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STRATEGY OF ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT – A CASE STUDY OF UTRECHT UNIVERSITY

Abstract

Background. Contemporary universities functioning in the conditions of intensifying globalisation and competition are looking for effective methods of increasing their competitive advantages. A clearly defined and consistently implemented SHRM strategy plays an important role in this process.

Research aims. The objective of this paper is to identify good practices of European universities in the area of strategic human resources management. The author has tried to acquire answers to two basic questions: On the basis of published documents, is it possible to identify examples of the execution of specific HRM strategies at European universities? What elements should such strategies comprise, so that universities could combine the fulfilment of their fundamental functions with modern management techniques?

Methodology. The analysis is based on the results of the author's study of literature on the subject as well as qualitative research based on a particular case. The research presented in this paper constitutes a part of a wider research programme.

Findings. The conducted research has allowed the identification of a specific HRM strategy in the area of organisational development at Utrecht University. The paper discusses the elements and stages of this strategy. In conclusion, the author emphasises that, in the Polish conditions, such a strategy would require considerable modifications.

Keywords: strategic HRM (SHRM), organisational development (OD), university management.

INTRODUCTION

Effective management of a university in the 21st century is an enormous challenge for managers which results, among other things, from the changes in economic, social, and demographic processes as well as the development of new and innovative sectors

of the economy. This challenge obliges university managers to develop and implement strategic activities which will guarantee an institution's organisational development irrespective of changes in its environment. The adoption of an organisational development strategy may ensure great prestige and competitive advantage for a university in the long term. An organisation acquires involvement, attachment, and loyalty of its employees, while the latter are provided with a possibility of safe employment, better working conditions, and development opportunities.

Within the context of approach, *Strategic Human Resource Management* was developed as an instrument of executing a business strategy at a functional level and was a logical consequence of the development of the concept of *Organisational Development* (OD), which gives priority to man and the principle of promoting values in the processes of change. This is confirmed by the opinions of numerous theoreticians, practitioners, and consultants, although so far their deliberations have concerned business organisations, and not higher education institutions.

The objective of this paper is to present an organisational development strategy employed at one of Europe's public universities. In order to achieve this objective, the author has used the methods of content analysis and participatory observation, pursuing answers to the following questions: On the basis of published documents, is it possible to identify examples of the execution of specific human resource management strategies at European universities? What elements should such strategies comprise, so that universities could combine the fulfilment of their fundamental (research, scholarly, didactic, and social) functions with modern management techniques?

Human Resource Management

The end of the 1980s witnessed the birth of a new concept of human resource management (HRM) consisting in searching for ways of unlocking employees' potential as well as increasing their efficiency and operating effectiveness.¹ Postulated changes were not limited only to burdening line managers with new responsibilities, a new approach to traditional positions, which started to be understood more broadly in terms of roles, or perceiving employees as assets², but also to delegating duties to organisational units with the simultaneous centralisation of administrative tasks. Their consequences included a higher level of employees' involvement and their perception as a source of capital, i.e. values contributed by the employees to organisations.³

In many cases, the economic situation forced organisations, on the one hand, to cut costs, restructure operations generating losses, and reduce employment, and, on the other hand, to recruit or outsource new employees. This generated conflicts among

¹ P. Relly, T. Williams (2012). *Strategiczne Zarządzanie Zasobami Ludzkimi*. Oficyna Wolters Kluwer business, Warszawa, pp. 12–15.

² M. Armstrong (2011). *Zarządzanie zasobami ludzkimi*. Oficyna Wolters Kluwer business, Warszawa, pp. 43–58.

³ R.G. Ehrenberg, R.S. Smith (1994). *Modern Labor Economics*. Harper Collins, New York.

employees and hindered the functioning of organisations as a coherent whole. Counteracting these negative phenomena, organisations started to appreciate employees more, not only to improve their effectiveness and efficiency, but also to keep them in employment. These phenomena resulted in the addition of a strategic dimension to the HRM concept: Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM)⁴, which lays special emphasis on the development of employees in organisations, the building of an organisational culture oriented towards values, and the development of an organisational system of learning.

The strategy- and capital-based approach to employees in an organisation accompanied by the model of involvement⁵ was based on the following principles⁶:

- Employees develop their occupational competencies and involvement if this is facilitated by the work environment.
- The interests of an organisation and its employees can be aligned thanks to open communication which builds trust and involvement.
- Employees are involved if they participate in solving organisational problems.

