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## **Personnel Departmental Power: Realities from the UK Higher Education Sector\*\***

The status of the Personnel function is subject to an ongoing debate in which attention has largely shifted from department to individual practitioner level. There remains, however, significant functional power in organisational structures, particularly in more institutionalised contexts. Aimed at the departmental level, the higher education state funding council for England (HEFCE) introduced an initiative to improve Personnel departments in Higher Education. However, survey evidence confirms the continuation of the low power position of the department. An exploration of the empirical data highlights why: the routine rigidity of power in organisational structures, the fragmentation of departmental power, and Personnel role ambiguity.

**Key words:** higher education, personnel department, power

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\*\* Article received: September 24, 2008

Revised version accepted after double blind review: August 21, 2009.

## 1. Introduction

The Personnel (or Human Resources – HR) occupation continues to be plagued by “*tensions between competing role demands, ever-increasing managerial expectations of performance and new challenges to professional expertise*” (Caldwell 2003: 983). It is constantly struggling to achieve status and legitimacy, yet is consistently identified as a weak occupational group with inherent role ambiguities (Guest/King 2004; Legge 1978). This debate surrounding Personnel department power was particularly lively in the 1980s when the industrial relations role of the department was in decline, and Human Resource Management (HRM) was in ascendancy. The department was seen as prepared to reinvent itself to exploit new potential sources of power (Legge 1995). The focus in the literature since has consequently shifted more towards the strategic involvement of the department (e.g. Budhwar 2000; Wright et al. 1998), and the added-value of HRM to firm performance (e.g. Paauwe 2004). However, studies by Caldwell (2003) and Guest and King (2004) of the changing and conflicting roles of Personnel have highlighted the reality that the power debate in both the literature and in practice particularly at this departmental level has not yet been resolved.

At the same time, there have also been shifts in focus in the organisational power literature. Debates which started from structuralist discussions have broadened to include more behavioural dimensions of power. In doing so, research has acknowledged that these are not divergent but complementary views (Cendon/Jarvenpaa 2001). Likewise, attention has shifted in general to more complex theories, for example from sovereign power to network power models (Munro 2000), but more specifically also from departmental power to individual power dynamics (Welbourne/Trevor 2000). However, there is a case to be made for continuance of the study of power at the departmental level (albeit taking a critical perspective on previous frameworks). Arguably, this latter perspective rediscovers and reminds us of the more embedded, structural sources of power inherent within organisations, whilst individual level power studies focus more on behavioural dynamics. The study presented here looks primarily to structuralist theories of departmental power, and a critique hereof, and specifically considers Personnel department strategies for gaining power, particularly through increased strategic input and income generation.

The chosen context for the study is that of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the UK. Against the backdrop of the idealised role of ‘strategic partnership’ prescribed by Ulrich (1997), and as a result of enquiries into HRM practices across the HE sector, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) provided significant additional funding to Personnel departments in HEIs to encourage them to become more strategically focused: the *Rewarding and Developing Staff* (RDS) initiative. There is now increased awareness of the department’s activities, but whether this strategic focus has actually led to an improvement in the credibility and power of Personnel in the sector is explored further here. Specifically, the HEI context presents an interesting example of a long-established, institutionalised organisational environment in the public sector, dominated by professional knowledge workers (Guest/Clinton 2007).

We start here with an exploration of the concept of departmental power and the impact of organisational context to explore further these interrelations. The specific power structures of the HEI context and the Personnel department are then described. Finally, conclusions are drawn regarding the impact of the funding initiative to encourage a more strategic role on Personnel department power. This review culminates in propositions which are then explored empirically in UK HEIs.

## Department power

The power structure of an organisation is a result of multiple contextual factors in addition to choices being made amongst available contingencies (Lawrence/Lorsch 1967). Within these structures, there emerges a functional division of labour, each subunit with its own agenda and hierarchy, with interdependencies and power relationships established within and between subunits (Welbourne/Trevor 2000). The strategic contingencies theory (Hickson et al. 1971) is a unique model in the power literature in that it focuses precisely on the intra-organisational departmental level of power. As such it addresses a shortcoming of much of the power literature, namely a lack of focus on the impact of organisational level systems and structures (Fincham 1992).

Strategic contingencies theory (SCT) is a modernist theory taking a structural perspective at the interdepartmental level of analysis. It shows how resources are used to exercise power through creating interdependencies. Debates on power had started to move away from this perspective into discussions particularly at the behavioural level. However, Swan and Scarbrough (2005) emphasize the difference between these dimensions. The dynamic behavioural dimension focuses on the role of political factors and power in action. Here the importance of Hardy's (1996) 'power of meaning' is particularly relevant: the creation of shared meanings through interpretations of actions, creating perceived legitimate relative power. The structural dimension of power is however more akin to Hardy's (1996) power of resources: the creation of interdependencies whereby one unit has power over another. Structural sources of power can thus be seen in terms of resources, connectedness in the workflow of others and hierarchical position (Cendon/Jarvenpaa 2001). Over time these structural sources become relatively stable as they are "*repeated patterns of response involving interdependent activities that become reinforced through structural embeddedness and repeated use*" (Gilbert 2005: 742); otherwise referred to as 'routine rigidity'.

There is a clear divide in the literature to date between studies taking either an individual behavioural or structural perspective. However, the literature is now emphasizing that power is multi-dimensional, and that these perspectives are actually complementary rather than alternative (Cendon/Jarvenpaa 2001). Structural power focuses on sources of power which may or may not be put into action. Behavioural power is about the actual actions of individuals, including their use of language and interpretation of meaning and symbols.

