Managing Human Resource in Public Sector Universities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan: Problems and Prospects

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Abstract

With poorly trained staff, persistently dogged behavior and obsolete organizational structure, official business in the public sector universities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are governed in an orthodox fashion. Over the years, management of human resources in these organizations has not received the desired level of attention. Literature is replete with studies in the HR domain with a focus on the corporate sector. However, limited research can be found addressing HR in the public sector universities. This empirical study investigates how the HR system is designed and functioning in the public sector universities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This study is aimed at looking into the prevailing HR system with a prime focus on five major themes including HR system, structure and capacity, recruitment and selection, training and development, performance appraisal and promotion and career development in the five selected universities. The study identified a number of loopholes in the HR system in these universities. Major factors responsible for the loopholes have been identified. The study will help academia, policymakers and practitioners to restructure their HR system in line with global HR best practices to meet emerging challenges of the contemporary academic world and fulfill growing expectations of the stakeholders.

Keywords: HRM, HR system, HR planning, HR policy, HR system in Universities

Introduction

In the backdrop of mounting pressure from the general public, government and global academic market, managing human resource have become 'a critical issue for contemporary universities.[1] In fact, the autonomous status has entrusted the

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responsibility as employer upon the universities resulting in enhanced expectations of the key stakeholders, particularly faculty and administrative staff and constituent institutes about terms and conditions of employment, working conditions, as well as broader aspects of work-life balance ultimately affecting academic and professional identities. Dubosc & Kelo in their study found that management of the human resource is, inevitably, becoming a key challenge in the institutes of higher education worldwide. Complex academic communities need appropriate career management systems as well as national HR policies underpinning the institutions of further education in recruiting, motivating and retaining qualified and committed academic workforce.[2]

The first part of this paper covers the background of the study followed by a brief overview of the context of the study elucidating higher education landscape and HR practices prevailing in the universities in Pakistan. This is followed by research questions. A brief review of the available literature is presented in the subsequent section. The methodology used for the study is followed by major findings of the study delineated in the ensuing section followed by certain recommendations.

Research Questions
In view of the preliminary remarks delineated above, this research study addressed the following two broad research questions:

Q1: How the HRM system is designed in the public sector universities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa?
Q2: What are the major loopholes in the HRM system in these universities?

Literature Review
This section presents an overview of the available literature addressing historical background of the higher education institutions in Pakistan. The organizational structure, role and functions of governing bodies and management of HR are succinctly covered in this review: This discussion is having a special focus on human resource management practices in the institutes of higher education in Pakistan. The discourse reckoning HR system, policy and practices in the public sector universities persisted to be a central part of this theme. The section identified research gaps in the prevailing HR practices thus providing a rationale for the study.

Universities in Pakistan

University is a place of advanced learning where students carry on their higher education after school or college. It is an educational institution of the highest level offering various schemes of studies for graduate and postgraduate students.[3] Higher education in Pakistan is having a strong colonial legacy. Rehman (1998) portrayed a distinct view of the historical background of institutions of higher education in Pakistan.[4] He maintained that:

The universities of Pakistan were established by the colonial British government in 1858 so as to produce educated Indians to serve in the expanding bureaucracy. As government and security were the major concerns of the colonial government they made the bureaucracy…and the military prestigious and efficient institutions while higher education remained subordinate, government controlled and poor…. This continues in Pakistan because the ruling elites of Pakistan continue to govern the country in the colonial tradition of the past.

A phenomenal increase has been recorded in the number of universities established both in public as well as private sector in Pakistan in the last couple of years. According to the data available on the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan website, there are one hundred and ninety-two universities and degree awarding institutes in the country. Amongst those, hundred and fourteen are public sector, whereas; seventy-eight are the private sector. These universities are government chartered, self-governing autonomous bodies funded by the Government of Pakistan through HEC.[5]

Organizational Structure

Universities, across the globe, depict a distinct form of organizational structure for its unique role and functions and absence of a top-down hierarchy. Universities are professional bureaucracies. These are academic bodies cultivating long-term vision. They are accustomed to time-consuming decision-making process followed by extensive deliberations amongst peers and constituent units - faculties, departments, or even disciplines - where in general at the top, the Vice Chancellor or the CEO does not hold overwhelming powers.[6]

Conversely, public sector universities in Pakistan, in general, share a symmetrical organizational structure having a top-down hierarchy. The Governor of the respective provinces or the President of the country, in the case of federal universities, used to be the chancellors by virtue of their designation. The Senate is the

principal governing body whereas syndicate is the executive body in most of the universities, responsible for key decision-making function.[7]

HRM in practice

Qadeer, et.al found that highly centralized HRM structure, a colonial legacy still prevails in public sector universities in Pakistan. Abbas & Ahmad arguably underpinned these findings in their study stating that HR functions have been made perplexed and complicated mainly looked after by the administration with no expertise and training to deal with it.[8]

Limited research can be found addressing HRM issues in the universities in Pakistan.[9] Even very few studies can be found taking up HR issues in the institutions of higher education holistically. Nevertheless, discrete studies are available, taking up HR practices in the institutions of higher education. On a closer examination, twelve such studies were found, focusing more on just one or two aspects of HR. Similarly, hardly any study covered HRM using system approach. This study took up the HR issues in the higher education sector comprehensively and is aimed at identifying major loopholes in the HR system in the public sector universities that need to be filled for successful operations of the institutions of higher education in the province.