Guest confirmed that, through adequate HRM practices, employees involvement and behaviour translated directly into organisational values.⁷

Strategic Human Resource Management

Strategic human resource management defines a manner in which an organisation achieves its objectives through people, means of an HR strategy, as well as integrated operational principles and practices related to HR.⁸ It consists in initiating activities and making decisions which apply to employees and in the long term determine the direction of personnel-related activities, and are of primary importance for an organisation.⁹ On the one hand, it stresses the building of interpersonal relations in the management process, highlighting the need for continuous development, involvement, communication, work quality, and balance between professional life and personal life¹⁰; on the other hand, it focuses on employees' results achieved in consequence of investment in their development.

⁴ N.M. Tichy, C.J. Fombrun, M.A. Devanna (1982). *Strategic human resource management*. "Sloan Management Review", vol. 23, pp. 47–61; J. Strużyna (2010). *Ewolucja strategicznego zarządzania zasobami ludzkimi*. „Zarządzanie Zasobami Ludzkimi”, vol. 3–4, pp. 12, 18–20.

⁵ M. Beer, B. Spector, P.R. Lawrence, D. Quinn Mills, R.E. Walton (1984). *Managing Human Assets*. The FreePress, New York.

⁶ O. Lundy, A. Bowling (2001). *Strategiczne zarządzanie zasobami ludzkimi*, Dom Wydawniczy ABC – Oficyna Ekonomiczna, Kraków.

⁷ D.E. Guest (1997). *Human resource management and performance: A review and research agenda*. „The International Journal of Human Resource Management”, vol. 8, June.

⁸ M. Armstrong (2010). *Strategiczne zarządzanie zasobami ludzkimi*. Oficyna Wolters Kluwer business, Warszawa.

⁹ T. Listwan (1995). *Kształtowanie kadry menedżerskiej firmy*. Kadry, Wrocław.

¹⁰ J. Storey (1989). *Introduction: From personel management to human resource management* [in:] J. Storey (ed.), *New Perspectives on Human Resource Management*. Routledge, London.

Research conducted by Armstrong and Baron confirmed the existence of many variants of HR strategies in business organisations¹¹: from very general and intentional ones to very detailed ones addressing particular aspects of human resource management such as recruitment, development, or remuneration.¹² Comprehensive HR strategies present manners of employee management, including providing employees with development opportunities; attracting, maintaining, and motivating employees; and building employees' involvement. Examples of such comprehensive strategies include high-performance management, high-involvement management, and high-commitment management.¹³ Meanwhile, specific strategies determine what an organisation intends to achieve in selected HR areas, for example in recruitment, development, talent management, remuneration, or the development of employees' relations.

Human Resource Development

The concept of *Human Resource Development* (HRD) also developed in the 1980s, from narrowly understood training activities to a comprehensive approach.¹⁴ It concerned the most frequent issues related to "individual and organisational learning, knowledge enhancement, the improvement of skills and abilities, and the shaping of people's values and attitudes in the work environment".¹⁵ Hence HRD is associated with such notions as: "training, employee development, career, talent management, learning, education, but also work effectiveness improvement at the individual, group, and organisational levels". As a new concept, HRD was developed by G.N. and L. McLean.¹⁶

HRD is generally understood as "intentional configurations of undertakings aimed at knowledge enhancement, talent development, the shaping of values, attitudes, motivation, and skills".¹⁷ Two approaches can be distinguished within HRD. In one of them, development is treated as a part of processes related to human resource management; in the other, development is perceived as a separate process. In the case of both approaches, HRD can be analysed at the levels of a whole organisation, teams, individual employees, or as four interdependent functions: *organisation development* (OD); *career development* (CD); *training and development*, (T&D) and *performance improvement* (PI).¹⁸

¹¹ M. Armstrong, A. Baron (2002). *Strategic HRM: The Route to Improved Business Performance*. CIPID, London.

¹² M. Armstrong, *Strategiczne...*

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ A. Pocztowski (2007). *Zarządzanie zasobami ludzkimi. Strategie, procesy, metody*. PWE, Warszawa, pp. 273–274.

¹⁵ HRM. *Human Resource Management* (2013). From the editors. "Institute of Labor and Social Studies", vol. 6, no. 95(13), p. 7.

¹⁶ G.N. McLean, L. McLean (2001). *If we can't define HRD in one country, how can we define it in an international context?*, "Human Resource Development International", vol. 4, no. 3, p. 322.

¹⁷ A. Pocztowski, *op.cit.*; T. Listwan (2010). *Rozwój badań nad zarządzaniem zasobami ludzkimi w Polsce* [in: S. Lachiewicz, B. Nogalski (eds.), *Osiągnięcia i perspektywy nauk o zarządzaniu*. Oficyna Wolters Kluwer business, Warszawa, pp. 237–240.

