dominated by applied research within developed or advance economies contexts and if these theories and conceptualisations are to be implemented in a developing country context, it will require that these processes have to leapfrog into developed HRM practices and processes. Advancing strategic HRM in SA’s higher education institutions will bring with it inadvertent tensions and implementation challenges such as, staff training and development, building managerial capabilities, and redesigning HRM functions (Aboramadan et al., 2020; Al-Twal et al., 2019). Prior to implementation, the current HRM contextual practices must be examined and understood. Essentially, a move towards strategic HRM alignment, is critical to align with the Saudi Arabia’s vision 2030 higher education development focus. Indeed, while several researchers support the need for more research in the Middle East region (Moideenkutty et al., 2011), especially educational management, administration and leadership in higher educational institutions, and hence the need to understand how HRM practices and processes are operationalised through the lens of HR devolvement. The paper highlights several tensions and challenges which potentially hinder the progression towards achieving a strategic HRM focus and delays strategic HRM progression and people development (Bahrami et al., 2013). This paper supports the alignment of HRM processes and practices within educational management and administration in SA’s higher education institutions. The Saudi Arabian government has been seeking to close the gap between higher education output and industry needs as part of its vision 2030, which is built

on three fundamental pillars; a vibrant society, a thriving economy and an ambitious nation (vision 2030 Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2019). Given the government's vision for higher education, there is now greater acceptance and recognition that strategic HRM alignment within educational management and administration can support higher education institution's goals in the current competitive global education market (Hailey et al., 2005; Truss, 2008). Therefore, the current devolvement of HRM processes and practices within higher education institutions raises two important questions:

1. What tensions and challenges are associated with the devolvement of HR processes and practices in SA higher education institutions?
2. Are there opportunities for strategic HRM alignment and how will this benefit SA higher education institutions?

The capability of SA to build a robust human capital is underpinned by the alignment of HRM within its educational management and administration (Bellibaş & Gümüş, 2019). This alignment calls for the advancement of strategic HRM in higher educational management and administration. The notion of HRM decentralisation to operational managers, underpins the drive to position the HR department as a strategic business partner (Gilbert et al., 2011). Hailey et al. (2005) attest that the increasing struggle for recognition within the organisational structure and decision-making processes have raised concerns about the status and recognition of HRM in organisations, particularly in less developed, and emerging economies. The advancement of strategic HRM in both private and public-sector organisations have been driven by industrial changes, economic development (Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015) and the need to be more responsive to employee needs. The existence and sustainability of the HRM function within organisations is to add value when they effectively streamline employment relationships across the entire organisation (Cunningham & Kempling, 2011; Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015). Therefore, the HR department has grown in significance due to the acknowledgement of human

capital as a strategic resource for organisational survival and competitiveness (Amalou-Döpke & Süß, 2014). HR departments in most organisations has undergone a major rejuvenation from performing an administrative HRM role to becoming a strategic business partner by providing core business functions that contribute to organisational competitiveness and growth (Amalou-Döpke & Süß, 2014; Op de Beeck et al., 2018). According to Ulrich and Dulebohn (2015), the evolution of the HRM function has been categorised into administrative, HRM practice and HRM strategy waves. The administrative HRM wave was viewed as a line management function with the objective of increasing administrative efficiency with limited links to the strategy of the organisation (Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015; Giauque et al., 2013). The HRM practice wave is driven by innovative policies and practices, work processes and organisation design. The HRM practice wave requires highly skilled HRM professionals with the ability to tailor practices to organisational needs. However, the HRM strategy wave creates an alignment between HRM policies and practices and the business strategy (Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015). Contemporary HRM functions have extended beyond administrative activities to developing innovative HRM practices that align to and support business strategy.

The strategic HRM literature, indicates that HRM processes and practices in higher educational management and administration cannot be additive, but should be inter-dependent, where the HRM department and the various faculties complement each other in the management and organisation of HR which correspond with the concept of the devolvement of HRM functions (Zhu et al., 2008; Budhwar, 2000; Reichel & Lazarova, 2013). The primary role of HRM is to contribute to the overall competitiveness of the institution in areas of research, teaching and community engagement. In the management and administration of HRM processes and practices in higher education institutions, different HRM actors are involved (Gilbert et al., 2011). Even though HRM processes and practices reflect organisational actions, faculties are generally mandated with the administration of operational HRM practices, including