## Measuring structural power

SCT proposes that intra-organisational subunit power is based on a department's ability to control strategic contingencies for other dependent subunits, largely achieved

through functional expertise (Hickson et al. 1971). The theory states that power can be explored both in terms of its determinants and its resultant levels, and explores the relationship between these two concepts. There are three determinants of power: the degree to which a subunit *cope with uncertainty* for other subunits; the extent to which a subunit's coping activities are *non-substitutable*; and the pervasiveness and immediacy with which the activities of a subunit are linked with those of other subunits (a subunit's *centrality*) (Hickson et al. 1971).

The empirical application of SCT is however not straightforward. There have been multiple previous applications, some arguing for modifications to the theory (see, for example: Cohen/Lachman 1988; Crawford/Rice 1997; Saunders 1990). This current study largely adopts the original definitions of the theory's determinants, amending slightly that of the centrality variable in line with arguments presented by Saunders (1990): rather than centrality being the degree to which a unit's activities are linked to the workflow of other units as in a manufacturing setting (Hinings et al. 1974), centrality is defined here as the extent to which each subunit's activities are perceived to be closely related to the mission of the organisation.

### *Critique of SCT*

Despite the discussion presented here, there are some shortcomings to taking a purely structural perspective. Organizations are open systems faced with uncertainty which they need to control in order to survive (Hickson et al. 1971). In this context, SCT describes power as being explained by "*variables that are elements of each subunit's task, its functioning, and its links with the activities of other subunits*" (ibid.: 217), referring to the power *possessed* by subunits through their ability to control uncertainty to the benefit of the organization. Despite describing this as being about links and relations, the definition used is in fact referring to structural rather than relational power (Clegg et al. 2006: 124f.).

The SCT definition of power focuses on the *possession* of power, and does not acknowledge that power is something which is *played out* in specific relations and is inseparable from its effects (Munro 2000). Lukes' (1974) dimensions of power help explain this: a one-dimensional (1-D) study of power (like SCT) is about observable behaviour in which it can be seen who prevails in decision-making where there is conflict; two-dimensional (2-D) power is more anti-behavioural and examines not only overt decision-making but also non-decision-making – the use of power to control the decision-making agenda; three-dimensional (3-D) power goes beyond these two ways of examining observable conflict to explore latent conflict, incorporating both the conscious and unconscious exercise of power. Clegg (1989) attacks the underlying positivist epistemology of the original SCT, suggesting that its 1-D approach does not reveal the issues either covert or latent in the organisational environment, that is, how the current power structure came about.

Similarly, Edwards (2006) distinguishes between 'power to' and 'power over'. The latter sees power as a form of domination of one actor/group over another (cf. Lukes 1974). For example, trade unions recognised for collective bargaining have the power over employers to demand mandated negotiations take place. However, 'power to' sees power as a means to achieve a specific end. Using the trade union example again,

although it may have the power over the employer to demand negotiations, it may not have the power to achieve finally the deal it was hoping for. ‘Power over’ is being gained by structural sources, in this example the collective bargaining infrastructure, whilst ‘power to’ is more akin to individual influencing (behavioural) sources of power.

Clegg and Dunkerley (1980) describe SCT as depoliticising power as a concept, making the assumption of a power struggle, and taking for granted the organisation’s formal structure. There is no consideration of the prevailing rules of the game that may be leading to the current power structure within which the power being observed by the SCT model is being exercised; the context created by Cyert and March’s (1963) dominant coalition has not been considered. In research terms, it is the difference between cataloguing power bases (as in SCT) and concentrating on the exercise of power. The SCT notion of power also does not acknowledge the hierarchical qualities of power and assumes that subunits are unitary and cohesive (Clegg et al. 2006: 125). In reality, within an organizational subunit there is a hierarchy in place, and within this hierarchy there may be dissent and/or the desire to pursue different, potentially conflicting, goals.

This said, we argue here that there is still merit in taking a structural perspective due to its ability to uncover embedded sources of power in organizations, but finding ways to avoid these shortcomings is both critical and possible, as we discuss below. A structural perspective is beneficial also due to a certain level of pragmatism. For instance, uncovering embedded sources of power means there may be the choice and the opportunity for change at the level of institutional investment. In light of the HEFCE funding initiative, an exploration of structural power may help us understand the results being observed.

## Organisational context

One of the dangers of adopting purely a SCT perspective is that this dismisses much of the organisational context which is crucial to understanding power systems (Crozier 1973). This context is a result of a complex interplay between historical and existing conditions and the ability of units or individuals to control these conditions (Brass/Burkhardt 1993). This creates a duality of structure and agency which means that “*social structures are both constituted by human agency, and yet, at the same time, are the very medium of this constitution*” (Giddens 1976: 121).

Salancik and Pfeffer (1977) describe an alternative more contextually sensitive version of SCT, acknowledging that power structures and relationships can change in response to environmental demands. At the same time, powerful subunits attempt to prevent such change from happening as organisations contain dominant coalitions that are consistently perceived to be more powerful than other groups (Cyert/March 1963; Fincham 1992; Gordon 1980).

Structural power gives access to critical resources and decision-making. Subunits are allocated resources resulting from inter-unit comparison based on rhetorical criteria which form the ‘rules of the game’ to create consistency within the organisational setting (Sillince 2005). Resource allocation is thus an issue of power balance in social exchange relationships (Mannix/Neale 1993). This power balance goes beyond the

structural framework, and is better observed through the network of relations in which imbalance gives rise to competition. As a result, certain subunits become perceived as being more powerful than others.

The combination of the dominant coalition and the processes of decision-making and resource allocation create relational power above and beyond that afforded by the organization structure. Perceived relational power, the power seen to exist in relations, is thus a separate concept to that of structural power and to that of individual power (Wolfe/McGinn 2005). When resource allocation is based on the way things have always been done, power differences remain stable (Provan 1989). The HE context as described below displays some interesting examples of how these 'rules of the game' become established and are perpetuated.