¹⁸ D. McGuire, M. Cseh (2006). *The development of the field of HRD: A Delphi study*. „Journal of European Industrial Training”, vol. 30, no. 8, pp. 653–667; H. Abdullah (2009). *Definitions of HRD: Key concepts from a national and international perspective*. "Journal of European Social Sciences", vol. 10, no. 4, pp. 486–495.

Human Resource Strategy for Researchers (HRS4R)

The *Human Resources Strategy for Researchers* (HRS4R) programme is recommended for implementation in all organisations employing academics and researchers.¹⁹ It is connected with the management improvement processes within *the European Higher Education Area*. Participation in the programme makes it possible for a research institute:

- to take part in periodic meetings of international public and non-public organisations employing academics and researchers;
- to share information and experiences among institutions and to use internal documents related to the implementation of an HRS4R programme;
- to enter the international Internet platform connected with the European Commission, to use the quality mark of *HR Excellence in Research*;
- to improve a university's image as an exceptional employer, in particular on the international arena.

The right to use the logo of *HR Excellence in Research* is granted to institutions supporting the creation of a work environment friendly for academics and researchers. The programme provides opportunities for the implementation of academic reforms, simultaneously strengthening an organisation's prestige and increasing its chances for a better position in international rankings.

Organisations joining the HRS4R programme are obliged to conduct an internal analysis of their previous practices in the area of human resources and subsequently prepare a plan of changes and a strategy of their implementation. Such activities should be the result of an assessment of an organisation's internal processes and a procedure of planned changes determined in order to adjust the organisation to the principles and values presented in *the Charter and Code*. If the *European Commission* accepts the planned and implemented changes, the organisation is awarded with the logo of *HR Excellence in Research*. The HRS4R programme motivates university managers to take measures aimed at their institutions' internal reforms in the personnel area.

The Charter and the Code allow researchers to identify universities operating in accordance with a similar set of principles and values irrespective of their country of origin. Since the adoption of the Commission's recommendations in 2005 more than 1200 institutions in 35 countries in Europe and around the world have expressed their support for *The Charter and the Code*, while 102 acquired the mark of *HR Excellence in Research*.

¹⁹ Human Resources Strategy for Researchers. <http://ec.europa.eu/euraxess/index.cfm/rights/strategy-4Researcher> (access: 7.01.2015).

METHOD

Management sciences are a set of various disciplines, subdisciplines, specialisations, research trends, and perspectives which force researchers to work intensively on determining a research method appropriate for a particular problem under analysis. Their paradigm is a practical problem, and *the principle of problem orientation requires the understanding and formulation of problems going beyond the limits of disciplines*.²⁰ In this paper, the author relies on the *interpretative and symbolic* paradigm (a dominant paradigm based on qualitative research)²¹, which shows interdependencies in complex social and organisational structures and is most often used in the areas of personnel management and strategic management. The author uses a *case study*, i.e. a research procedure representing the *idiographic approach*, together with such methods as *documentation analysis, observations, interviews, and projective tests*.²²

The popularity of *good practices* results from the need for access to the best models and for a reflection on *what can be done better, and how*. They consist in an organised presentation of the whole system (or its part) in a particular institution and a formulation of generalising conclusions²³, although particular good practices effective in one university do not necessarily deliver expected benefits in another.

Silverman distinguished two types of case selection²⁴: *intentional* and *theoretical*, while Czakon distinguished five such types²⁵: *grammaticality* (data availability); *an extreme character of a case* (extreme, but unambiguous in an interpretation of a case); *diversity* (different or opposing cases); *a critical phenomenon* (whose unusual and unexpected course allows the formulation of generalisations); *a metaphor* (allows the adoption of a particular position or a particular course of a studied phenomenon). The importance of a case study is determined by the application of exploratory methods (by assumption – many methods) in order to understand a studied phenomenon best.²⁶

In February and August 2015, the author conducted an analysis of the websites of the European public universities. The analysis was based on the following three basic

²⁰ H. Steinmann, G. Schreyögg (1995). *Zarządzanie. Podstawy kierowania przedsiębiorstwem. Koncepcje, funkcje, przykłady*. Oficyna Wydawnicza Politechniki Wrocławskiej, Wrocław, pp. 43–44.

²¹ Ł. Sułkowski (2011). *Struktura teorii naukowej w zarządzaniu* [w:] W. Czakon (ed.), *Podstawy metodologii badań w naukach o zarządzaniu*. Oficyna Wolters Kluwer business, Warszawa, pp. 169–175.

²² J. Niemczyk (2011). *Metodologia nauk o zarządzaniu* [w:] W. Czakon (ed.), *Podstawy metodologii badań w naukach o zarządzaniu*. Oficyna Wolters Kluwer business, Warszawa, p. 24.