recruitment and selection, training and development, performance evaluation and employee promotions. Given that within the higher education institutions context, substantial administration of HRM processes and practices are often assumed by the faculties (e.g. Deans and Heads of Schools). It is therefore unclear what HRM functions (roles) are left for the HR department. Gilbert et al. (2011) asserted that the HR departments within higher education institutions are gradually losing their core functionality, which has been absorbed by faculties. It can be argued that transferring HRM functions to faculties may create new opportunities to influence and improve the management and administration of HRM processes and practices in higher education institutions (Stone, 2017; Mellahi & Wood, 2013). However, one divergent view is that it may create challenges, as faculties may not have staff with HRM knowledge and capabilities (Mellahi & Wood, 2013) to effectively administer HR functions. Despite the devolution of HRM functions in higher education institutions, Gilbert et al. (2011) argues that the HR unit still has a fundamental responsibility for safeguarding employee well-being and management indifference.

The notion of HR Devolvement and strategic HRM advancement

It is widely accepted that the centrality of HRM has shifted focus on several trajectories since its inception. For example, HRM has shifted from the domain of personnel management which remained administrative and reactive in nature arising out of the need for enforcing statutory compliance for much of the 20th Century (Zhu et al., 2008; Budhwar, 2000). While implementing administrative functions, personnel management primarily concerned itself with employee record keeping and adherence to policy and statutory guidelines (Zhu et al., 2008). The latter decades of the 20th Century witnessed the winds of change in personnel management with the emergence of behavioural perspectives (e.g. human relations theory, hierarchy of needs theory etc.) to employee motivation (non-monetary factors) toward employee productivity increase (Stone, 2017). The emergence of behavioural perspectives to employee

motivation coupled with government interventions contributed to more guaranteed workers' rights through the enactment of new legislations leading to a shift to a more dynamic HRM approach (Allui & Sahni, 2016; Budhwar, 2000). Interestingly, the spread of free market competition and technology-based organisations (evidence of knowledge-based economy) raised HRM approach to a new turn – strategic HRM which is underpinned by HRM alignment through a value-driven and integrative approach (Zhu et al., 2008; Reichel & Lazarova, 2013).

Budhwar (2000) argued that 'one of the central features of the changing debate of HRM was the importance given to the integration of HRM into the business and corporate strategy and the devolvement of HRM to line managers instead of personnel specialists' (p.285-286). The devolvement of HRM practices and processes represents an extension of responsibilities to include line-managers and supervisors in the implementation of HRM functions (Zhu et al., 2008; Budhwar, 2000; Stone, 2017). The strategic HRM literature typically categorised HR devolvement into two separate distinctions – internal and external where the latter include HR devolvement through outsourcing and the former through HR role delegation (Zhu et al., 2008; Paauwe, 1995). Prior literature argues that the increasing interest in HR devolvement has been occasioned by free market competition, globalisation, and advancement in technology and the need for organisations to be more operationally efficient and effective (Zhu et al., 2008; Reichel & Lazarova, 2013).

For example, increasing educational market competition in recent times implies that HR devolvement is becoming significant in linking HRM with organisational strategy which correspond with the proliferation of decentralisation and flatter organisational structures (Paauwe & Boon, 2018). Decentralisation in HRM within higher education management provide greater levels of efficiency in the management and utilisation of human capabilities (Järvalt & Randma-Liiv, 2010; López-Cotarelo, 2018). Prior literature support HR devolvement on the basis that it reduces cost of operations, offer opportunities for better control

systems, support HRM proactiveness and empowerment of faculties (front-line managers) for succession planning (Zhu et al., 2008; Budhwar, 2000). Overall, HR devolvement provide a strong basis for the advancement of strategic HRM thinking and practice which has resulted in the widening of faculties (line managers) responsibilities to include HRM activities in the face of HRM alignment with corporate strategy. This reflects Budhwar (2000, p.286) ‘proposition that as HRM becomes more and more strategic, personnel specialists will have less time for the traditional routine type of HR activities. These activities will then be devolved to, and performed by, the line managers. It is therefore anticipated that within higher education institutions, more HRM functions and responsibilities will be devolved to faculties than other organisations and this is likely to create tensions and challenges.