With this in mind, Gilbert (2005) identifies the concept of 'routine rigidity', emphasizing that organizational processes create self-reinforcing inertia which makes these processes difficult to change, establishing the 'rules of the game' and becoming more rigid in times of great uncertainty. In other words, by acting together, people create structures and routines which over time start to govern their actions.

### **Higher education institutions**

Situated within the public sector, there are three forms of HEI: 'old' pre-1992 universities, established by Royal Charter or statute; 'new' post-92 universities, formerly polytechnics given the status of universities under the Higher Education Act 1992; and specialist self-governing Higher Education colleges. Prior to 1992, there were clear differences in HRM practices, particularly bargaining arrangements and in funding and control mechanisms between the different types of institution. For example, there were different trade unions to represent workers in the different institutions, as well as different forms of governance and separate bodies for the allocation of government funding. However, the impact of these differences on the role of the Personnel department and the governance structures of institutions has all but been ignored in empirical studies, yet may be of crucial importance in understanding an institution's heritage (Eisenhardt 1988).

The power focus across the HE context is predominantly internal due to wide-ranging strategic discretion and considerable jostling for power through competing claims for scarce resources (Butler et al. 1977). HE institutions are primarily funded by national government-sponsored funding councils in a highly competitive arena. Funding is then dispersed to departments through internal decision-making processes. Departments that are able to acquire additional external funding resources can enhance their importance to the organisation (Jarzabkowski/Wilson 2002; Salancik/Pfeffer 1974).

Most previous studies of HEIs have focused on the effect of power on the allocation of these scarce financial resources between academic departments, which are decentralised, political structures (Hackman 1985; Pfeffer/Salancik 1974) forming a loosely-coupled system (Greenwood/Hinings 1988; Weick 1976). This system consists of coalitions carrying out independent tasks with localised objectives and pooled interdependence (Thompson 1967) rather than departments reliant on each other through rational operational needs (Astley/Zajac 1991). Within this context, there is a



predominance of professional knowledge workers and considerable demand for self-determination by actors (Hope-Hailey et al. 1997).

The administrative departments on the other hand follow a model more akin to academic bureaucracies in centralised institutions (Hackman 1985). They focus largely on the rational, functional structure of authority regulated by formal rules. These administrative departments are tightly-coupled, carrying out complementary activities with collective objectives for the survival of the organisation (Astley/Zajac 1991; Weick 1976).

Academic department power is based on achieving excellence in research, income generation, teaching and strong leadership (Jarzabkowski/Wilson 2002). This leads to a central position within resource allocation structures. Thus power lies with the departments with the highest grants or sources of outside income generation (Jarzabkowski/Wilson 2002; Salancik/Pfeffer 1974). This departmental power in turn predicts resource allocation (Welbourne/Trevor 2000), reinforcing existing power structures. Less powerful departments, such as support units, are subject to more implicit and explicit control (Cendon/Jarvenpaa 2001).

This duality of university environments, with both political and bureaucratic models of organisation (Walsh et al. 1981), is often overlooked, yet is fundamental to understanding how power dynamics within institutions differ between department types. In general, few studies make this distinction between core and support units within organisations when considering structural power (Cendon/Jarvenpaa 2001). Indeed, even less attention is paid to the differences between the different support units themselves; a gap to which this study aims to contribute.

### *The Personnel function*

As an example of an administrative department, Personnel (also referred to as Human Resources or HR) is most often a centralised function with a hierarchical structure. Traditionally, it has responsibilities for Human Resource Management (HRM) activities such as the administration of recruitment and selection, pay (which was negotiated at national level), training, and promotion procedures. With regard to academic staff, its role has largely been that of administrative oversight, rather than the perhaps more active role it plays in HRM activities for non-academic staff. The RDS initiative was designed to address some of these issues and make the department's contribution more strategic. There is also a tradition of conflict between academic staff and the Personnel function: *"among many academics, individuality idiosyncrasy, innovation and on occasion risk-taking is highly valued, whereas administrative functions such as human resources share a common concern for consistency, order and systems of regulation and control that emphasise risk avoidance"* (Guest/Clinton 2007: 6).

Hence, Personnel is a support function within a knowledge-intensive industry which places great value on its human resources, however, the extent to which Personnel can play a controlling role is paradoxically limited by the discretion required by these same knowledge workers (Hope-Hailey et al. 1997). This controlling role is further diluted considering that the Personnel function usually reports through a senior academic (e.g. Pro-Vice Chancellor, Vice-Rector) to the Vice Chancellor, and is closely involved with other academics in, for example, joint negotiating committees. Ulti-

mately, this may transfer some of the power from the professional Personnel function to the academic community. This is in addition to the close linkage between the function and line management who has to implement many of the HRM practices.

In general, across many different sectors, the Personnel department is repeatedly seen as having low power and influence (Guest/King 2004). It is haunted by the negative image of its past performance (Caldwell 2003; Hope-Hailey et al. 1997). A number of studies have explored what Gowler and Legge (1986: 225) call “*the gap between its theoretical centrality and frequently experienced marginality*”. An underlying problem is that the department does not have a natural monopoly over people management (Armstrong 1995), as evidenced above in the HE sector. The reputation of the function may also impact on its power status: as Personnel departments are key to releasing the value of an organisation’s human resources, some increases in power have been noted (Ferris et al. 2007). However, the institutionalisation of power structures may also explain a lack of power due to years of marginalisation (Gilbert 2005; Legge 1978): persisting structures inhibit future access to power. Relating this to the broader power literature, this might be seen as an example of a (3-D) latent form of power suppression (Lukes 1974).

