Playing the Performance Management Game? Perceptions of Australian Older Academics

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the perceptions of Australian older academics on performance management. Drawing on documentary data from 21 universities and interview data from 52 academics, the findings revealed predominantly negative perceptions about the purpose, process and development support of performance management. Underpinning this were criticisms of a simplistic organisational orientation and a compliance tool susceptible to manipulation and misuse. This contributes to a deteriorating working environment, contrary to what is expected for highly educated professionals and advanced educational institutions. Utilising the psychological contract as an interpretative framework to understand the employment relationship, it is argued the overwhelming feelings of dissatisfaction and cynicism among older academics towards the futile use of performance management are clear signs of relational contract violation, thus eroding trust and loyalty. These findings provide university management with an insight into how older academics perceive performance management and how this in turn impacts job satisfaction and motivation.

Key Words: Human resource management; older academics; performance management; psychological contract; university management
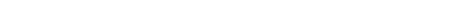
INTRODUCTION

The psychological contract is a concept that can provide an insight into the employment relationship and the likely factors that contribute to employee motivation, job satisfaction and performance. Human resource management (HRM) policies and practices, such as performance appraisal and compensation, can play an important role in shaping the

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framework of the psychological contract (Rousseau and Greller, 1994). Given that there is long-standing discontent amongst academics about university leadership and the academic work environment (Altbach, 1996; Anderson et al., 2002), it is a vital signal for universities to better understand the employment relationship. Hence, the psychological contract can assist in the interpretation of understanding why academics' dissatisfaction with university leadership remains to be the case.

Universities are constantly striving to advance their reputation in excellence in a dynamic environment that has become increasingly competitive for research funding, high-performing academic staff, high-quality students and resources (Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, 2010; Hugo, 2005, 2008; Willekens, 2008). This growing complexity in the globalised landscape in which universities operate is impacting on and changing the expectations of its academic workforce. The added challenge for universities is the unprecedented human resource (HR) situation of an ageing academic workforce. Universities in Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) countries are on the cusp of a HR crisis with 40–60 per cent of academics older than 55 years of age (Enders and Musselin, 2008). This comes at a time when student numbers and ongoing demand for higher education are high but competitive funding from national governments coupled with managerialist and corporatist governance have kept the academic workforce lean. An ageing academic workforce is a new phenomenon and there are human capital, labour market and social welfare implications for governments.

In the Australian context, 40 per cent of academics are aged 50 and over (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011). As universities contribute significantly to Australia's economic growth, with education ranking as Australia's third largest export industry, directly behind coal and iron ore (Universities of Australia, 2009), the next decade presents a time of critical vulnerability as universities are likely to experience a substantial loss of academics through retirement over the next decade, depleting the universities' skill and experience levels. This raises crucial sustainability issues for universities in relation to HRM and knowledge management. Since workforce knowledge and skills are central to the business of universities, a satisfied, motivated and high-performing academic workforce is crucial to the well-being of universities. Therefore, the changing age demographic creates scope for universities to devise and implement HRM policies and practices which capitalise on the advanced levels of highly specialised knowledge and experience of older academics. The effectiveness of the university performance management system for academics is the focus of this paper.

This paper explores the perceptions of older academics on performance management and draws on the psychological contract as an interpretative framework to understand the employment relationship. It reports findings from a larger Australian study on career management for older academics, where performance management was identified as an issue for academics aged in their 50s. There are five sections in this paper. The first section provides an outline of the existing literature on psychological contracts and performance management of Australian academics. The second section describes this study and the research approach adopted. The third section presents three key areas arising from the findings, specifically

in relation to the purpose and process of performance management, the role of university management and the attitudes to performance management. The fourth section discusses the implications of the findings, in particular the overwhelming feelings of dissatisfaction and cynicism felt amongst academics aged in their 50s and the limitations of this study. The conclusion and insights from this study form the fifth section and it is argued that given the immense negative views coupled with cynicism and anger over the insincere use of performance management, there are clear signs that the relational aspects of the psychological contract for older academics have been violated, thus eroding trust and loyalty.

Even though the location of this study is Australia, there is broad international relevance in light of the ubiquitous academic staffing crisis predictions within OECD countries. Given the unparalleled staffing situation of universities in Western developed countries, a systematic investigation is warranted to provide insights into how universities, their leaders and their HRM policies and practices respond to such a situation.