The context of Saudi Arabia

Though the concept of strategic HRM has been widely studied (Mellahi & Wood, 2013), limited attention has been focused on the context of Saudi Arabia, especially the higher education sector. For Ismail et al. (2016), there is evidence of misalignment between strategic HRM processes and practices and organisational goals and objectives in the Kingdom – HRM is not yet strategically congruent with organisational strategy in many Saudi organisations. Drawing empirical literature support, Allui and Sahni (2016) found limited evidence of strategic HRM development in Saudi Arabian public institutions. The evidence points to the absence of recruitment and selection policy, mismatch between employee training needs and actual training activities and the lack of employee engagement. On the one hand, given that performance management represent a core element of strategic HRM development, yet it remains a key challenge in Saudi universities. Al-Ghamdi and Tight (2013) noted that the processes of evaluating academic staff performance in Saudi universities has been mired with operational challenges and personal biases. For example, there are ambiguities in the criteria for evaluating faculty staff performance. In addition, there is no alignment between

performance appraisal outcomes and staff professional development activities. Several HRM decisions such as staff tenure, promotion, access to sabbatical leave etc., are not consistent with HR policy guidelines, but based on managerial prerogative and discretion (Al-bakr et al., 2017; Mellahi & Budhwar, 2010).

The development of higher education in SA can be divided into three main phases: the foundation phase, the expansion phase, and the comprehensive phase (Ismail et al., 2016). The foundation phase occurred between 1949 and 1960 with the establishment of four colleges, which was followed by the founding of King Saud University in 1957. The expansion phase, which started in 1961 and ended in 1981, witnessed the establishment of six additional universities. The phase of comprehensiveness began in 1982 with the spread of higher education in SA, leading to the establishment of additional publicly-funded universities (Ismail et al., 2016) . In 2015, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education were merged into a single Ministry overseeing the entire spectrum of education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Ministry of Education, 2019). This merger aimed to reduce the bureaucratic gap between these two Ministries to improve efficiency and raise the quality of higher education. The Kingdom of SA is an Islamic country, with an entrenched Islamic traditional monarchy, based on a tribal system with a large royal family orientation and influence (Al-bakr et al., 2017). HRM practices have been significantly influenced by Islamic laws, beliefs, principles and value system. Mellahi and Budhwar (2010) state that managers generally draw from Quranic principles in conducting business activities in the Middle Eastern region because of the embeddedness of Islamic religion on societal values and belief systems. In 2018, of an estimated population of 33.4 million people, about 12.6 million of the population are non-Saudi nationals, accounting for approximately 37% of the total population (General Authority for Statistics, 2019).

Saudi cultural values are unique and different from those found in the Western world (Yavas & Yasin, 1999; Al-Asfour et al., 2017). For example, the social status of employees and their families are determined by the type of work they do and their sector of employment. Thus, Saudi employees generally prefer to work in the public sector rather than the private sector. The preference for foreign employees mostly in private sector enterprises stems from the fact that foreign workers are easier to control and discipline than local workers (Mellahi & Budhwar, 2010). Finally, local workers encounter difficulties in integrating in a multi-cultural work environment compared to foreign nationals (Mellahi & Budhwar, 2010).

Typically, Saudi public universities, recognise that the Deanship of Faculty and Personnel Affairs (similar to Head of HR services in Western universities) is the main unit responsible for managing human resources and employee well-being. Notwithstanding, though Deanships of Faculties and Personnel Affairs are primarily responsible for HR services, other units and departments perform complementary HR services. These include Heads of Colleges and Deans; The Scientific Council, Vice President for Graduate Studies and Scientific Research; Academic Development and Quality Deanship (Deanship of Skills Development). The Deanships of Faculties and Personnel Affairs predominantly performs administrative aspects of HRM functions. While Heads of Colleges and Schools have some level of control in administrating HRM activities, the Scientific Council and the Vice Presidency for Graduate Studies and Scientific Research have significant influence and control in HR administration with the exception of staff performance evaluation and training and development. Although the above-mentioned units perform complementary roles in HR services, an ad hoc committee is established annually with the function of recruiting foreign academic staff. The complexity and duplication of administrating HRM functions in Saudi higher education institutions undermines the effectiveness of HRM practices and processes.

Methodology

Study design

Our choice of an exploratory qualitative research approach was driven by the need to draw from a data set that supported rigorous analyses and value open-ended discovery of participants lived experiences (Anderson, 2017) on issues around the devolvement of HR processes and practices in an under-researched context – supporting research contextualisation (Levitt et al., 2018). Administrating HRM functions in Saudi public universities is complex due to the multiple roles performed by various departments, such as Heads of Colleges or Deanships of Faculties and Personnel Affairs and their reliance on the Ministry of Higher Education for some HR policy direction. The relevance of Deanships of Faculties and Personnel Affairs has been called to question as their role has been narrowed to advertising job vacancies and issuing employment letters. This study used an exploratory qualitative approach to ascertain and understand how shared HRM functions (HR devolvement) in Saudi higher education institutions impact on the relationship between HR departments (managers) and faculties (Deans of Colleges). The study also examined how the nature of such relationship may impact on the advancement of strategic HRM. An exploratory qualitative study was also appropriate due to the dearth of management and HRM research in the Arabian Gulf Regions (Moideenkutty et al., 2011).