²³ B.R. Kuc. *Jak sformułować i rozwiązać problem badawczy?* <http://wydawnictwoptm.pl/content/8-artykuly-naukowe> (access: 7.01.2015).

²⁴ D. Silverman (2008). *Prowadzenie badań jakościowych*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa, pp. 171–175.

²⁵ W. Czakon (2011). *Zastosowanie studiów przypadków w badaniach nauk o zarządzaniu* [in:] W. Czakon (ed.), *Podstawy metodologii badań w naukach o zarządzaniu*. Oficyna Wolters Kluwer business, Warszawa, pp. 46–56.

²⁶ R.K. Yin (2003). *Case Study Research. Design and Methods*. Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks – London – New Delhi, pp. 21–27.

criteria: availability, possibility of adaptation to the Polish conditions, and diversity. The more detailed criteria included the following:

- it is possible to use a given experience in a public university (it can be adapted to the Polish conditions);
- an experience is related to a European University (it is related to the development of the *European Research Area* and the *European Higher Education Area*);
- an experience is related to a development strategy of a public university and employee development management;
- an experience can be generalised;
- an experience can be described (information is published and materials are available in English).

Nine European universities, fulfilling the aforementioned criteria, were selected for further analysis. All of them occupy high positions in various ranking lists and have well developed detailed human resource development strategies. This paper focuses on the presentation of one of these universities, i.e. Utrecht University. Utrecht University holds high positions in worldwide rankings of higher education institutions, e.g.:

- *The 2014 Academic Ranking of World Universities* conducted by Shanghai University ranks this university #13 in Europe and #57 in the world.
- *The National Taiwan University Ranking 2014* ranks it #34 in the world.
- *The World University Rankings 2014* conducted by the British magazine *Times Higher Education* ranks Utrecht University as #18 in Europe and #79 in the world.

Combining rich traditions, history, and values with the challenges of the 21st century and professionalism in management, it is one of the oldest and best research universities in Europe. The author has identified Utrecht University's specific strategy in the area of organisational development, which is connected with the school's general strategy. The case study has been conducted by way of analysing the content of relevant websites on the basis of the previously established research stages.

RESULT: Strategy of organisational development – a case study of Utrecht University

Founded in 1636, Utrecht University (<http://www.uu.nl/en>) skilfully combines its rich traditions, values, and modern management. This management is performed at the central level and at the level of the particular faculties. The highest governing body is the *Management Board* whose members are appointed by the *Supervisory Board*. The university consists of seven faculties which deal with teaching and research in the fields of the humanities, social sciences, law, economics, governance and organisation, geosciences, natural sciences, veterinary medicine and medicine as well as three so-called *Teaching institutes*. It is one of the largest research universities in Europe, with close to 30,000 students, 6000 employees, and an annual budget of 765 million euros (2014). Thanks to the efficient achievement of established objectives, the cultivation of traditions, and compliance with its principles and values, in 2014 the university was ranked number 47 in the Academic Ranking of World Universities.

The fundamental values determining the employees' and students' attitudes include the following: *inspiration, ambition, independence, and involvement*. Additionally, the university follows the regulations published in the document entitled *The Netherlands Code of Conduct for Academic Practice. Principles of Good Academic Teaching and Research*, which specifies the principles of academic conduct, including ethically responsible research. These principles comprise *honesty, scrupulousness, reliability, verifiability, impartiality, independence, and responsibility*. Utrecht University is also bound by two other documents focusing on ethical behaviour in the event of auxiliary activities (outside a contract with the university) as well as *The Code of Conduct on Inappropriate Behaviour*.

The objective of *The Strategic Plan of Utrecht University (2012-2016)* is to strengthen further the university's national and international position in the fields of education, research, and science. Utrecht University's vision presents it as an institution that is *curiosity-driven* and *relevant to society*, while according to its mission, it is a *large and multifaceted centre of knowledge offering education and research of international quality*. The university pursues also a social mission expressed as *Bright Minds, Better Future*. Clearly defined, Utrecht University's objectives include the following:

- to develop young people academically;
- to educate new generations of researchers;
- to educate academics who combine knowledge and professional skills;
- to conduct ground-breaking research;
- to contribute to solving issues in society.

