The Performance Management and Appraisal in Higher Education

By

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Abstract

The performance appraisal (PA) is one of the performance management tools that is widely used to measure the productivity of academic employees in different contexts. Therefore, this paper has two main objectives. Firstly, it critically reviews the extant literature on performance management, including; Kaplan and Norton's Balanced Scorecard Approach, among others. Secondly, it presents a qualitative research that explores the performance appraisal system in a higher education institution. The researcher has conducted semi-structured interview sessions with academic employees to analyse their opinions and perceptions toward their annual PA. The research participants revealed the costs and benefits of their PA exercise. They were aware that their educational leaders could pragmatically employ the PA's metrics to improve their performance outcomes, in terms of stakeholder engagement, internal processes, organisational capacity and innovation, among other areas. This research implies that the PA instrument could lead to significant benefits for both the institution as well as for the personal development of individual academics.

Keywords: performance management, performance appraisal, Balanced Score Card, higher education, academic productivity.

Introduction

The notion of human resource management (HRM) has often been described as a set of prescriptions on how to manage people at work. Guest (2002) suggested that HRM is concerned with improving the organisations' performance by paying serious attention to the association between HRM and worker–related outcomes. Other relevant literature links the concept of strategic human resources management with the performance management of employees in their work place (Brewster, 2017; Beer, Boselie and Brewster, 2015; Huselid, Jackson and Schuler, 1997; Hendry and Pettigrew, 1990; Fombrun, Devanna and Tichy, 1984). In a similar vein, schools, colleges and universities are using performance management techniques towards a competitive, performance culture (Manatos, Sarrico and Rosa, 2017; Page, 2015, 2016; Decramer, Smolders and Vanderstraeten, 2013; Forrester, 2011; Soltani, Van Der Meer & Williams, 2005). Performance management (PM) is a goal-oriented process (Erez and Kanfer, 1983) that is intended to ensure that the organisational processes are in place to maximise the employees' productivity (Huselid, 1995). Organisations measure and improve the value of their workforce (Kaplan and Norton, 2001; Venkatraman and Ramanujam, 1986) through regular performance appraisals (PA) that involve ongoing reviews of performance of individual employees or of teams (Levy and Williams, 2004). Hence, the PA is a vital element for the successful implementation of organisational performance management. It aims to ensure that the employees' performance truly contributes to achieving organisational objectives. Thus, it should be used as part of a holistic approach to managing performance and productivity (Huselid, Jackson and Schuler, 1997). However, in recent years; the value of the annual performance appraisals has increasingly been challenged in favour of more regular 'performance conversations'. Therefore, regular performance feedback or appraisal systems remain a crucial aspect of the performance management cycle (CIPD, 2017). Moreover, a thorough literature review suggests that there are diverging views among academia and practitioners on the role of the annual performance appraisal (PA), the form it should take, and on its effectiveness.

In this light, the researcher investigates the use of the PA as a human resource management (HRM) tool in a higher educational setting. The underlying research question is to critically analyse the costs and benefits of utilising the PA to measure the performance of academic employees (Elliott, 2015; Decramer, Smolders, Vanderstraeten and Christiaens, 2012; Brown and Heywood, 2005; Salanova, Agut and Peiró, 2005; Levy and Williams, 2004). Hence, the

researcher evaluates the appraisal criteria that are currently being used in a higher education institution within a small European Union (EU) member state. In conclusion, this contribution implies that the PA instrument leads to significant benefits for both the institutions' productivity and for the personal development of individual academics.

Literature Review

Strategic Human Resources Management and Performance Management

Relevant academic literature has linked the concept of strategic human resources management with performance management (Brewster, 2017; Beer, Boselie and Brewster, 2015; Soltani et al., 2015; Huselid, Jackson and Schuler, 1997; Hendry and Pettigrew, 1990). Fombrun et al.'s (1984) model raised awareness on the importance of matching internal HRM policies and practices to the organisation's external business strategy (Camilleri, 2017a,b; Taylor, Beechler and Napier, 1996). However, Fombrun et al.'s (1984) prescriptive model and its individualistic perspective, had focused on just four "hard" HRM practices. Many researchers argued that "hard" HRM embraced the elements in employment relations, as it laid emphasis on the employees' compliance, quantitative output, managers' tasks and the development of the organisation (Barney, and Wright, 1998; Lado and Wilson, 1994; Guest, 1989). On the other hand, "soft" HRM favoured flexibility, negotiation, performance, quality, recognition of environments and rights in employment relations (Cook, MacKenzie and Forde, 2016; Guest, 1989). This latter perspective is more strategic and long term (Edgar and Geare, 2005; Truss, Gratton, Hope-Hailey, McGovern and Stiles, 1997). Therefore "soft" HRM models and their metrics could help to improve the organisational leadership as well as employee wellbeing (Edgar, Geare, Halhjem, Reese and Thoresen, 2015).