Participant and case studies selection

The study focused on academic staff, Heads of Colleges and Deanships of Faculties and Personnel Affairs (Heads of HR services) from six publicly funded universities. These universities had different established dates and locations from one another: two of them were established before 1974; another two were established between 1975 and 1999; and the last two were established after 2000. This variation in the sample study supports the

comprehensiveness of the investigation into the challenges of HR devolvement within universities in SA. It also provided the lens to understand the tensions in the implementation of HRM functions and the degree of similarity or differences across the sample case studies in relation to the devolvement of HR practices. A significant number of the participants had served in different roles such as HR managers, Deans of Colleges and Heads of disciplines. These categories of participants were purposively selected due to their capacity to inform the study and their various experiences in administrating HRM functions in universities.

Table 1: number of participants interviewed

Name of University	Number of Interviews	Key Informants		
		HR Managers	Deans & Heads of School	Lecturers
University A	5	1	1	2
University B	6	1	4	2
University C	5	1	2	2
University D	4	1	1	2
University E	4	1	1	2
University F	4	1	1	2
Total	28	6	10	12

Data Collection

The research drew from multiple data sources in six publicly funded universities. These data sources include documentary records and in-depth face-to-face interviews. The interviews were semi-structured, and the interview guide provided a broad scope and much flexibility to discuss in detail, a number of HRM issues within Saudi public universities and how shared HRM functions affected the relationship between different units and departments. It also offered the opportunity to explore tensions associated with HR devolvement between HR managers and Faculty Deans. The interviews were conducted in both English and Arabic because the official language in Saudi higher education institutions is Arabic, although a few universities and departments offer programs with English as the mode of delivery. In some interviews, foreign nationals preferred English as the preferred language since Arabic was not their first language. Overall, twenty face-to-face interviews were conducted in Arabic, while

eight face-to-face interviews were conducted in English. The interviews conducted in Arabic were transcribed and further translated into English. Then, a third reviewer reviewed independently the translation process to ensure reliability (Brislin, 1980). The interviews lasted between 65 and 70 minutes each. All the twenty-eight face-to-face interviews were audio recorded. The research protocol received ethics clearance from the first researcher's university. The findings from the interviews were supported by and triangulated with documentary records as well as local literature sources. The documents were sourced from HRM research publications, the universities' websites and annual reports from the Ministry of Education. Drawing from multiple data sources enabled the extraction of information from diverse organisations' groups to explore the tensions and challenges that undermine the effective management and organisation of HRM processes and practices in Saudi universities. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality of respondents, the universities were given pseudonyms.

Data analysis

Nvivo software is considered a standard program for the management of qualitative data (Roman et al., 2017). The data was coded using Nvivo to manage and sort the data and analysed using a thematic data analysis technique guided by prior literature.

Findings:

The thematic data analysis technique employed in this study yielded five key themes. These include: (i) duplication of HRM functions; (ii) limited coordination between departments and units; (iii) power struggle (iv) lack of recognition; and (v) government regulatory constraints. Below are the findings that point to tensions and challenges in the devolvement of HR practices which in turn, undermine strategic HRM progression in Saudi higher education institutions:

(i) Duplication and role ambiguity of HRM Functions

Duplication in managing and implementing HR processes and practices emerged as a major challenge in SA higher education institutions due to overlapping in designing and supervising HR functions between Deanships of Faculties and Personnel Affairs and other Deanships. Participants identified and acknowledged that HRM practices and processes were fragmented and not overseen by one single unit or department. The HRM processes and practices are designed and implemented by different units and departments besides the Deanship of Faculty and Personnel Affairs, which was established mainly to manage HR issues across the various units and faculties. One key participant indicated:

‘The fact that there is duplication in managing human resources practices at the university. There is an independent deanship called the Deanship of Faculty and Staff Affairs, but this Deanship does not freely practice all human resources practices because there are other deanships that supervise some of the human resources practices’ (participant #4).

The overlapping in HRM processes and practices makes the process of completing HR tasks too long, as it generates unnecessary delays in the process. Several participants explained that due to the duplication and overlapping in the design and implementation of HRM practices and processes within the universities, there is ambiguity and delay in the process of recruiting new academic staff, irrespective of whether the university intends to recruit from the domestic or foreign labour market. The participants further noted that in some circumstances, unnecessary delays in the recruitment processes has led to the loss of talents to other universities.