Methodology

Qualitative research paradigm

Qualitative research paradigm has been adopted for the study for a variety of reasons. The most compelling was the conspicuous lack of previous conclusive research on the subject matter.[10] Qualitative approach is valuable for the in-depth understanding of a phenomenon, exploration of new dimensions and discovering their interrelationship. Moreover, the case study approach adopted for the study aided in developing a profound understanding of contemporary employment issues confronted by Pakistani public sector universities in a systematic manner with a focus on five major themes mentioned above in the selected public sector universities of the province. The study involved probing a small number of key informants through extensive and prolonged engagements in order to develop patterns and relationships of key themes and subthemes for further analysis.[11] The study was carried out with a prime focus on public sector Universities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. According to the data, available on HEC website, there are twenty-four public sector universities and DAIs in

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. For the study, a total of five universities were purposefully selected out of the total. Demographic details of case study universities and participants are given at Appendix-I.

Data Collection

For data collection, two sources of information were used: i) Interview and ii) Documents and archival records. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with low, middle and top management as multiple key informants. The key informant is an expert source of information.[12] Since, the Establishment and the Meetings Sections are the two main administrative sections operating under the Registrar's office in the universities, therefore, the top, mid and low career level manager/administrative officers working in these sections (i.e. Registrar, Additional Registrar, Deputy Registrar and Assistant Registrar) were selected for the purpose.

Data Analysis

Once data was collected, the same was analyzed, using coding and pattern matching technique.[13] Data was fastidiously reviewed, revisited, compared, and contrasted. Pattern and themes that emerged during the process were categorized under different headings and subheadings discussed in the discussion part of the paper. Firstly, attribute coding (i.e. EUHRM-2, IUARM-3, KUAREx-4 and KUR-1) was used for the participants. Secondly, for the analysis of data thematic analytical approach propounded by Braun & Clarke was adopted which include: i) Becoming familiar with the data; ii) Generating initial codes; iii) Searching for themes; iv) Reviewing themes; v) Defining and naming themes, and vi) Producing the report. Moreover, the archival record, official documents and available reports were content analyzed.[14]

To put it succinctly, once data was collected and transcribed into a common format, the process of coding was started by carefully, reading and rereading the raw data. Here, specific codes were identified during repetitive readings of the data. The actual words and phrases of the respondents were used to create coding categories. During this exercise, complete absorption in the data was taken on. This required moving back and forth several times to confirm the whole and the context given to each part, and it matched the general theme and the overall data. Resultantly, five themes emerged and based on the same, a general structure was developed and presented in the findings section.

Findings

The data collection process resulted in valuable information regarding HRM practices in public sector universities. It was noticed that universities, in general, confront serious problems in connection with managing human resources as understanding about the concept is circumscribed. The human resources are managed, essentially, in the most traditional and obsolete fashion.

The interviews conducted for the study provided an illuminating insight into the HR issues and challenges confronted by the universities. In the selected universities, the job description is not available creating role ambiguity. Many times employees used to perform overlapping and ill-defined tasks. Work processes are complicated and over dragging creating an undue delay in the disposition of official business. This results in more people ending up performing lesser work. The universities were following, more or less, the procedures and formats evolved by the government for performing staffing function but the same was overshadowed by excessive nepotism and malpractices. The hierarchy has been found to be too complex and intricate. A little deviation from the established norms could land the employees in serious troubles. For performance appraisal, the outdated Annual Confidential Reporting of the public sector is in practice, in the universities.

Employees are neither rewarded nor censured for what they actually perform. The reward system is not performance based. Career growth and employees development remained low priority areas. Training opportunities are available but for the few favoured ones. Besides, there are serious issues regarding the nomination of employees for training, the relevance of training and application of training to the actual task performed by the employees. These findings are discussed at length in the next section.