Beer et al. (2015) held that Fombrun et al.'s (1984) model ignored the stakeholders' interests, situational factors, including their political and cultural environments, and the notion of strategic choice. They contended that their own, "Harvard model" acknowledged a range of internal and external stakeholders, including employees, trade unions, management, community, and the government, among others (Edgar and Geare, 2005; Guest, 1987; Beer et al. 1984). Evidently, the Harvard model's social systems perspective, recognised the importance of forging relationships with multiple stakeholders (Freeman, 1984). It suggested

that, stakeholders could influence HRM policy choices. Eventually, Hendry and Pettigrew's (1990) Warwick model comprised five inter-related elements which indicated how external factors could impact upon the internal operations of the organisation. The authors posited that the employers could align their external and internal contexts to experience higher performance. Therefore, this model seemed to recognise the wider context of the strategic HRM function which consisted of a range of tasks and skills (Beer et al., 2015; Huselid et al., 1997). Hendry and Pettigrew (1990) suggested that the organisations needed better structural frameworks and strategies. Therefore, HRM's responsibility was to provide a diagnosis and to propose solutions to challenging deficiencies – in attitudes, scope, coherence and direction of their organisation's human resources (Hendrey and Pettigrew, 1990).

Eventually, Guest's (1997) prescriptive model represented a 'flow' approach that considered strategy as an underpinning practice in HRM. Guest's (1997) model tied employee behaviour and commitment into strategic management goals. The author explained that there was an association between high performance or high commitment HRM practices and the various measures of organisational performance. He also put forward a theoretical framework of integrated HRM practices that explained how organisations could achieve superior performance. Guest's (1997) model delineated how organisations could improve HRM practices, whilst fostering an environment for behavioural commitment, to achieve the desired goals and performance outcomes, including financial ones. His model has presented a logical sequence of six components, comprising; HR strategy, HR practices, HR outcomes, behavioural outcomes, performance outcomes and financial outcomes. Guest (1997) argued that the HRM practices of selection, socialisation, training and development, quality improvement programmes, staff appraisals, reward systems, communication, employee involvement, team working and job design, among other variables, ought to be aligned with the organisational strategies. The assumption is that Guest's (1997) unitary perspective on 'appropriate' HRM practices was intended to improve employee motivation. Therefore, his proposed model may be used in organic structures where there is functional flexibility and adaptability. This perspective is related to Vroom's (1964) expectancy theory of motivation perspective (Bowen and Cheri Ostroff, 2004), as effective HRM practices may bring significant improvements in the performance outcomes of organisations, in terms of quality, commitment and flexibility.

The organisations' performance outcomes must be monitored on a regular basis to ensure that the HRM department manages its employees in an effective and efficient manner (Buckingham and Goodall, 2015; Lebas, 1995; Wholey and Hatry, 1992). The educational leaders are also expected to ensure that their employees meet academic and pedagogical quality assurance and standards of teaching through regular performance reviews. The teachers' competences could be evaluated via observations, learning walks, electronic data, organisational and architectural structures in order to identify hidden elements of the performance management process (Page, 2015). The author contended that the headteachers' practice may be obscured by "clandestine conversations and negotiations which offer compromise agreements" (p. 1032). In another paper, Page's (2016) qualitative study identified four tensions that obfuscated the performance management in schools, including' the educational leaders' responsibility toward teachers and to pupils; external accountability and professional autonomy; discipline of teachers and support of teachers; fixed processes and improvisational practices.