‘The basic impediment is the length of the procedures: sometimes we want to recruit faculty members, but the long procedures might allow that applicant to contract with other organizations. The issue is also more complicated when any department of the university has to attract faculty members from outside the Kingdom because there is a great competition

among the universities around the world to attract the competent and experienced faculty members' (participant #11).

Another participant indicated that:

'There is no clear strategy for the employment in the university. The admission period of hiring new faculty members is also not clear, not specific and the process is too long. For example, you may find a faculty member joining the department or college at the beginning of the semester and after a certain period of time; another faculty member might join the department and so on. There must be a definite and clear period for this process to accept faculty members, so the department and the faculty can choose the best candidate and the most efficient' (Participant # 4).

One participant noted that undue delays attributed to the problem of duplication, creating some bottlenecks for academic staff when they seek approval to attend international conferences or workshops. The approval process in most universities in Saudi Arabia involves several units and departments, and this makes the processes more complicated and time wasting. One participant noted that:

'The procedures are very long within the university. Sometimes the date of the conference is over and the university has not yet made the decision, because the decision and treatment must be approved by more than one person' (participant #21).

(ii) Limited coordination between departments and units

The lack of coordination between Deanships of Faculties and Personnel affairs and other units or Deanships that manage and administer some HRM functions is found to be an evolving obstacle to efficiency. It undermines the effectiveness of HRM processes and practices in Saudi higher education institutions. Although many units and deanships design and perform some

HRM functions, there is no coordination among them in performing these functions. This has led to the establishment of different HRM processes and practices in different departments; it has also created agitation among academic staff from the same work environment in relation to variations in administrative procedures, which explicitly undermines the principles of fairness and procedural justice. For instance, while the immediate supervisors of academic staff usually conduct employee performance assessment and training needs, the deanship in charge of training and development does not seek input from the heads of schools and departments before employees are selected for further training and development. The implication is that training programmes identified by the deanships in-charge of training and development are inconsistent with staff training needs and as such, training programmes are not based on the staff training needs assessments, which is usually expected to be drawn from employee performance evaluation reports. One participant said:

'Training and development exist at the university, but it is not strategically planned. The training courses at the university are not based on the actual need, but in unorganized way' (participant #5).

The lack of coordination between deanships and heads of schools has significantly undermined Deanships of Faculties and Personnel Affairs from being a strategic business partner, in mapping out strategies to assist universities in achieving and remaining competitive. Several participants demonstrated that the current work of Deanships of Faculties and Personnel Affairs are not strategic and does not support the long-term strategic direction of universities. In fact, the evidence points to some indifference and inconsistencies between the objectives of the Deanships of Faculty and Personnel Affairs and other units within Saudi universities.

'The current work of the Deanship is an action that is not strategic and does not suit the long term as it has only an executive role' (Participant #1).

It was also noted that:

'There is also no consistency between the objectives of the Deanship of Faculty Members and Staff Affairs and the University objectives' (participant #9).

Another participant asserted that the indifference arises not only from differences between Deanships of Faculties and Personnel Affairs' and the university's objectives, but it also exists within the deanships and colleges, and among academic staff. This divergence in HRM thinking is a result of a lack of coordination in designing and implementing HRM practices within Saudi universities. One participant mentioned:

'Limited coordination between deanships in carrying out human resources practices caused gap between HR departments, colleges, divisions and academic staff. The gap exists as a result of duplication and conflict in the responsibilities between departments within the university' (participant #5).

(iii) Power struggle

The existence of different units performing similar HRM functions, originally within the domain of Deanships of Faculties and Personnel Affairs, has generated hostile relationships between HRM departments and other faculties. This hostility is the result of imminent power struggles in relation to who ultimately has the mandate to make decisions relating to staff recruitment and selection, staff development and employee promotion. Power struggle in decision making affects the unity of command and unity of direction principles in the various universities. Power struggle has led to the narrowing of the functions of Deanships of Faculties

and Personnel Affairs to administrative HRM functions, with limited or no opportunity to carry out their mandated functions.

'The power to make decisions in most human resources practices is not in the hands of the general administration of the faculty and staff members but in the hands of other departments. I expect that if all HR practices were managed and implemented by our management (Deanship of Faculty and Personnel Affairs), the achievement would be much greater than the current situation'. (Participant #22).

Another key participant reiterated that:

'Designing and performing HR functions by other parties caused power struggle in decision making because that there are many units design and perform some of the HR functions without fully knowledge about what other units do. This leads us (the deanship of faculty and staff affairs) to lose the good planning, which helps us to achieve the objectives of the vision and mission of the university' (participant #15).