Specific to the public sector, sources of power are being eroded by cost-cutting exercises, the declining influence of trade unions and the increasing influence of line management in HRM (Oswick/Grant 1996). This is augmenting the ambiguity and conflict within the Personnel department role (Caldwell 2003). Personnel is thus summed up as having one of the lowest levels of power within an organisation (Kelly/Gennard 2001). Specific to the university context, it is described as being a highly centralised administrative bureaucracy, with tension between professional autonomy and “*creeping managerialism*” (Guest/Clinton 2007: 6), the latter particularly in the post-1992 university sector as it moves towards an increasingly business-like governance structure (Newman 2009).

One approach to exploring Personnel department power taken in the literature is to consider organisational role. There are multiple prescriptive typologies, perhaps the most widely cited being that devised by Ulrich (1997 – cited over 150 times in academic articles and much more widely in practitioner publications), which divides out people and process as well as operational and strategic dimensions. The largest part of the centralised, bureaucratic Personnel department role, according to Ulrich (1997), is the *Administrative Expert*: a process-orientated role with a day-to-day, operational focus, based on the management of the firm infrastructure. In contrast, the other process-orientated role, *Strategic Partner*, is future-focused, based on the strategic management of people and aligning HR and business strategy. This *Strategic Partner* role is advocated as the role which can show the most added-value in the HRM and performance debate.

Traditionally in HEIs, there has been a reliance on an operational focus as an *Administrative Expert*, rather than being a *Strategic Partner*. The HEFCE initiative, designed to address this at departmental level, was launched in 2000 largely as a result of government reviews in 1997 and 1999 (IRS 716 2000), which identified shortcomings in HRM practices across the sector. The evaluation of the initiative has highlighted that the visibility of Personnel and its perceived importance are improving as it has



become central to the acquisition of significant funds (HEFCE 02/17/02/18 2002). According to these evaluations, many Personnel departments are now reporting playing a more central role in the strategic planning process. However, the actual impact of the initiative on the power of the department is not clear.

Various measures can be applied to observe the level of power of Personnel. As role typologies have shown, one measure is strategic involvement. Personnel's presence on an organisation's board of directors can make a substantial difference to the department's involvement in top-level decision-making (Farndale 2005). It ensures department members are privy to strategy development at an early stage. However, firstly, within the HEI sector a relatively low proportion of Personnel Heads belong to the top management team (56%: Guest/Clinton (2007)), and secondly, formal board membership alone is not synonymous with achieving strategic influence; other informal links with top management may be equally rewarding (Budhwar 2000). Formal reporting relationships are also influential in power structures, with more critical functions having a direct reporting relationship with top management (Fincham 1992). The existence of a Personnel Director is, however, a matter of choice for an organisation, rather than a function of its size, structure or strategy (Purcell 1995). This decision is likely to be based on the past performance of the department and on the head of the organisation's orientation towards people management issues (Wright et al. 1998). Size, in terms of both budget and staffing, can also serve as a measure of the degree of power a department has over scarce resources (Timperely/Osbaldeston 1975).

Given the HEI context, a number of features related to strategic positioning might suggest that the Personnel department may be increasing its structural power. Firstly, there is a significant amount of attention currently being paid to the development of the department's strategic contribution. And secondly, the HEFCE initiative is increasing the critical position of the department by making it a crucial source of additional funding. However, looking at the broader picture of the Personnel function in organisations (cf. Guest/King 2004), there is as yet no evidence to suggest that Personnel has actually gained from these potential sources of power. In comparison with other administrative support departments, such as Finance which is acknowledged as being in a powerful position (Armstrong 1995), Registry which has control of student affairs and the Estates department responsible for the buildings and facilities (for both of which there is a lack of empirical research in this field), it might therefore be expected that the Personnel department's power remains low. Given this, the first proposition for this study is:

P1: the Personnel department will be perceived as having lower levels of power, and be rated lower on the determinants of power, compared to other HEI administrative departments.

In the earlier description of the HE sector it was explained that there are three types of institution in terms of their historical background: pre-1992 universities, post-1992 universities and HE colleges. These labels represent the heritage of an HEI in institutionalised terms. They give an indication of an institution's traditional focus, be it purely academic or more vocational as was the previous perceived split between pre- and post-1992 universities. Likewise, these institutions were used to dealing with dif-

ferent trade unions and having different funding structures and regulatory bodies. These conditions are expected to affect the role and perception of the Personnel department in these different types of HEI due to the differing organisational heritage.

Specifically, in the post-1992 universities, we expect to observe higher levels of Personnel department power as these institutions generally have a shorter organisational history, and are more likely to have a business-like structure with a place for Personnel on the Executive Committee (Guest/Clinton 2007). In contrast, pre-1992 universities are more likely to have a long-established structure and way of operating, and a stronger research focus (ibid: 31) resulting in more autonomy being demanded by academic departments. The HE College group is likely to be least cohesive due to the wide range of type and size of institutions included, and is therefore not included in this part of the study. This leads to the second proposition:

P2: the Personnel department will be perceived to have the highest levels of power, and be rated highest on the determinants of power, in post-1992 universities compared to pre-1992 universities.