Performance Management Systems in Education

A number of researchers suggested that the educational institutions can measure their performance by using Kaplan and Norton's (1992) Balanced Scorecard (Wu, Lin and Chang, 2011; Beard, 2009; Cullen, Joyce, Hassall and Broadbent, 2003). For example, Cullen et al. (2003) have adopted the balanced scorecard (BSC) approach to assess an academic programme and its planning process. The basic premise of the BSC is that organisations could develop a comprehensive set of financial and non-financial measures to use as leading indicators, or predictors (Kaplan and Norton, 1992) to capture value-creating activities. Kaplan and Norton's (1992) balanced scorecard approach could be used to appraise employees and to evaluate their performance in a higher education institution (HEI), as featured in Table 1:

Table 1. The Balanced Score Card Approach in Higher Education

Perspective	Question	Explanation
1. Stakeholder (including the government, the national department of education, business and industry employers, parents, students)	What do existing and new stakeholders value?	This perspective views organisational performance from the point of view of its stakeholders. It gives rise to targets that matter, including; the quality and delivery of teaching students, the provision of professional development and training courses to business and industry, outreach and collaborations with external stakeholders, et cetera.
2. Internal (the academic and administrative members of staff)	What internal processes must be improved to achieve quality educational objectives?	This perspective views organisational performance through the lenses of quality education, individual research, engagement with trade and professional organisations, the department's operational internal processes and efficiencies, et cetera.
3. Organisational Capacity (or Innovation and Learning)	How can educational institutions improve to create value?	This perspective views organisational performance through the lenses of human capital, infrastructure, technology, culture and other capacities that are key to the creation and dissemination of knowledge. It considers the educational institutions' research output (as a whole), and its capacity to maintain a competitive position through the identification of training needs of individual members of staff, and the acquisition of new resources.
4. Financial (or Stewardship)	How can an educational institution (government, church or private entities) improve financial performance and their value to trustees or shareholders? How can an educational institution use its financial resources?	This perspective considers the organisation's financial performance and its use of resources. It covers traditional measures such as growth, return on investment and profitability.

(Adapted from Kaplan and Norton, 1992)

The BSC could include strategic elements such as the mission (the organisation's purpose), vision (aspirations), core values, strategic focus areas (themes, results and/or goals) and the more operational elements such as objectives (continuous improvement activities), or key performance indicators; which track strategic performance, targets (the desired level of performance), and initiatives (projects that will help organisations to reach their targets).

A critical factor for an effective BSC is the alignment of its four perspectives with the organisation's vision and strategic objectives (Kaplan and Norton, 1995). In a similar vein, Guest (2011) contended that superior performance could be achieved when organisational sub-systems are aligned to support each other. Thus, Kaplan and Norton's (1992) BSC could be used to support educational leaders as they track short-term financial results while simultaneously monitoring the progress of their institution's members of staff (Kaplan and Norton, 1992). Therefore, BSC can support the educational leaders as it allows them to monitor and adjust the implementation of their strategies and to make changes, if necessary.

Performance Metrics in Higher Education

The employees' performance could be measured against their employer's priorities, commitments, and aims; by using relevant benchmarks and targets. Key metrics could be used to analyse and measure the employer's targets against actual performance outcomes. Quantitative performance measures of higher education institutions could include the students' enrolment ratios, graduate rates, student drop-out rates, the students' continuation of studies at the next academic level, the employability index of graduates, et cetera. Conversely, the educational leaders could explore the students' attitudes through regular survey questionnaires on their courses. They can provide insightful data on the students' opinions and perceptions about their learning environment. Qualitative indicators could evaluate the students' satisfaction with teaching; satisfaction with research opportunities and training; perceptions of international and public engagement opportunities; ease of taking courses across boundaries and may also determine whether there are administrative / bureaucratic barriers in higher educational institutions (Decramer et al., 2012).

The higher education institutions' performance indicators could also assess the department's progress on planned goals, objectives, and initiatives. Other metrics may evaluate the departments' strategic priorities; including an assessment of the recruitment of academic and

administrative staff and their retention rates; the tracking of changes in departmental size; age and distribution of academic employees; diversity of students and staff, in terms of gender, race and ethnicity, et cetera. The department could examine discipline-specific rankings; it may conduct regular programme reviews, scrutinise research output, determine expenditures per academic member of staff, et cetera.