CONTEXT: PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACTS AND PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT OF AUSTRALIAN ACADEMICS

Australian universities have experienced continual and major organisational change over the past 50 years. These include the creation of the unified national system (UNS) of higher education in 1990 which marked the Australian government's formal recognition that universities had moved from an elite to a mass system, the corporatisation of university governance and reduced levels of public investment (Neumann and Guthrie, 2002; Guthrie and Neumann, 2007). As a result, there has been growing interest in studying the impact of these changes on the academic workforce. Various studies (see McInnis, 1999; Anderson et al., 2002; Winefield et al., 2002; Winter and Sarros, 2002) have focused on issues such as the changes to academic work, work motivation and occupational stress of academics. For example, Anderson et al.'s (2002) national survey of over 2,000 Australian academics has shown that academics are by and large frustrated and disillusioned with the ways in which academic life has changed, to the extent that many would not recommend an academic career. Moreover, there was overwhelming evidence that Australian academics were experiencing high levels of job dissatisfaction, low morale, stress and burnout. In addition, the results of a large international survey, called the Changing Academic Profession (CAP) survey, found that of the nineteen countries surveyed, Australian academics were reported to have the third lowest scores on the satisfaction scale on academic work and United Kingdom (UK) academics rated the lowest satisfaction scores (Coates et al., 2010). Perceptions of increasingly unmanageable workloads and the lack of confidence in institutional management and support were some of the factors contributing to the low scores on academic job satisfaction. The consistency of national and international survey findings should be a critical signal to university management that they should focus on the well-being of their academic workforce. A reduction of the high levels of stress and disillusionment felt by academics has important implications for organisational productivity and performance, while universities harnessing the capabilities of their academic workforce can deliver a sustained competitive advantage.

Before discussing the literature on performance management and psychological contracts of Australian academics, for the purposes of this paper several definitions need to be clarified. Within the career and HRM literature, an infinite number of definitions for 'performance appraisal', 'performance management' and 'psychological contract' exist. It is important to delineate between 'performance appraisal' and 'performance management', as often the two terms are used interchangeably (Lansbury, 1988; Lonsdale, 1998) but have different meanings and focuses. Performance appraisal, in its traditional form, is a process of reviewing and evaluating how well employees are performing against a set of job criteria and usually forms part of performance management (McCarthy, 1986; Hort, 1996).

On the other hand, performance management is broader than performance appraisal as it links the management of the business with the management of people and typically is facilitated by various integrated HRM policies and practices. This paper draws from Lansbury's (1988: 46) definition of performance management, as:

> The process of identifying, evaluating and developing the work performance of employees in the organisation, so that organisational goals and objectives are more effectively achieved, while at the same time benefiting employees in terms of recognition, receiving feedback, catering for work needs and offering career guidance.

In terms of the 'psychological contract', there is no universal or accepted definition within the literature. Different authors have assumed different perspectives on how the psychological contract is to be defined, from the implicit employee expectations of the employer to the focus on reciprocal mutuality (Cullinane and Dundon, 2006). In this paper we have adopted the definition by Rousseau (1989, 1995) that the psychological contract is an individual's beliefs, shaped by the organisation, regarding terms of an implicit agreement between the individual and the organisation. In addition, a psychological contract emerges when an employee believes that 'a promise has been made and a consideration offered in exchange for it, binding the parties to some set of reciprocal obligations' (Rousseau, 1989: 123). This definition is pertinent to this study where the focus is on the individual employee perspective.

The psychological contract is a useful concept in understanding the nature of the employment relationship between the employee and employer. According to Rousseau (1989), two types of psychological contracts are common in the workplace, transactional and relational contracts, which can be conceptualised as being at two ends of a contractual continuum. The transactional contract focuses on short-term and monetisable exchanges such as pay for work, while the relational contract focuses on open-ended relationships involving considerable investment by both employees and the employer, such as socio-emotional elements of loyalty and support (Rousseau, 1989). As this paper explores the perceptions of academics aged in their 50s on performance management, the components pertaining to both transactional and relational contracts are likely to become evident in the data analysis.

According to Rousseau (1989, 1995), a psychological contract is a complex blend of individual characteristics and cognition, social cues and organisational messages. This is supported by several authors (see Rousseau and Greller, 1994; Rousseau and Wade-Benzoni, 1994; Kabanoff et al., 2000) who suggest that there is a link between HRM practices and the creation of the psychological contract. HRM practices are considered to be the major mechanisms through which employees come to understand the terms of their employment and consequently shape employee behaviour, performance and coop-eration with fellow employees. For example, performance management can play a key role in creating a framework for the psychological contract between the employee and the employer as the performance appraisal interview provides opportunities for contract creation, maintenance and change (Rousseau and Greller, 1994; Stiles et al., 1997). Specific contract-making features of performance management include the understanding of the job role; the fair, timely and accurate evaluation of performance; development opportunities; and the provision of feedback to employees (Rousseau and Greller, 1994). Furthermore, the continuous process of integrative bargaining between individual employees and their managers can facilitate 'win–win' aspects of renegotiation and enhance procedural justice (Marsden, 2007). In the context of performance management for academics, the focus is on the management of performance so that job satisfaction and motivation is enhanced and the emphasis is on the management's role to create the conditions under which others can best work (Lonsdale, 1998).