## Methodology

In order to explore the study's propositions, a questionnaire survey supplemented by interviews was carried out among HEIs in the UK in 2002/3. This point in time was two years after the initial launch of the *Rewarding and Developing Staff* initiative, but before the second phase (which focussed particularly on job evaluation and was launched later in 2003). The population for the study was the 180 HEIs in the UK. Postal questionnaires were sent to the heads of Personnel in all institutions, then to the heads of Estates, Finance and Registry departments in institutions which had responded. A total of 144 responses were received from 73 institutions (41% response rate). This included 73 responses from Personnel departments (one per institution), and from these 73 institutions, 30 responses from Estates, 20 from Finance, and 21 from Registry departments. The study's sample represents 44% of pre-1992 universities, 48% of post-1992 universities, and 28% of HE colleges (HEC). The Chi-square goodness-of-fit test was found to be statistically insignificant at  $\alpha = .05$  ( $p = .203$ :  $\chi^2 = 3.190$  with 2df), indicating the sample is highly representative of the HEI population as a whole. (Representation is lower amongst the HEC population as many institutions do not have a Personnel department due to their small size.)

The questionnaire was designed to collect primarily perceptual data. It included questions based on SCT to measure both determinants and consequences of power, rather than an assessment of power itself (cf. Welbourne/Trevor 2000). Table 1 summarizes the means, standard deviations and zero-order correlations of the variables.

Following the initial analysis of the data, 17 semi-structured interviews were carried out in respondent institutions. In order to balance the opinions of the heads of departments already surveyed, interviews were held with members of the senior management team who were outside of the departments surveyed but with knowledge of the work carried out by them. A semi-structured approach was adopted to ensure the data gathered could be used both to compare between institutions and to relate the findings to the existing quantitative data.

**Table 1: Summary statistics and correlation coefficients for the personnel department**

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 Resource proportion	0.01	0.00							
2 Position in hierarchy	0.37	0.49	.20						
3 Involvement	20.04	12.63	.05	.09					
4 Influence	3.51	0.88	.14	.35	.46				
5 Ability to cope	10.12	4.69	.03	-.07	-.05	.12			
6 Centrality	4.25	0.88	.10	.19	.24	.44	.04		
7 Non-substitutability	3.04	0.93	.03	-.02	.14	.09	-.03	-.06	
8 Type of institution	0.83	0.83	.57	.05	-.04	.10	-.04	-.17	.05

n = 73  
Correlations > 0.23 are significant at p<0.05  
Correlations > 0.34 are significant at p<0.01

In selecting the sample, it was essential to work with institutions that had already been involved in the questionnaire to ensure the relevance of the data. Based on random selection from the questionnaire respondents, nine pre-1992 universities were contacted from which eight interviews were arranged, eight were post-1992 universities from which five interviews were arranged, and seven were HE colleges from which four interviews were arranged. The interviews explored: how the interviewee thought the Personnel department was perceived within their institution and why; the impact of the HEFCE initiative; the Personnel department’s position in the institute’s decision-making structure; and general points about the organisation or HE context which the interviewee thought pertinent to the position of the Personnel department.

**Table 2: Primary coding variables for interview transcripts**

CODE STRUCTURE	VARIABLE	DESCRIPTION
<i>Determinants of power</i>	Non-substitutability	The extent to which a department is not easily replaceable
	Centrality	The extent to which a department contributes to the organisation through carrying out its role
	Coping with uncertainty	The extent to which a department solves problems and provides information to other departments
<i>Levels of power</i>	Influence	The overall perceived level of influence of a department
	Involvement	Participation in corporate strategic decision-making
	Individual power	Power through personal influence and credibility
	Relational power	The power that exists in relations between actors
<i>Context</i>	Status	Type of HEI
	Size	Size of HEI
	Funding	Financial dependence on the State
	Professionalism	Personnel department professionalism
	Trade Unions	The significance of trade union activity
	Outsourcing	The extent of outsourcing of Personnel activities
	Decentralisation	The extent of decentralisation of the department
	Devolution	The extent of devolution of personnel management to line managers
	HEFCE	HEFCE funding initiative

Once the interviews had been transcribed, each transcript was coded independently by the authors based on the variables in Table 2. Following the coding, the ideas and quotations for each variable were assembled to identify patterns and themes in the data. Specific evidence was then sought to confirm or disconfirm findings from the questionnaire analysis. In addition, the data were explored to identify issues beyond structural power to uncover some of the relationships between the power of individuals, relations and structures.

## Findings

The research was designed to address two fundamental issues regarding Personnel department power in HEIs: the current perceptions of Personnel department power given the additional funding being provided and the increased *Strategic Partner* role; and variation between historical types of institution regarding patterns of Personnel department power.

Firstly, the relationship between the determinant and level of power variables in the HEI context was tested. Canonical correlation analysis for the four types of administrative department was selected due to the desired exploration of the relationship between multiple variables on both sides of the equation, i.e. multiple determinant and level of power variables. Two significant variates were found ( $p = .000$  and  $p = .002$ ). The results of the analysis for the first canonical variate with 39.4% variance overlap are displayed in Table III. The results clearly show that as the determinants of power decrease, so do the levels of power, giving support to SCT in this HEI context.

**Table 3: Canonical correlation results for determinants of power and level of power variables for administrative departments in HEIs**

Canonical variate for independent variables (determinants of power):			Canonical variate for dependent variables (levels of power):		
Variable	Canonical loading	Standardised canonical coefficient	Variable	Canonical loading	Standardised canonical coefficient
CENTRALITY			INFLUENCE		
Estates	-.132	.352	Estates	-.364	-.184
Finance	-.181	.088	Finance	-.157	.180
Personnel	-.623	-.757	Personnel	-.720	-.610
Registry	-.548	-.243	Registry	-.765	-.719
COPING			INVOLVEMENT		
Estates	-.262	-.207	All departments	-.112	.240
Finance	-.042	.146			
Personnel	-.272	-.028			
Registry	-.466	-.277			
NON-SUBSTITUTABILITY					
Estates	.055	.047			
Finance	-.178	-.242			
Personnel	-.082	.280			
Registry	-.573	-.437			
Proportion of variance	.122		Proportion of variance	.254	
Redundancy	.048		Redundancy	.100	
Squared canonical correlation		.394			
Wilks Lambda		.257 ( $p = .000$ )			

$n = 98$  (Note: the remaining 46 cases could not be included in the analysis due to some missing data items.)

