

Human Resources Administration in Universities: Policies, Practices and Challenges in Sri Lanka

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Abstract. This paper will analyze human resources management within the context of the Sri Lankan universities with respect to policies, practice and challenges faced by academic and non-academic employees. The management of human resources is an important role in providing quality in teaching, research, and institutional sustainability. Sri Lankan university system has a regulatory framework that is centred in the public sector under the guidance of the University Grants Commission (UGC) which controls recruitment, promotion, training and pay. Although university institutions have formal HR policies, the challenges that exist include bureaucratic inflexibility, brain drain, scarcity of professional development, and poor performance appraisal systems. The paper follows a qualitative literature based research and the necessity of strategic human resource management reforms in enhancing organizational effectiveness in tertiary education.

Keywords; Human resource administration, universities, HR policies, HR practices, Sri Lanka.

Introduction

Human resources management has emerged as one of the core and strategic roles of contemporary institutions of higher learning, especially universities which are faced with complex, competitive and fast globalizing environments in the academia. Universities are knowledgebased organizations whose wellbeing largely relies on the quality, dedication and proficiency of their human resources such as academic staff, administrative officers, technical as well as support staff. Contrary to the profit-focused organizations, universities also have compound goals, including excellence in teaching, research, innovation and social development.

The management of the human resources used in universities therefore, needs special policies and practices that are equitable, accountable to the people, and promote the efficiency of an organization in addition to academic freedom [1].

The sector of higher education in Sri Lanka is largely state-funded and controlled, with the state universities being governed by the Universities Act No. 16 of 1978 and administration by the University Grants Commission (UGC).

It is a centralized form of regulation that makes significant contributions to the human resources management in the university especially in recruitment, selection, promotion, salary determination, training, disciplinary measures and retirement benefits. On the one hand, this system ensures transparency, uniformity, and fairness among the institutions; however, on the other, it constrained institutional flexibility and independence, and the universities were not as able to react quickly to the new academic and administration requirements.

Universities are becoming more proactive in taking strategies in strategic human resource management that focus on talent management, relentless professional growth, evaluations based on performance, engagement of employees, and creation of organizational culture around the world. These strategies acknowledge the human capital as an important determinant of institutional performance and competitiveness across the world. Nevertheless, the Sri Lankan universities are greatly inhibited in implementing these contemporary HR practices by the inflexible administrative processes, scarcity of funds, excessive workload of teachers, and unwillingness to change. Consequently, the conventional personnel management is still prevalent in the administration of Hr in most institutions.

Academic brain drain is one of the most serious issues that human resources management in the universities of Sri Lanka has to face. Loyal and competent scholars tend to seek better paid homes in the overseas universities or other institutes in the private sector in search of better research facilities, a better career ladder, and clearer career path. The consequence of this trend is permanent staff shortages, overworking of the rest of the faculty, and negative effects on teaching quality, research output, and supervision of postgraduates. More so, delays in staff recruitment and promotions often demotivate employees and lower efficiency in an institution [2].

Also, the systems of performance appraisal and staff development in university are still mostly procedural and not developmental in Sri Lankan universities. Despite having formal evaluation mechanisms, they tend to be accused of being lack of transparency, consistency, and alignment to the guiding objectives of the institutions.

There are few opportunities to have structured training, capacity building in research, and leadership development, especially among early-career academics and non-academic staff. These weaknesses impede the capacity of universities to nurture a skilled, motivated and flexible workforce that can respond to the new challenges of digital transformation, internationalization of higher education and interdisciplinary research [3].

In this respect, a detailed analysis of the human resources management in the Sri Lankan universities is timely and a must. It is critical to understand how the HR policies are designed, the implementation of the HR practices, and what hinders their performance to be able to inform the policy changes and institutional policies. This paper thus aims at studying the issue of human resources administration in the Sri Lankan universities with special consideration to the policies, practices and challenges with the intention of making contribution to the existing body of knowledge, as well as offering practical solutions to policymakers, university administrators and academic heads aiming at ensuring improvement in the performance and sustainability of the higher education sector.

Human Resource Policies in the Sri Lankan Universities.

The policies of the human resource in the Sri Lankan universities are mainly directed by the Universities Act No. 16 of 1978 and laws adopted by the University Grants Commission (UGC). Such policies are used to regulate recruitment, payment scales, promotions, disciplinary measures and retirement packages of academic and non academic staff. Recruitment policies are based on selection based on merit conducted by open advertisement and structured interviews.

The policies of promotion are based on the academic qualifications, seniority, and the output of the research. Although they are expected to provide fairness and transparency, such policies may take long to be approved and thus slows down the decision-making process[4-6].

University Human Resource Practices.

HR practices are the policies that are put in place in institutions. Recruitment and selection practices in the Sri Lankan universities are formalized processes that are usually faced with delays because of bureaucracy. The training and development opportunities are also not well distributed among the universities as there are fewer well-organized academic staff development programs.

There are performance appraisal systems, which are often denounced due to their inconsistency, objectivity and developmental orientation. Pay systems and reward policies are mostly standardized and fail to capture personal performance, which impacts on staff motivation and retention.

Human Resource Administration Problems.

The Sri Lankan universities have a number of challenges in HR administration. Brain drain is one of the greatest challenges where qualified academics are finding better opportunities elsewhere because of low salaries and the scarcity of research centers. Bureaucratic inflexibility limits the decisions on timely recruitment and promotion. Poor performance appraisal systems lead to less accountability and professional development. Training, support of research, and incentives are also limited by the lack of funds. Besides, institutional cultures are resistant to change, which negatively influences the introduction of modern HR practices.

Strategic Human Resource Management Lenses.

A strategic human resource management (SHRM) model can be effective in improving the performance of a university by ensuring consistency between the HR policy and institutional performance. SHRM is highly focused on talent management, lifelong professional growth, employee engagement, and reward based on performance. In the case of Sri Lankan universities, flexible recruitment systems, enhancing staff development initiatives, and re-evaluating performance appraisal systems can go a long way in ensuring that HR is more effective and competitive to the institution.

Conclusion

The human resource management in universities of Sri Lanka is in a framework of policy that is well organized to ensure standardization and less flexibility. Despite the existence of formal HR practices and policies, the implementation of formal HR practices is hindered by bureaucratic limitations, resource limitations, and competitive labor markets. The issues listed above can be improved by implementing strategic HR reforms to improve the quality and sustainability of higher education in Sri Lanka.

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