The accomplishment of the established objectives and the maintenance of the leading position of one of Europe's best research universities is possible thanks to strong leadership which is cultivated and improved at each management level of the institution. The university's professional style of leadership is generally held in high regard because it strengthens its employees' trust and involvement, supports them in their professional development, and contributes to the building of a positive work atmosphere. Therefore, special attention is paid to ensuring that each manager is able to:

- develop a vision that others can adhere to;
- be open to feedback;
- offer confidence and scope for development;
- take decisions and make choices;
- discuss the professional skills and development, in conformity with the organisational objectives, of and with the members of staff;
- make optimum use of the qualities and talents of the staff members;
- provide support required for the staff members to achieve their goals.

The university emphasises the role of cooperation and knowledge sharing; hence an employee can receive support not only from her/his colleagues and direct superior, but also from the university's administration within the scope of the particular disciplines. Additionally, special motivational packages have been prepared for the employees.

In the achievement of its vision, mission, and objectives, the university relies on the motivated, involved, and professional employees responsible for their careers. They have the possibility of choosing from among the following development paths:

- specialisation; enhancing knowledge in a particular field;
- changing an academic discipline or field in connection with the broadening of horizons, e.g. undertaking new tasks, working temporarily in another place or within internal projects;
- changing the scope of duties, e.g. after reaching a new career level in connection with acquiring an academic degree, promotion, or transfer to another position.

The academics have the opportunity to participate in various development programmes leading to the acquisition of the *Basic Teaching Qualification* and subsequently the *Senior Teaching Qualification*. Each faculty has its own interpretation of the basic and required teaching qualifications. Subsequently, the academics can take advantage of the development programmes offered by the *Centre of Excellence in University Teaching*, e.g.: *Educational Leadership*, a *Master Class in University Teaching in English* or a *Master Class in Quality Assurance*. Academic managers, professors, and future leaders can also take part in the programme called *Leadership Academic*, while talented managers and employees have the additional opportunity to use individually tailored programmes aimed at developing leadership talents and skills necessary at various managerial and political positions (*talented management and support staff network-network OBP-talent*).

Utrecht University aims at attracting and maintaining talented researchers from both the Netherlands and abroad. It encourages them to continuous professional development by way of implementing an effective personnel policy confirmed by the European Commission. For the purposes of the *Human Resource Strategy for Researchers* (HRS4R) programme, the university has conducted an internal audit and launched an action plan included in its strategic documents. For the results of these activities, the university has been awarded the logo of *HR Excellence in Research*.

Utrecht University is an example of an organisation which, combining its traditions, history, and values, has successfully managed to respond to the challenges of the 21st century. Taking advantage of strategic management and professional leadership, it has based the process of achieving its objectives on development management, personnel improvement, and organisational development.

DISCUSSION

The SHRM concept was criticised mainly because the issue of organisational change was becoming the domain of a specialist, separate problem or an expensive and time consuming process. In this concept, an important role was played by communication processes constituting the foundations for intended changes. In such context, the execution of an organisation's development strategy was a process of continual transformation characterised by the alternate occurrence of moderate changes and revolutionary changes. In the English speaking countries, the organisational development

model was being developed for many years in response to the dynamic changes taking place in the business environment and society. Polish universities can learn from their Western European counterparts, taking into consideration both their good and bad experiences connected with the implementation of SHRM.

With respect to university management, there are some opinions that universities are frequently characterised by unclear and immeasurable objectives which are different at the level of particular organisational units (faculties) and whole universities. They frequently generate internal competition which prevents the achievement of strategic objectives, although they are important for universities' internal and external activities, in particular for the development of relationships with academic communities and other stakeholders. Furthermore, strategies tend to be very general documents including objectives and tasks which are difficult to achieve and incomprehensible for employees.

CONCLUSIONS

A clearly defined and consistently implemented SHRM strategy plays an important role in strengthening of a university's competitive advantage. This can be confirmed by the case of the organisational development strategy at Utrecht University, which effectively combines tradition and modernity in management. This case, however, is connected with the necessity to adopt a few guidelines which may appear difficult to follow in other conditions:

- managing a university consistently at the levels of the whole organisation, particular faculties, and other organisational units (without internal competition);
- managing a university on the basis of mutual relations and trust;
- treating employees as valuable assets, which results in benefits for an organisation (e.g. a higher position in world rankings) or for employees (e.g. deeper involvement);
- compliance with the adopted values, standards, and principles;
- open communication related also to the inclusion of employees in organisational problem solving processes and responsibility for decisions made;
- commissioning specialists to prepare a university's development strategies as well as specific strategies in the area of SHRM.

In the conditions of Polish universities, the practices described above can generate measurable results in human resource management, although they would require considerable modifications.

The presented research results do not exhaust the problem under analysis. Nevertheless, they constitute a good point of reference for the continuation of research in this area and a stimulus for a more dynamic discourse in a wider group of SHRM researchers.

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