Looking closer at the univariate relationships specific to the Personnel department, positive significant bivariate correlations ( $\alpha = .05$ ) are noted between the department’s centrality and both its involvement in decision-making ( $p = .037$ ) and its overall perceived level of influence ( $p = .000$ ), and between its ability to cope with uncertainty and overall influence ( $p = .008$ ). This again gives support to the application of the SCT model for Personnel departments in HEIs.

The first proposition for this study explores the levels of power of the Personnel department relative to other HEI administrative departments. Looking first at the extent of involvement in decision-making for each department, the mean scores for each key issue displayed in Table 4 were observed. The results show that Personnel departments have the most influence over staff and strategic planning issues, as we might expect, but that their influence over other key decisions in the organisation is limited. Further analysis of the data shows that this involvement often only includes the provision of information. The mean total involvement score at the base of Table IV indicates that the Personnel department has the lowest overall level of involvement in corporate decision-making across the full range of key issues. This provides support for the study’s first proposition that Personnel will have low power in the HE context.

**Table 4: Mean scores of stages of department involvement in corporate decision-making on nine key issues**

	<b>Estates (n=30)</b>	<b>Finance (n=20)</b>	<b>Personnel (n=73)</b>	<b>Registry (n=21)</b>
Budget setting	4.0	7.1	2.6	3.2
Strategic planning	5.0	4.6	4.6	3.8
Quality assurance	1.1	0.4	1.3	4.4
New degrees	0.5	1.1	0.5	3.4
Student recruitment	1.1	1.3	0.6	5.4
Pricing	0.7	5.0	0.8	1.3
Purchasing	4.2	5.4	1.9	1.3
Staff planning	2.3	3.5	5.0	2.4
Computer systems	1.7	3.8	2.8	5.8
<b>Total</b>				
Mean	20.6	31.9	20.0	31.0
Standard Deviation	15.6	15.6	12.6	21.3

Note: INVOLVEMENT values are the sum of scores for all applicable stages in the decision making process in which the department is involved (the maximum score being 10).

Secondly, in a separate question about the perceived level of overall influence of a department, the mean results show that all departments agree that Finance is the most influential, although opinions vary between departments regarding the position of the others. If a department’s opinion of itself is removed (which is mostly higher than the opinion that others have of it (Fried 1989)), overall Registry is considered the second most influential, then Personnel and finally Estates (see Table 5).

Taking each of the determinants of power in turn, Table V shows that after again removing a department's opinion of itself, the Personnel department is rated lowest on its ability to cope with uncertainty and its centrality, and second lowest behind the Estates department on its non-substitutability. This again largely supports the study's first proposition.

**Table 5: Mean ratings on indicators of power for administrative departments (with opinion of own department removed)**

	Estates	Finance	Personnel	Registry
Overall influence	2.9	4.3	3.0	3.3
Ability to cope with uncertainty	6.4	7.7	6.2	7.2
Centrality	3.7	4.1	3.5	4.0
Non-substitutability	2.4	3.1	2.7	3.4

n = 144

The second proposition for this study explores Personnel department power in different types of HEI. The historical type is defined as whether the institution is a pre-1992 or post-1992 university as detailed above. Two additional indicators of the level of power of the Personnel department are also included: the resource proportion of Personnel staff to total employee headcount, and its hierarchy position (whether there is a direct reporting line between the head of the Personnel department and the head of the institution).

Comparing the two institution types on the level of power variables (see Table 6), the Personnel resource proportion is highest in post-1992 universities, and involvement in decision-making is highest in pre-1992 universities. Hierarchy and overall influence are equal in both types of institution. The only variable found to differ significantly between the two types of institution is the Personnel resource proportion ( $p = .002$ ). This provides only partial support for the second proposition.

**Table 6: Comparative statistics of power level variables for Personnel departments in two types of institution**

	Pre-1992 (n=65)		Post-1992 (n=44)		Equality of Means	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	F	p
Resource proportion <sup>a</sup>	.009	.003	.013	.004	10.286	<b>.002</b>
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	$\chi^2$	p
Involvement	27	19	23	14	0.380	.537
Ability to cope	8.46	4.38	7.98	4.41	0.228	.633
	Median		Median		$\chi^2$	p
Hierarchy <sup>b</sup>	0		0		0.001	.972
Overall influence	3		3		2.230	.135
Centrality	4		4		0.230	.632
Non-substitutability	3		2		8.327	<b>.004</b>

p:  $\alpha = .05$ , significant statistics are highlighted in bold.

<sup>a</sup> This represents the proportion of members of the Personnel department to total employees in an institution.

<sup>b</sup> A score of 0 indicates an indirect reporting relationship between the head of the Personnel department and the head of the institution.



Looking at the determinant of power variables (see Table VI), the results of the Kruskal-Wallis tests show very little variation in the ability to cope and centrality variables between the two types of institution. Non-substitutability however shows a significant difference between institution type ( $p = .004$ ), being lowest in post-1992 universities. Together these findings only provide weak if not contradictory support for the second proposition. The implications of these findings for both extant theory and practice are discussed in the following section, but first an overview of the qualitative data is presented.

### *Interview findings*

The interviews attempted to uncover some of the reasoning behind the survey results primarily in terms of structural power, but also to understand some of the related issues of individual and relational power.