Research Design

The performance management of an organisation's employees is intended to increase organisational efficiency, performance, authority and accountability within educational settings (Adcroft and Willis, 2005; Boland and Fowler, 2000). Therefore, this research sheds light on the performance management and appraisal systems of the academic lecturers within a higher educational institution (HEI) in small European Union country. This study has adopted a qualitative research methodology as it searched for a deeper understanding of how the PA could be used as an HRM tool for educational leaders (Brown and Heywood, 2005). This inductive approach has allowed the researcher to interpret the educators' (the appraisees') perceptions on their annual PA exercise. This study involved eighteen personal face-to-face interview sessions, where the researcher could observe the interviewees' environmental setting, the organisation's culture and structure, the educational leaders' management styles, and the educators' attitudes toward them, among other variables. From the outset, the informants were briefed about this study's rationale and on its aims and objectives. The informants were requested to describe the PA process, in terms of its costs and benefits. They were encouraged to share their views and opinions about their own PA experiences in a flowing conversation with the researcher; making the interview instrument a suitable data-collection vehicle for the purposes of this study.

Research Context

The researcher has observed the contextual setting of the informants' workplace environment. He experienced their organisational culture and background. He became familiar with the organisation's hierarchical structure, its respective educational leaders' management styles, as he got acquainted with the educators' attitudes toward them, among other variables.

The HEI's educational leaders appraise the performance of their academic and administrative employees on an annual basis to encourage self-reflection and development. Generally, the academics are assessed on three areas of performance, including: (i) lecturing, mentoring and tutoring, (ii) research, and (iii) administration. Thus, the educational leaders utilise both qualitative and quantitative measures to evaluate their academic employees' performance on their teaching, publications and administrative tasks. Every HEI department assists its employees in identifying their personal and professional development needs by providing them a supportive HRM framework and performance management criteria.

The PA provides the basis for the individual academic's performance and merit. Its quantitative ratings and qualitative reviews involve an annual assessment of the individual's performance. In this case, the educational leaders use a consistent performance management process that serves the interests of the educational institution's human resource management, corporate governance and employee development (Heywood, Jirjahn and Struewing, 2017; Brewer and Brewer, 2010; Ramsden, 1991). The staff appraisal is one of its strategic HRM practices as it enables the head of departments (HODs) to identify the training and development needs of their employees. During the appraisal, HODs (or designated appraisers) discuss with the individual employees on their personal goals, tasks and aspirations, whilst assisting with the identification of professional development needs and tasks. S/he will maintain appropriate written records of each appraisal meeting. The appraisal of the educators (including lecturers and teaching associates) will usually involve a classroom observation. The HODs (or designated appraiser) may also evaluate the students' feedback on the educators' courses. Hence, they will be in a position to identify and address any areas of concern.

Implementing and Administering the PA Process

The PA and its evaluation process is a collaborative appraiser / employee (appraisee) process that starts with the identification of the individual employee's duties and responsibilities. This information can also be retrieved from the job description from the contract of employment. This document includes relevant details on how the employee is expected to meet the employer's pre-defined goals and objectives.

The contract of employment specifies the employer's performance measures for its employees. It clarifies that the PA is usually carried out once a year. The PA consists of a combination of

quantitative and qualitative performance appraisal systems involving the use of rating scales as well as "collaborative methods", where the employees would self-appraise their own performance. Therefore, the academic employees are given the opportunity to provide any information that they would like to communicate to their employer through the self-appraisal document. This feedback is used by the appraiser to evaluate the employees' performance during the appraisal year. It also offers the appraisees the chance to review their own accomplishments, and to actively participate in their organisation's goal setting process. This way, they can identify their strengths and any areas of performance (including behaviours, conduct and results) where they could improve. The academic employees are also encouraged to communicate about their expectations for the following year. Afterwards, the appraisers (i.e. the subject or area coordinators) will mark the appraisal form with their quantitative ratings and qualitative feedback following an informal meeting with the appraisees.

The appraisee has the right to reply to the appraiser's ratings and remarks in writing. Eventually, both of them will sign the performance form to acknowledge that their PA has been discussed. Finally, the educational leaders will retain the original signed form and will provide the appraisee with a copy of the signed form. Hence, the performance form will be kept in the human resources department where there is the individual employee's file. In addition, the appraiser(s) may also include any written justification for their performance scores (or for their remarks).