Discussion

HR System, Structure and Capacity

Notwithstanding, three of the selected five universities have been offering advanced level courses in HR; however, its practical application remained abysmally flawed. Participants were of the view that System approach is not adopted towards staffing function in the institutions of higher education. This malfunctioning at the strategic level precluding execution of coherent and integrated HR processes. This was further elaborated by an HR manager stating that:

The concept of HRM and the idea of HR best practices prevailing around the globe are novel to the people at the helm of university's affairs. They are not even mindful of the fact that HR is a specialized discipline and needs professional staff, managerial skills and comprehensive understanding of the subject area for the smooth functioning of HR business in the universities (EUHRM-2).

Those who mainly dealt with HR issues were found to be not HR specialists and even those were not properly trained for the job. The irony of the fact is that there is no realization of the need to have HR professionals to look after the HR business. There was a general misconception in the universities assuming that it was an HR job and anybody could perform it. Assistant Registrar of a university elaborated this dimension stating that:

Very few among the top management is cognizant of the HR challenges confronted by the universities. Similarly, few cadmic leaders are mindful of the latest HR trends. This lack of understanding resulted in numerous HR related issues in the institutions of higher education (KUARE-4).

Universities in the public sector, in general, did not have a full-fledged, separate office to take care of HR issues. Similarly, there is no statutory body or Council (i.e. HR Council) overseeing HR affairs in the universities. This was further substantiated by a respondent:

Here, in our university, Establishment Section is the main HR Department deals with service matters, personal files, ACRs, leave record, transfer and promotion of employees. There is no concept of HR, here. I think, more or less, same is the position in other universities (IUARM-3).

To be brief, highly centralized HR structure with a colonial legacy still prevails in the public sector universities. Strong resistance to integrate HR practices in the system and the high power distance culture are defying the universities efforts framing HR policies and practices. Status quo is believed to prevail until a schematic HR department become an integral part of the universities reformed administrative structure.

Recruitment and Selection
In fact, the recruitment and selection function in the public sector universities is braving out a whole host of troubles. The whole process from advertisement to final selection is plagued by

numerous lacunas and hounded by inadvertent delays. Multiple people, different bodies, and numerous factors play a part in it. Assistant Registrar of a university maintained that:

> *The process is not uniform. It is obsolete, bureaucratic and outdated. A great deal of confidentiality, discrimination and partisanship are involved in it. Not a single university has its recruitment and selection process automated (KUARE-5).*

In universities, the selection decisions, generally, is open to severe critique. The employment decisions are not based on an impartial assessment of individuals' ability to perform a job in the best possible manner. It has been widely reported that the universities create certain new positions with a particular person(s) in mind. Short-cuts are adopted to hire people for temporary assignments and later on, are appointed against regular and permanent positions. One respondent mentioned that:

> *In universities, in spite of the fact that jobs are openly advertised, screening tests are held and interviews are conducted but the assessment is not competitive. These are all just courtroom formalities. Here, the assessment of the relative suitability of candidates using a competitive selection process based on the relationship between the candidates' work-related qualities and those required for the job position is not undertaken (KUARE-5).*

The work-related attributes including qualification, skills, abilities, relevant personal qualities, potential for future growth, ability to contribute to team performance are not taken into consideration during the entire process of assessment. The practices of breaching the rules and defying merit are seeped into the system of recruitment and selection in the almost all selected public sector universities rendering it, virtually, arduous for the respondents to identify proceedings of the Selection Board which were free from mal-practices and discrimination.

Training and Development
In the selected universities, there is no defined policy for capacity building of employees. Once selected for a job, the employees seldom find ample opportunities for training and development. Pre-serving training, considered as mandatory for new entrants and regarded as essential for executing a job productively has not gained wider currency in the universities. A Registrar of a university maintained that:

> *Hardly any university has a long-term plan for building the capacity of employees in the area of HR, leadership and strategic management. Since competition with private sector universities has not thrived, the public sector universities are lukewarmly considering to groom their own employees (KUR-4).*

To begin with, limited allocation is being made in the universities' budget for training and development component. Wherever, any allocation is made for the purpose, spending on this account remained the lowest. This results in re-appropriation of the allocated budget for other purposes. Deputy Registrar of a university maintained that:

> *The current training programs offered in public sector institutions are deficient in many respects. The training opportunities available to the public sector universities' employees lack relevance, rigor and doesn't make any difference in their on-the-job performance. Secondly, the available training programs either don't expose participants to the prevailing best practices in relevant areas or are of little functional utility to them (EUDRE-2).*

In recent days, HEC took a number of initiatives for capacity building of administrative staff. The Indigenous On-Campus Training Program and the Tertiary Education Support Program, in collaboration with World Bank and Institute of Management Sciences, Peshawar, designed for the training of non-teaching staff of the universities to promote good governance and bring efficiency in the system were two of the worthwhile initiatives , however, such opportunities are few and far between which needs to be revived.