Firstly, a common finding was that Finance has an institutionalised strong role: *"Finance yields the power and has a historical power base"* (Assistant Principal). The story for Personnel according to one Pro Vice Chancellor is somewhat different: *"if all it does, or all it's seen to be doing publicly is just signing forms and arranging interviews, then it won't be held in high esteem."* Role ambiguity has significant influence on how it is perceived across the sector: *"there's less clarity of view of what Personnel is for [...] whereas with the more functional departments, Registry and Finance, it is a lot clearer to people what it is they do"* (Vice Principal); *"there is a confusion of roles that comes partly through Personnel themselves and partly through a lack of transparency of the role of line management"* (Vice Principal).

The competitive division between loosely-coupled academic and tightly-coupled administrative departments within institutions was also frequently mentioned by interviewees. The bureaucratic requirements of Personnel administration were described by one College Secretary as: *"a deprivation of resources from direct education or provision of research."* Role clarity remains an issue: *"it's easier for individuals to question the worth or value of something that doesn't have a tangible outcome"* (Head of Organisational Development).

A constant theme throughout the interviews was the resourcing of the department itself: an inability to pay adequately to recruit the person needed as well as being overstretched in terms of demands made and resources available: *"they [academics] want it all and they want it now and yet the institution simply doesn't spend that kind of money on its support structures"* (College Secretary). There is also evidence of suppression of power in some institutions: *"throughout the whole academic board and its decision-making processes the Registrar is there. The Personnel Manager isn't. [...] In most of the decision-making processes which the academics see, the Personnel Manager is never involved"* (Vice Principal).

One Assistant Principal in an HE college highlighted how differing institutional contexts affect the role of the department: *"the amount of trade union influence, which here is negligible, inevitably has led to an immaturity in development within the Personnel function. In the past, Personnel would have had to have developed to deal with that threat."* The individuals forming the department are also of fundamental importance according to one Pro Vice Chancellor: *"Personnel departments stand or fall on the reputation/credibility of their senior staff."* Another Vice Principal supported this view: *"Personnel very much takes the lead the head gives it."* The importance of informal links with senior management is also evident in

this context: “*Personnel can create a more powerful position if they’ve got the ear of the Vice Chancellor and senior staff*” (Pro Vice Chancellor).

Overall, departments are reporting themselves as perceiving their importance and visibility as improving as a direct result of the HEFCE funding initiative: “*The HEFCE initiative has probably had a positive effect on how Personnel departments are perceived generally actually, not just here, because it’s given them a higher profile and because of the magnitude of the funds*” (Pro Vice Chancellor); “*now it’s got a sum of money attached to it, suddenly everybody’s interested*” (Personnel Director).

## Discussion

The HE context is a combination of political academic structures and bureaucratic administrative departments (Hackman 1985; Weick 1976) in highly institutionalised environments with strong departmental identities. Between these subunits, interdependencies and hence power relationships have been constructed (Hickson et al. 1971). The combination of both loosely and tightly-coupled departments can result in different strategies for gaining and maintaining power within individual institutions, as well as variation between institutions. The SCT (Hickson et al. 1971) provides a starting-point for exploring this structural power. In addition, however, it is also important to consider institutionalised elements of power (Salancik/Pfeffer 1977), as well as other contextual dimensions of power relating to relations and individuals (Clegg et al. 2006).

The questionnaire data gives an insight into current perceptions of power of the department in the context of the significant increases in funding available through the HEFCE initiative. Despite the increased strategic role and the additional financial resources, the Personnel department is shown to have minimal involvement in strategic decision-making beyond the issues of staff planning, supporting previous findings (Budhwar 2000). The influence of the Finance department is seen as dominant within institutions (Armstrong 1995) with Personnel taking third place. These positions of low power within institutions are supported by the low ratings of the department on its ability to cope with uncertainty and centrality to achieving the institution’s mission, akin to the issues of role ambiguity and role conflict highlighted by Caldwell (2003), although the department is rated marginally higher regarding its non-substitutability.

The interview data illuminate these findings further. In particular, there is evidence of a lack of credibility for future action due to Personnel’s perceived marginal role (e.g. “*signing forms and arranging interviews*”), resulting in a latent low power situation (Clegg/Dunkerley 1980). It might be argued that Personnel should be able to gain power from its position of professional expertise, although this powerbase can diminish through routinisation of HRM activities (Hickson et al. 1971). However, routinisation may also be a mechanism for building credibility which facilitates taking on future powerful roles, as the subunit is seen in a positive light when operating successfully. This counteracts the substitutability argument: the more a subunit can successfully routinise its activities to the benefit of the organization, the more it may be able to take on more strategic activities to the greater good of the organization.

There is also evidence of the erosion of the power base and suppression of power in some institutions through under-funding and the visibility of the Personnel representatives. The reality that Personnel departments lack power means they are not represented on decision-making bodies, undermining their ability to become part of those bodies and processes in the future (Clegg/Dunkerley 1980). This is evidence beyond a structural perspective that power is also based on relations. In particular, it highlights one of the control variables of the SCT model: organizational distance (Hickson et al. 1971: 223). This distance is the tightness of personal links between members of the Personnel department and the key decision-makers in the organization. It contributes to the notion of tradition and 'the rules of the game' (Gilbert 2005).

Ultimately a history of under-funding has assisted in marginalising the department. A low regard by those who control the governance structure has also resulted in a general lack of involvement in strategic decision-making (Wright, et al. 1998). Its ability to become more involved in the future in positions of power is thus constrained. As the Personnel function often has to influence without authority, power and influence is often focused on non-structural sources such as through networks and individuals (Ferris, et al. 2007).

