Student volunteer management – A strategic human resource management approach

1. **Research area:** HRM

2. **Purpose of the paper**

Student volunteers as unique human resources play a key role in assisting organisations' missions, reflects the potential for employing SHRM theories to shed light on the student volunteering phenomenon. Most existing volunteer management literature has attempted to utilise (strategic) HRM frameworks and quantitative methods to investigate the link between implemented HRM practices and performance, however, they greatly neglect the distinctive non-employment mechanism of voluntary work and complex contextual factors in shaping HRM practices planning and implementation. A qualitative approach thus necessitates interpreting the underlying reasons for transferring HRM practices initially prescribed in the employment relationship into the volunteer realm.

This report identifies new avenues for research on the management of volunteers and proposes a methodology to answer the key research questions:

- RQ1: What motives and contextual factors affect students participating in
- RQ2: What HRM practices do university employees utilise to manage student volunteers, and how are they geared strategically with organisational requirements?
- RQ3: How are HRM practices perceived by volunteers, and how do they work in practice?

3. **Theoretical background**

From a managerial level of perspective, non-profit-voluntary organisations have stressed proceeding and realising their goals strategically through employing more professional practices and managerial approaches to manage their human resources (Aisbett & Hoye, 2015). SHRM would be an optimal and omnipotent theoretical framework to understand the student volunteering phenomenon. It is necessary to elaborate on the theoretical transferability of employing SHRM and HRM practices in the volunteering administration field.

Firstly, Contemporary volunteering stems from the issue that out of budgetary constraints, some jobs must be designed as voluntary positions. Otherwise, the organisational strivings and objectives cannot be accomplished. Wilson and Musick (1997) argue that voluntary work represents a substitution of paid workforces rather than informal activities that are intrinsically irrelevant to managerial practices. Volunteer administration demonstrates a harmonious analogy elicited from the traditional employment relationships (Brudney & Meijs, 2009). In essence, Wilson and Musick (1997) argue that volunteers executing voluntary tasks assigned

by managers is a form of working, although without monetary rewards and rigidly contractual and legal obligations.

Secondly, equivalent to paid staff, volunteers are human resources possessed by an organisation, especially for volunteer-reliant entities. Pynes (2013, p.378) argues that managers should develop a SHRM system for volunteers as well because strategic planning is not exclusive to the paid staff but to all human resources who contribute to organisational goals. Along with the significant contextual factors that have been underlined in SHRM (Alfes et al., 2017; Wright et al., 2018), increasing attention has been paid to the non-profit/voluntary realm and the volunteer population, particularly in investigating the effectiveness and generalisability of SHRM practice implementation (Englert et al., 2020; Walk, et al., 2014).

Thirdly, for major organisations with a large population of volunteers (e.g., international universities), formal governance and professionalised arrangements are imperative with increasing volunteering activities (Pynes, 2013, p.389). Taylor and McGraw (2006) argue that professional HRM is frequently a legitimate requirement and a means of fundraising for large non-profits. Holdsworth and Quinn (2010) argue that university-led volunteering has gradually supplanted student-led programmes mirrors the fact that more professionalised and top-down practices have emerged in student volunteering.

Fourthly, volunteers assist an organisation's goals and thus play a key role in its strategic HRM planning (Pynes, 2013, p.377). Their inputs also, to some extent, help the realisation of non-profits' societal goals (Gay, 2000; Liao-Troth, 2001). Scholars have recognised the significance of bridging volunteer management to organisation strategy (Pynes, 2013, p.389), such as integrating volunteer management practices into strategy (Carvalho & Sampaio, 2017) and fostering a volunteering culture as a strategy (Alfes et al., 2017) to proactively plan volunteer workforces (Bringle & Hatcher, 2000). In practice, Sullivan et al. (2013) find that students who are more acquainted with university's missions showed a higher level of volunteering participation.

In addition, what HRM system and practices should be designed and implemented in volunteer management is another research theme debating in volunteer research. Studer and Schnurbein (2013) argue that the collaboration between volunteer management and orthodox HRM is only half of the picture. Most volunteer management research has merely crammed classic HRM practices into volunteers and examined whether these practices will demonstrate a similar degree of effectiveness compared with other paid workers or volunteer groups. However, Kreutzer and Jäger (2011) argue that this universal approach imprudently overlooks the intrinsic discrepancy between the managed-managing relation in the employment sector and the quasi-management identity between volunteers and NPOs.

In summary, although the transferability of employing SHRM in student volunteer administration has been strongly stressed, these academic gaps call for a qualitative approach to provide a comprehensive account to explain the student volunteer management phenomenon.

4. Methodology

Case study has been chosen as the major methodology in this qualitative research. Leeds University Union and its Volunteering Team is picked as a single case study. The main participants are the staff and student volunteers. The main data collection techniques are interviewing and ethnographical observation.

5. Expected findings

- Detailed accounts of volunteering motivation from both the paid staff and volunteers' perspectives.
- The HR practices are planned and implemented to administrate student volunteers and strategically fit the organisational requirements and goals.
- The differences between student volunteers' perceived HR practices and the HR practices implemented by the paid staff.

6. Potential contribution

This proposed research has the potential to contribute to the knowledge of volunteer management and SHRM theory. It aims to paint a more comprehensive picture of how HRM practices are implemented in managing student volunteers while taking the motivational and contextual factors into account. The other unique contribution is to provide in-depth interpretations of how and why non-profit/voluntary organisations and managers conceive volunteer-tailored HR practices at a strategic level, compared with most pre-existing studies merely concentrated on volunteers' perceptions of implemented HR practices (Walk et al., 2021). Moreover, it can contribute to the limited qualitative and longitudinal studies in the field of volunteer management.

7. Key words

Volunteer management, strategic HRM, HR practices, volunteering motivation, organisational goals.

8. References

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