A Critical Analysis of the PA

The Benefits

The PA's quantitative ratings and qualitative reviews involve an annual assessment of the individual'employees' performance. In this case, the educational leaders are using a consistent performance management process that serves the interests of their institution's human resource management, corporate governance and employee development (Heywood, Jirjahn and Struewing, 2017; Brewer and Brewer, 2010; Ramsden, 1991).

PA Improve the Working Relationships

The academic literature has often discussed about how the successful implementation of the PA instrument relies on supervisor-employee relationships (Whiting, Podsakoff and Pierce, 2008; Salanova et al., 2005; Levy and Williams, 2004). For example, Elicker, Levy and Hall's

(2006) contended that the managers are expected to create a "common ground" with their subordinates throughout the year. This enables them to build a social foundation of aligned efforts, understanding, and more positive reactions toward PA systems. Thus, the PA exercise could be considered as a tool to improve the communication within the organisation, between the teachers and their educational leaders. The PA instrument could lead to continuous improvements in the workplace environment (Elliott, 2015; Kaplan and Norton, 1995). In this case, the majority of the research participants agreed that the PA was focused on improving their extant working relationships with their educational leaders.

PA Increase the Organisational Performance

Four of the youngest informants admitted that the PA has helped them clarify their work goals; as it supported them in improving their individual performance (Salanova et al., 2005). Two middle aged participants considered the PA as an appropriate HRM tool. They contended that their educational leaders were recognising and acknowledging their progress, year after year. Another interviewee pointed out that; "the PA makes academic staff more accountable to their students and authorities". These responses resonate with the extant literature on the subject. For instance, McGregor (1957) argued that PA should be goal-oriented. He suggested that one of the main functions of PA should be the identification and achievement of work goals rather than just assessing performance (DeNisi and Smith, 2014; Salanova et al., 2005).

In a similar vein, eight interviewees held that the PA provided them with insightful feedback from their appraisers that has led them to significant improvements in their work performance and productivities (Whiting, Podsakoff and Pierce, 2008). More importantly, a sense of ownership and a climate of trust is essential if the PA is to be effective and successful (Camilleri, 2017a,b; Mayer and Davis, 1999). Evidently, the PA and their key performance indicators have increased the employees' morale, job motivation and commitment (Kuvaas, 2006; Gagné and Deci 2005; Poon, 2004; Thomas and Velthouse, 1990).

Several academic members of staff who participated in this study have also communicated to the researcher that they expected their educational leaders to recognise their work output. A few informants also contended that they considered recognition as a form of reward. Furthermore, they went on to say that the PA has increased their motivation, job commitment and their performance. This finding was also reflected in relevant academic literature (Kuvaas, 2006; Levy and Williams, 2004).

The informants maintained that PA should be used for the improvement of communication. One of the informants suggested, "PA should be used to develop and support us on an ongoing basis rather than being a one-off session, once a year". She believed that the PA should be a continuous process as a means of improving communication between the teachers and their educational leaders. Moreover, other informants discussed about other issues, including the allocation of an annual performance bonus; the identification of specific individuals for future promotion and on the use of PA to monitor the employees' individual performance. Hence, the informants suggested that PA should be used to identify and recognise outstanding members of staff and to reward their efforts, commensurately. They argued that the PA instrument could be utilised as an HRM tool that could lead to continuous improvements in the workplace environment.

The Costs

Generally, the informants reported that they looked forward to their annual performance appraisal. However, the performance management of the teaching aspect of academia may prove difficult to evaluate in a staff appraisal report, due to its inherent characteristics:

PA are Backward Looking

The PA process ought to focus on the development and achievement of future objectives, rather than merely assessing the past performance of the organisation's employees. Many informants felt that the PA exercise had become an annual administrative task for the educational leaders. Five respondents suggested that the PA instrument was not being adopted to identify the training requirements to keep the academic staff up-to-date with the latest advances in teaching and educational technologies. A few of them claimed that the PA has become an annual administrative task for their educational leaders. Others argued that the PA should focus on the development and achievement of future objectives, rather than just assess their past performance.

The PA and the Organisational Culture

Four informants held that they did not feel that they owned their PA process. This finding was also reported in relevant academic literature that has emphasised how the PA exercise ought to be part of a wider performance management strategy, where it is integrated with other performance management strategies (DeNisi and Smith, 2014; Delery and Doty 1996). The PA

system may be ineffective unless it is being linked to other performance-enhancing policies. Arguably, when the PA is used in isolation, it may not yield the desired outcomes. In one of the respondent's own words, "PA must form part of college's culture, rather than being considered as something that needs to be got over and done with". This interviewee claimed that "not much time was being devoted to PA", as "the lecturers did not feel that they own the PA process".