In most academic work contexts, there exist some shared and complementary responsibilities between HR departments and Deans as well as Heads of Schools, but the usurping of more HRM responsibility by Deans and Heads of Schools has become entrenched in their operations. The Deans and Heads of Schools demonstrate ultimate authority in administrating significant HR functions, and in some cases, have exhibited limited knowledge and capabilities in administrating such HR functions. Interestingly, the failure of any HR processes carried out by Deans and Heads of Schools is generally attributed to HR departments given the fact that they mandated to perform such functions. Although, Deanships of Faculties and Personnel Affairs are established mainly to deal with all HR related processes and practices, it does not freely carry out or have control over such HR processes and practices. For example, some participants complained about the method of academic staff recruitment and the selection of non-Saudis or

foreign nationals, as these recruitments are generally carried out by ad-hoc committees without the active involvement of HR departments. Participants in HR departments in Saudi higher education institutions bemoan that recruitment and selection of staff are sometimes shrouded in secrecy. The implication is that such recruitment processes have in turn, contributed to the high rate of academic staff turnover in some universities. The evidence further points to the open display of power and influence in the recruitment and selection processes for academic staff, particularly non-Saudi academics, by some actors. For example, in most instances, the ad-hoc committee established with the mandate to source foreign talents in some specific academic fields or domains, do not have the requisite skills and capabilities to intensively evaluate the competencies and academic standards of potential applicants.

'Non-Saudis academic staff are contracted through committees formed by the university administration. The power of dean head of school will play a significant role in recruiting and selecting new applicants. In some cases, the choice is made by the dean of the college and he is responsible for recruiting faculty members in his college. In some other cases, only the committee formed by the university administration is responsible to recruit faculty members from those countries. The problem here is the committee formed by the university is usually not specialized in the major they seek to recruit. Meaning that, the dean and head of the department have no role in selecting and recruiting faculty members in their colleges' (Participant #6).

(iv) Loss of credibility and recognition

The evidence also points to the limited role of the HR departments and its lack of recognition by others. Participants from HR units bemoaned the lack of recognition by some Deans and Heads of Colleges. The lack of recognition has instigated the narrowing of HR departments functions in Saudi universities. The HR department now performs basically two administrative functions: issuing employment letters and advertising job vacancies whereas key HR functions

that should be performed by HR departments are within the domain of Deans and Heads of Colleges.

'Our department (the Deanship of Faculty and Staff Affairs) announces the vacancies of faculty members based on the needs sent by the departments and colleges. The role of Human Resources Management is limited to printing the final decision of the applicant. Candidates are selected to fill these positions through departments and colleges. Then, the candidate is approved by the rector. Our role is limited to print the rector's decision in order for the candidate to commence his work' (Participant #16).

This situation demonstrates that the significance of Deanships of Faculties and Personnel Affairs, with their HRM capabilities and knowledge, are not fully recognised by senior management and faculties.

'The establishment of the Deanship of Faculty and Personnel Affairs is significant in managing HR but is not recognised. What is noticeable in our university is that the deanship has a limited role and lack of recognition because that the power of the deanship in designing and performing HR functions are fragmented between the deanship and other units within the university. From my perspective, I think this reason made the role of HR department is limited' (participant #27).

(v) Governance regulatory requirements

Participants also acknowledged state regulatory and procedural complexities in administrating HR functions in Saudi universities. The link between Saudi universities and other Ministries suggest the absence of autonomy in Saudi universities in relation to the implementation of HR policies. Therefore, Saudi public universities have to follow regulations that have been

established by the Ministry of Education, which is the main body responsible for all educational issues within the kingdom. Additionally, Saudi universities operate within the dictates of other ministries such as: Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Labour and Ministry of Civil Services, in terms of processes and practices related to the adoption of some HR policies and practices. This further makes HRM operations in universities more complex. The limited autonomy and flexibility of Saudi universities in adopting and initiating strategic HRM systems that work well for universities, have been attributed to procedural complexities emanating from Ministries and agencies responsible for higher education. For example, even though the universities are given some level of independence to carry out their functions, in relation to the recruitment of foreign nationals, some clearance and approvals are required from several Ministries (e.g. Finance, Interior, Labour and Civil Services), which contributes to delays in the whole recruitment and selection processes. One key participant said:

'Non-independence of Saudi universities. In other words, Saudi universities must follow the regulations and legislations of the Ministry of Education and other ministries such as the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Civil Service, the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Labor. As a result, the HR department at the university has an executive and limited role. In other words, the university cannot legislate the rules and regulations that it deems appropriate for the university because the university is obliged to follow the higher education systems under the Ministry of Education' (participant #1).