A psychological contract violation is when an employee perceives that the terms of the psychological contract have been breached by the organisation or other parties as they have failed to respond to an employee's contribution in ways that the individual believes they are obligated to do (Rousseau, 1989). Moreover, mixed messages and different contract interpretations can occur if there is misalignment among HRM practices and multiple contract makers (Rousseau and Greller, 1994; Robinson et al., 1994). For example, the Stiles et al. (1997) study examined three large UK organisations undergoing large-scale change and found the presence of conflicting messages to employees. There was a sense of scep-ticism about the performance management processes and Stiles et al. (1997) concluded that the underlying dynamics of social and economic exchange were mismatched between employee and employer. Consequently, violations of the psychological contract can lead to serious consequences for the parties such as eroding trust in the employment relation-ship and creating feelings of injustice, anger and betrayal (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994; Robinson et al., 1994). The concept of the psychological contract 'makes salient the issue of violation and its consequences for the employee's well-being and outlook' (Rousseau, 1989: 135).

Perceived breaches or violations of the psychological contract can be reduced by effec-tive communication (Guest and Conway, 2002). For example, 1,306 HR managers were surveyed by Guest and Conway (2002) to explore the role of communication in managing the psychological contract and their findings revealed that a positive state of the psycho-logical contract, such as employees exhibiting higher job satisfaction, higher organisational commitment, higher reported motivation and a lower intention to resign, was associated

with an organisational climate of high involvement, partnership and, in particular, effective communication. Moreover, central to functional and positive employment relationships are exchanges between employers and employees that are characterised by mutuality or shared understandings of both parties' obligations and reciprocal commitments and contributions (Dabos and Rousseau, 2004).

An important intersection is the literature on the psychological contract and the performance management of academics within Australian universities. Although the empirical research on psychological contracts has gained momentum during the past decade, there is a dearth of research on the psychological contract of Australian academics. To date, there are only two studies to our knowledge that focus on the psychological contract of Australian academics. One study explored the contents of the psychological contract established by academics (O'Neill et al., 2010). Using a mixed method research design comprising of focus groups and a cross-sectional survey, O'Neill et al.'s (2010) study revealed key elements of psychological contracts formed by academics within an Australian university business faculty. Academics' expectations of the university included the importance of staff development and support; good management and leadership; fairness and equity, particularly for promotion; appropriate remuneration; rewarding performance; and good workplace relations. The findings of O'Neill et al. (2010) indicate that given the insights into the contents of academics' psychological contracts university management can and should maintain a positive academic psychological contract by taking the necessary action to better manage and harness academic staff motivation and commitment (O'Neill et al., 2010). A second study in a middle-ranked Australian university (Shen, 2010) explored the extent to which the psychological contract had been fulfilled and examined the impact of demographic variables on the psychological contract. The findings revealed that academic psychological contract fulfilment was low and the least fulfilled contents of the psychological contract were fair promotion, consultation, recognition of contributions, providing funding for research and pay equity (Shen, 2010). The study identified that a more transactional contract existed amongst academics than a relational one. It also found that older academic staff tended to perceive the university as not having met its obligation to recognise their talents, skills and contributions, or to take seniority into consideration. The findings suggested that older academic staff might become more apathetic about what is occurring in the workplace and recommended that universities pay more attention to employee psychological contact matters to reduce work stress in academics and to build mutual trust in order to increase employee retention and commitment.

Given the potential for performance management to create and shape the framework of the psychological contract, it is important to take note of the studies on performance appraisal and performance management of Australian academics. During the 1980s and 1990s, performance management in Australian universities attracted much attention, resulting in several reviews (Lonsdale et al., 1988; Paget et al., 1992; James, 1995) to ascertain whether the introduction of performance appraisal into Australian universities had increased the efficiency, effectiveness and accountability of academics (McCarthy, 1986;

Lonsdale et al., 1988). Although these studies were conducted over twenty years ago, they remain pertinent since there is a paucity of recent research.

One of the earlier and larger empirical studies examined the implementation of performance appraisals in Australian institutions (Lonsdale et al., 1988) and found that 56 of the 61 institutions surveyed had policies on staff appraisal, mainly concerned with promotion and tenure. Only eight institutions reported using procedures to evaluate the regular performance of academic staff. The study recommendations were incorporated into two themes: the importance in distinguishing between institutional and individual decision-making in the design and conduct of performance appraisals, and critical to the success of performance appraisal is the nature, custody, interpretation and use of appraisal information (Lonsdale et al., 1988). It is important to note that at the time of this study, 61 institutions (consisting of 18 public universities and 43 public colleges of advanced education (CAEs) out of the total of 68 institutions) had responded to the study. In 1990, the 68 institutions were amalgamated to form the UNS, comprising 38 universities. Notwithstanding the age of this study, these recommendations have relevance for university management today.