Looking further at the second proposition, the questionnaire data is also used to analyse the difference in power of the department between types of institution, based on their conditions of founding (cf. Eisenhardt 1988). The results of the comparative analyses are somewhat fragmented in that they do not show any single type of institution to have significantly higher ratings on all the indicators of power measured. For example, although Personnel departments in pre-1992 universities have the lowest levels of resourcing, their involvement in strategic decision-making is highest; and post-1992 universities have the highest access to resources, but are considered the most substitutable.

Further evidence of this fragmented nature of Personnel department power was uncovered during the interviews. A number of interviewees talked of how the Personnel department had operated in the past, combined with the personal credibility of the Head of the department, and the effect these are having on current levels of power: this again supports the notion of latent sources undermining power relations for Personnel (Lukes 1974). On a more positive note, the interview evidence supports the view that departments able to acquire external funding can enhance their importance to the organisation (Jarzabkowski/Wilson 2002; Salancik/Pfeffer 1974). In some instances, it was however implied that the Personnel department itself is not seen as bringing in these new funds, as the administrative paperwork required by HEFCE was actually being carried out by another strategy or external relations unit within the institution. Again, this means that the Personnel function's controlling role is being fragmented further still (Salancik/Pfeffer 1977).

In summary, when prescribing a more strategic role (Ulrich 1997) and the importance of resource allocation (Jarzabkowski/Wilson 2002; Salancik/Pfeffer 1974), the impact of institutionalised structures and routines is largely ignored. This study shows that regardless of the availability of new external funds through the Personnel department which should have made the department more central to resource acquisition, the embeddedness of structures and extant relations demonstrated the routine rigidity

(cf. Gilbert 2005) facing the Personnel department within this context. The change happening within the sector was insufficient to break through the learned patterns of decision-making and structures in place.

Following a similar theme, prescribing a strategic role for Personnel may not necessarily result in that role being enacted. The Personnel department alone cannot allocate itself a more strategic role via the HEFCE initiative, it must also be perceived throughout the organisation as making a more strategic contribution if its power is to increase respectively (Wolfe/McGinn 2005). Only in occasional instances, as uncovered during some interviews, was individual level power able to overcome the institutionalised power structures (Cendon/Jarvenpaa 2001).

Putting these results into the context of Edwards' (2006) distinction between 'power over' and 'power to', the RDS initiative perhaps gives Personnel a place at the strategic table by virtue of structural sources ('power over'), but it does not guarantee to improve the Personnel function's 'power to' act and achieve strategic goals. Here, individual and relational level sources of power may be more significant.

It appears that the presence of fragmentation, role ambiguity, as well as institutionalised power structures and perceptions dominate the Personnel department's situation in HEIs, undermining attempts to improve its standing. Resource allocation should arguably have broken the system but routinised behaviours were dominant. Despite the literature advocating the strategic role, and attempts through funding initiatives to support this role, the marginalisation identified by Legge (1978) is still dominant in HEIs. This is evidenced in more recent empirical work by Guest and Clinton (2007: 30-1) which still notes that "*HR directors rate the influence of their function as generally low [...] influence on research, teaching and student outcomes is likely to be indirect at best*".

## Conclusions

In essence, this study has highlighted that the power debate has not been fully resolved amidst universalistic claims being made within prescriptive Personnel role typologies particularly regarding the impact of strategic contribution. Equally, funding for a more strategic role for the Personnel department in highly institutionalised HEIs does not necessarily lead to a position of high power.

As the power literature has become increasingly complex in identifying the dimensions of power, this study has highlighted the importance of considering a structural perspective at departmental level, but that this must be complemented by insights into relational and individual power. However, HEIs have departments with strong institutionalised identities in public sector bureaucracies, and hence departmental power in particular remains an important level of analysis.

The findings demonstrate clearly the fragmented nature of Personnel department power. Even in a sector characterised as a knowledge economy and critically dependent on its human resources, existing power structures and role ambiguity constrain Personnel's strategic aspirations. Perhaps the wide-ranging autonomy of the knowledge-worker environment of HEIs erodes potential power. Equally, the institutionalised power dynamics of restricted resources, the decision-making processes and fragmentation perpetuate the poor image of the department across much

of the sector. Based on latent power structures, it may be that Personnel has in some way been constrained from adopting a full *Strategic Partner* role in the HEI context (despite policy statements and funding to the contrary) and hence little evidence of an enhancement of departmental power is being found.

The study of power in organisations is unavoidably complex, resulting in many potential methods and perspectives for its approach. This study has focused primarily on a pragmatic exploration of structural sources of power, and is thus limited in its treatment of more relational and individual approaches to studying power, although the interview data did bring these issues to light. Arguably, a further limitation is that no consideration has been given here to issues of hierarchical power within the Personnel department itself: these may impact on the power of the function as a whole, and hence are worthy of further investigation. In addition, there has been little attention paid here to the different professional and occupational differences between the different support departments, in addition to the differences between support and academic departments. These are potential questions for further research in the sector.

Since the data collection for this study took place, there have been further initiatives taking place within the HEI sector. Perhaps most significantly, in 2006 a new National Framework Agreement was implemented to modernise HEI pay structures. This is changing the role of the Personnel function in pay management and negotiation, creating more local responsibility for such issues. This may be a new source of power for the Personnel function, which future research could explore. The shift of emphasis within the function based on the new ways of rewarding and developing staff as a result of the HEFCE funding initiative could also be explored in terms of new roles which the function is now playing beyond basic administration. A remaining area for future research could explore the extent to which different forms of governance and different bargaining and contractual arrangements still prevail between pre- and post-1992 universities and the continued effect these are having on Personnel. For the time being however, although now better funded, Personnel appears to continue its struggle for credibility and power across this multifaceted sector, and is perhaps still searching for the opportunity to reinvent itself.

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