'Rules and Regulations: There are some rules and regulations that cannot be ignored. This is due to the connection between the university and other ministries such as the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Civil Service, the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of Labor. This connection limited the role of HR department in Saudi universities' (participant #11).

Discussion and implications for strategic HRM alignment

The capability of Saudi Arabia to build a robust human capital is underpinned by the alignment of HRM processes and practices to support higher educational management and administration. The paper highlights several tensions and challenges which hinder the progression towards achieving a strategic HRM focus and delays strategic HRM progression in higher educational management. Firstly, duplication and role ambiguity in HRM functions between Deanships of Faculties and Personnel Affairs and other Deanships in Saudi higher education institutions, generally affect the effective implementation of HRM practices and processes. The overlapping of duties generates unnecessary delays in completing HRM tasks. HRM is an integral unit of the university strategic process, where the first order of strategy brings long-term focus for organisations, while the second order of strategy brings internal operating procedures needed to accomplish organisational goals (Purcell, 1999). However, the evidence in Saudi higher education settings, does not support either the first or second order of strategy. The role of HR departments in Saudi higher education institutions has been relegated to second-class status, where they only perform administrative HRM duties. In some instances, HR departments lacks recognition and legitimacy to carry out their mandated responsibilities. This evidence clearly undermines contemporary strategic HRM notion beyond administrative HRM activities towards developing innovative HRM practices in support of organisational strategic goals (Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015).

As part of the Vision 2030 ambitions, the country seeks to position its higher education within the global education space and particularly as one of the avenues to attract foreign students from Asia and Africa, which forms part of the broader diversification strategy of the economy. Such an outcome is associated with well-governed universities that can operationalise well-designed devolved HRM processes and practices. These tensions certainly do not align with the government's initiative to position SA higher education as a global education contender,

towards attracting international students. The SA higher education institutions need a well-designed and governed HRM environment that enables Saudi universities to attract world-class staff, provide them with adequate training opportunities and reward systems to enhance teaching and learning quality and increase research output and impact. Notably, considering the current tensions and challenges within SA higher educational management, it appears that the capacity to build a world-class academic staff base to support teaching and research may not be achieved. Primarily, the recruitment and selection processes to evaluate the actual capabilities of potential applicants, particularly foreign nationals is critically impeded as a result of these tensions. This is predicated on the grounds that recruitment and selection processes are carried out in secrecy in accordance with individuals' in-group relationships and tribal lines. In some cases, the failure of ad hoc committees to involve Deans and Heads of Colleges in the recruitment of foreign nationals led to the recruitment of mismatch 'person-job fit' applicants, which produced long-term disadvantages for Saudi universities (Robertson, 2007).

In addition, power struggle and the limited coordination between different units, resulted in departments designing and implementing different HRM processes and practices in isolation from Deanships of Faculties and Personnel Affairs. For instance, academic staff appraisals are undertaken by Heads and Deans of Colleges. However, training and development programs are designed by different units and not aligned with academic staff performance evaluation outcomes. The main challenge with this arrangement stems from the fact that training programs provided for or recommended for individual academics, are not aligned with their training and development needs. This contradicts the purpose of training and development and the need to align training and development activities with staff performance appraisal outcomes. Primarily, effective HRM processes and practices cannot operate in isolation from other departments

(Amalou-Döpke & Süß, 2014). This has also created an environment of agitation among academic staff in relation to differentiated administrative procedures and explicitly undermine the principles of fairness, and procedural justice (Blader & Tyler, 2003). Within the strategic HRM literature, HR departments should be designed to strategically manage employees as a business resource and a tool for achieving and sustaining competitiveness (Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015). This is where Deanships of Faculties and Personnel Affairs (HR managers) must play both their advisory and strategic roles as consultants. Yet, the work of Deanships of Faculties and Personnel Affairs are not strategic and do not support the long-term goals of Saudi universities due to the absence of coordination and power struggle.