The Appraisers' Bias and Subjectivity in the PA Process

There were two informant who insinuated that the measurement of performance is subjective. They argued that the appraiser may provide constructive feedback as well as negative criticism. The latter type of communication may possibly lead to employee demotivation, turn-over intention, as well as unproductive behaviours from the employees' part (Kuvaas, 2006; Poon, 2004; Cleveland, Murphy and Williams, 1989). Most of the interviewees were in disarray when the interviewer questioned them if they thought that the PA instrument could be used to inform their educational leaders on harder HR decisions on issues relating to retention, termination of employment or for disciplinary action. In these cases, two other informants have voiced their concerns over the subjectivity of the PA procedure. They argued that there may be specific situations where the appraisers' decisions could be agreed upon by the appraisee. Alternatively, they may be contested, leading to conflicts and grievances. Another informant iterated that the PA may cause unnecessary tension among employees if they believed that it is being used by HR to take 'hard' decisions. In the main, the interviewees pointed out that for the time being, the appraisers do not have the authority to implement contentious HR decisions that will affect their future employment prospects, or their take-home pay.

Discussion and Conclusions

This contribution has focused on the academic literature relating to strategic HRM models (Beer et al., 2015; 1984; Huselid et al., 1997; Fombrun et al., 1984), performance management and appraisal systems (Wu et al., 2011; Cullen et al., 2003; Guest, 1997; Kaplan and Norton, 1992; Guest, 1989, 1987). Relevant theoretical underpinnings suggest that HRM strategy should be internally-consistent and externally-relevant to achieve organisational success (Decramer et al., 2013; Amaratunga and Baldry, 2000; Kaplan and Norton, 1992). In this light, the researcher suggests that the organisations' (including academic institutions) HRM systems

should be evaluated, and their performance outcomes must be monitored on a regular basis to ensure that their educational leaders are managing its resources and capabilities in an effective and efficient manner.

This research implies that the BSC could be used to analyse the performance management of educational institutions in terms of their stakeholder, internal, organisational capacities and financial perspectives. Therefore, universities and colleges could evaluate their strengths and address those areas that require further improvement. These institutions could resort to the performance appraisal as an HRM management tool to improve their individual employees and their group performance (Capko, 2003). Such performance management systems are intended to inform employees of how they stand with the organisation on factors, including; job-related criteria (Thornton, 1980) and on the employer's performance expectations (Bretz, Milkovich and Read, 1992). Assessors ought to explain their highly objective work evaluation instruments to their valued employees (Arvey and Murphy, 1998). Currently, the PA process is informing HEI leaders on their academic employees' performance and productivity. Its successful execution may lead to an increased employee motivation, job satisfaction, better feedback, increased accountability, and to a fairer distribution of rewards (Heywood et al., 2017; Whiting et al., 2008; Kuvaas, 2006; Poon, 2004).

This reflective paper has highlighted the costs and benefits of the PA process within a higher educational setting. In sum, it suggested that the PA exercise is increasingly relying on the skill and on the predisposition on the part of assessors who provide constructive criticism and key recommendations to their colleagues. Therefore, the appraisers are entrusted to set out clear objectives to the appraisees, and to measure their productivity and effectiveness in their workplace environment. At the same time, they are expected to identify their strengths as well as other weak areas that will inevitably require further improvement. The appraisers are in a position to nurture the talent of their colleagues as they determine the continuous professional development needs of their organisation. Thus, the evaluators (i.e. the area and subject coordinators) may also require training from time to time, on how to conduct the effective appraisals of other employees. This training should instruct them how to rate fellow employees, and could inform them how to conduct appraisal interviews. They may also learn how to make objective ratings and unbiased reviews, as good appraisal systems involve constructive feedback that would possibly translate to significant improvements of the employees' performance.

The performance appraisal is an excellent opportunity for the appraiser and the appraisee to engage in a fruitful dialogue. Yet, this HRM instrument should never substitute the ongoing communications and coaching that is expected from the educational leaders, on a day-to-day basis.

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