Performance Appraisal
There is no effective performance appraisal system in place for evaluation of the performance of staff in the selected public sector universities except the yearly annual confidential reporting that happens to be nothing more than just a formality and has become an extremely ineffective tool to assess the performance of employees. This is taken into consideration on the odd occasions only for promotion purposes. It has never been linked with compensation or pay increase. Obsoleteness of the system, untrained evaluators and non-involvement of the concerned staff in the appraisal process are the potential bottlenecks in the performance appraisal system. Assistant Registrar of a university maintained that:

The prevalent performance appraisal systems in the universities are having a plethora of problems. The outdated ACR method for performance evaluation is commonly in practice which is in no way helpful in rating and enhancing the performance of the employees (ICARE-3).

Data revealed that majority of the heads of the departments are not aware of the philosophy of modern appraisal system. Targets and goals are neither mutually set nor formally shared with the staff. Performance review discussion is not held between the head of the department and the staff. Achievements and failures in the past performance are not communicated to the concerned staff candidly and regularly. An HR Manager of a university articulated that

The existing performance appraisal system is flawed, unjust and unfair as it does not capture adequately, all the job components that make up the performance during the review period (EUHRM-2).

This has been widely considered as a routine business as this report has limited implications as far as the increase in pay and benefits are concerned. In addition, these reports have no immediate impression unless grading is below the minimum acceptable standard. On the contrary, there are numerous deleterious dimensions of this unidirectional practice as there is no feedback received from the concerned employee about his or her performance which means no learning from past mistakes and no improvement is made towards performance.

Promotion and Career Development
The career development practices in public sector universities are characterized mainly by discrimination, biasness and personal likes and dislikes. Congestions in career channels, rapid and unplanned up-gradation and subsequent promotions of some of the cadres and stagnancy of the rest of the cadres are few of the underlying limitations. The data revealed that the promotion system is generally based on seniority-cum-fitness. The length of service and an unblemished service record reflected in the ACRs are the two basic factors taken into account while considering cases of promotion. Performance used to be having no bearing upon career progression, hence offering no incentive for improved performance. Deputy Registrar of a university revealed that:

Under the current circumstances, best performers have virtually no opportunity to get an accelerated promotion. There is no career path for a lot of positions at various levels. In the absence

> *of a promotional ladder, employees have no motivation to work hard and deliver (AUDR-5).*

Data revealed that there is a general apprehension about career development practices as universities largely failed to devise career development programs for administrative staff allowing them to grow in their careers as well as groom professionally. Registrar of a university argued that:

> *An important way to improve the motivational level of university employees is to define likely career paths and to make clear that career advancement in the public sector universities depends, largely, on relevant experience, acquisitions of new skill set and exhibiting inspired performance (KUR-1).*

The diversity of experience does play a role in promotion but there are no clear guidelines to this effect. Centralization of authority is detrimental in blocking promotion of the hard-working, deserving and competent staff. An effective device here is to devise service structure clearly spelling out career paths for the most common skills and all occupational cadres.

Recommendations

To address these challenges, public sector universities need to restructure its HR system by adopting new capacity building undertakings. There is a need to establish a robust link between training and promotion, formulating formal training plans, utilizing training facilities more effectively and establishing priorities for international assistance in capacity building activities. Respondents suggested that the public sector universities need to change the typical, public sector bureaucratic mindset of the confidential reporting system of performance appraisal. The time period of evaluation should be reduced from one year to six months and the outcome of the exercise needs to be shared with the concerned employees, across the board. The system of performance evaluation should be devised in such a manner that it is linked with the promotion and reward system.

Respondents suggested that: i) Diversity in experience should be rewarded and the universities should encourage employees to broaden their experience and diversify their exposure. ii) A proper Mechanism should be developed so that promotions take place, exclusively, on merit and in accordance with rules and regulations without any delay. iii). Promotion policy needs to be revisited incorporating measures such as performance-

related criteria, linking promotions to management and leadership potential demonstrated during professional career and integrating the diversity of experience.

Conclusion
As the jobs in the today's dynamic academic world have become more complex that requires significant interaction with sophisticated technology, the universities HR office must ensure that they have the right people for the right jobs. This requires the university to have a robust HR system in place, duly supported by effective and efficient HR subsystems. This entails that the jobs must be well-defined, recruitment and selection are transparent, employees are compensated proportionally and handsomely for what they deliver, grievances are redressed in a beseeming manner, promotions are predominantly based not on seniority but on merit and performance and that the high-performance employees are kept motivated and retained for a longer period of time. For the realization of these objectives, exceedingly empowered, technically skilled and highly motivated human resources are inevitable. Developing HR capacity and building an effective human resource department in the universities has become indispensable. In fact, it is all about the complete transformation of HR function, establishing a warm and welcoming relationship with key stakeholders and reckoning the foremost outcomes of human resources in the academic settings.

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