Beyond the power struggle, duplication and role ambiguity, there were evidence of external political influences associated with the functioning model of publicly funded universities in the Kingdom with several implications for strategic HRM advancement. Saudi higher education institutions have limited autonomy and independence and by extension weakens publicly funded universities' management in their adoption of strategic HRM processes and practices as the latter must be administered within a framework of varied government ministries and agencies, particularly in relation to the staffing of foreign nationals. These regulatory and procedural complexities limit strategic HRM initiatives, as approvals are required from various ministries and departments. These interferences and influence on universities from government ministries affect Saudi universities capabilities to establish their own academic agencies, staffing, budgeting and HRM policies (Alkhazim, 2003). Whereas institutional arrangements have contributed to loss of talents during recruitment and selection, power struggle for HRM autonomy has further aggravated the delays in Saudi universities staffing process. A number of Deanships of Faculties and Personnel Affairs have alluded to the significant loss of potential, especially highly qualified and talented staff to private universities, where HRM systems are

generally adaptable and free from government regulatory guidance and political intrusion. Some strand of the staffing literature highlight that unnecessary staffing procedures may potentially push some applicants to give up hope of employment and voluntarily withdraw from the recruitment process, contributing to loss of talented applicants (Ahlvik et al., 2016; Arvey et al., 1975).

Considering the management and administration of key HRM practices and processes in SA higher education context, it is obvious that the presence of role duplication, power struggle and the limited coordination among departments, have created dual chains of commands, breeding conflict and undermining the management and administration of HRM processes and practices. It further impedes the principle of unity of command owing to HRM role ambiguity, in terms of staff recruitment and selection procedures, staff development planning and performance appraisals processes. This generally undermines strategic HRM advancement in higher educational management (Ahlvik et al., 2016; Junni et al., 2015). The evidence suggests a clear need for HRM alignment within SA higher educational management and administration. Adopting a strategic HRM alignment in the management and administration of HRM processes and practices would create an enabling management environment for the interaction between HR units and Deans of Schools and Colleges, since both actors aim to contribute to ensuring institutional success.

HRM alignment would be fundamental to supporting the advancement of strategic HRM that focuses on enriching higher educational management and administration. A strategic HRM alignment in SA higher education institutions may help rejuvenate HR departments by building an integrated set of processes and practices across the various Faculties and Colleges in support of universities long-term goals (Amalou-Döpke & Süß, 2014). Even though the effective management and organisation of HRM processes and practices in higher education represent a

major management challenge as highlighted by HR managers, the study participants view that a strategic HRM alignment will be the outcome of a two-way process that addresses the limited coordination between HR departments and Deans of Schools and Colleges. In addition, given the higher education context, substantial HRM processes and practices are often assumed by Faculties, therefore strategic HRM alignment must be built on a shared understanding between HR departments and Deans of Schools and Colleges.

Conclusion and managerial implications

The high level of HR services devolved to Deans, Heads of Schools and Colleges has created power struggle, duplication and role ambiguity of HRM functions, loss of credibility and execution complications. These tensions and challenges have further been heightened by HR managers resistance to such changes due to uncertainties of losing their status and legitimacy. In addition, the lack of recognition and coordination between HR units and Faculties points to limited evidence of strategic HRM and potentially limit the progression of strategic HRM. In Saudi universities, comparable HRM functions between departments has impeded Deanships of Faculties and Personnel Affairs capacities to be strategic business partners which in turn, support the long-term goals and strategies of universities. This is due to the limited strategic and advisory HR roles of Deanships of Faculties and Personnel Affairs in Saudi universities. This has undermined contemporary HRM notion beyond transactional HRM functions to developing innovative HRM practices to support organisational strategy.

There are several specific policy and strategy implications from these findings. First, the advancement of a clear policy guideline on HR roles between Deanships of Faculties and Personnel Affairs, and other units in Saudi universities has the potential to minimise these tensions and challenges. This may help to give recognition and legitimacy to Deanships of

Faculties and Personnel Affairs by highlighting key responsibilities and clarifying their specific HR roles – eliminating ambiguity and power struggle. Second, HRM does not operate in a vacuum and requires greater partnership with line managers and senior management at every level of the organisation (Nel et al., 2017). This is where Deanships of Faculties and Personnel Affairs and other faculties may need greater and closer co-operation in order to establish a more unified HRM structures and systems built on trust and shared values. Third, the devolvement of transactional and tactical HR roles from Deanships of Faculties and Personnel Affairs to other faculties does not reduce the recognition and legitimacy of HR departments, but allows Deanships of Faculties and Personnel Affairs to focus on their strategic business partner role which is critical if Saudi universities would achieve their long-term strategic goals (Allui & Sahnim, 2016). The capacity to free Deanships of Faculties and Personnel Affairs from low-level transactional HR roles and to focus on strategic HR issues such as talent management, change management and cultural transformation directly align with universities long-term strategic directions. In recognising the limitation of the study, we highlight the fact that the study findings on tensions and challenges resulting from HRM devolvement have no universal claims as the study was limited to only few public universities and participants.

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