Several authors emphasised that the success of performance management in universities was contingent on incorporating the characteristics of academic work and the university environment into the performance management system (McCarthy, 1986; Hort, 1996). Lonsdale (1998) argued that the development of performance appraisals and performance management in universities had occurred through successive generations, with the fourth generation as the term for performance management of the twenty-first century. The first generation reflected the conventional performance appraisal approach as outlined earlier in this paper. The second generation was aimed at improvements in the efficiency and productivity of higher education institutions, whereby the national guidelines for staff appraisal schemes featured staff development and improvement. The outcomes of the two-year trial of the second generation approach revealed that staff appraisal for development purposes were unsuccessful and that 'people performed the process with no real commitment, in a climate of scepticism and where appraisal was not linked to other facets of organisational functioning' (Lonsdale, 1998: 306). The third generation reflected the recommendations of the Hoare Report (1995) for a comprehensive approach to performance management for both academic and general staff with a focus on the work, performance and development of individual staff. However, Lonsdale (1998) makes the case that the fourth generation approach to performance management should build on the third generation approach by including the circumstances under which people work and emphasising the importance of managing for performance rather than the management of performance. He concluded that the design of the fourth generation approach to performance management for the twenty-first century would need to be compatible with the factors influencing the motivation of academics such as the encouragement of risk-taking and individual autonomy, a non-judgemental psychological climate and an emphasis on cooperation rather than competition (Lonsdale, 1998).

As we are a decade into the twenty-first century, the practice of performance management in Australian universities continues to remain gloomy. As Morris et al. (2011) have

argued, the dissatisfaction with the practice of performance management has been largely due to a controlling rather than a developmental mechanism.

THIS STUDY AND THE RESEARCH APPROACH

The purpose of this study is to explore career management for older academics. As performance management was an issue identified as part of this broader study, this paper explores the perceptions of academics aged in their 50s of performance management and draws on the psychological contract as an interpretative framework to understand the employment relationship.

The research is qualitative, utilising both documentary and interview data. There are multiple sources ranging from interviews to publicly available institutional documents on the internet to audit reports from the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) for the period 2006–2009. AUQA, established in 2000 as a not-for-profit company by the Ministers of Education in each of Australia's states and territories, is a core part of a total national quality assurance framework for Australia's higher education sector. Interviews were conducted with individual academics aged in their 50s and academics holding university management positions. Senior university management encompasses deputy vice-chancellors and pro vice-chancellors with institutional responsibility for academic staffing and university HR directors. Middle-level management comprises (executive) deans of faculties and heads of very large schools. All senior-level managers are typically externally appointed, as are most of the faculty dean positions. Heads of large schools (HoS) and heads of departments are generally appointed by faculty deans in consultation with departmental academic staff.

The research design purposely incorporated different university types and different discipline groups to capture the diversity of Australian universities. Four university groupings were incorporated. Three are formal and self-selected: the Group of Eight (Go8) – a coalition of eight of Australia's oldest and leading universities that are internationally recognised for scholarship and research excellence (www.go8.edu.au); the Australian Technology Network (ATN) – a coalition of five Australian universities that share a common focus on the practical application of tertiary studies and research (www.atn.edu.au); and the Innovative Research Universities (IRU) – which comprises seven Australian universities recognised for their distinctive and innovative approaches to research, teaching and learning (www.iru.edu.au). The fourth university grouping is the 'Regional Universities'. These universities reside either as outer-metropolitan institutions or in large regional locations outside capital cities and are economically and socially important to their local region (Neumann et al., 2007). Since the commencement of this study, a formal Regional Universities Network (RUN) has been formed with six universities (Ministers' Media Centre, 2011). The document data and audit reports included twenty-one universities across all four university groups.

Academics were drawn from the four distinct academic discipline groups – hard pure (HP), soft pure (SP), hard applied (HA) and soft applied (SA) – as categorised by Becher and Trowler (2001). Discipline groups are based on the knowledge forms reflecting

both epistemological approaches and the social aspects of knowledge (Neumann, 2009) and encompass the myriad of differing organisational structures of knowledge domains manifested within universities, described as 'academic tribes, each with their own set of intellectual values and their own patch of cognitive territory' (Becher, 1994: 153). Hard disciplines such as physics, biology and engineering are characterised by tight knowledge structures and gregarious social organisation compared with those in soft fields where the nature of knowledge is reiterative and holistic, such as history and anthropology. Applied disciplines are concerned with the application of knowledge to practical problems thus comprising professional areas such as agriculture, engineering, law, accountancy, education, management. The variance between these four discipline groups are distinguished by a range of characteristics, such as the entry requirements, the enquiry process, the nature of knowledge growth and the relationship between the researcher and knowledge (Becher and Trowler, 2001).

A total of 52 interviews were restricted to the Go8, ATN and IRU and Table 1 shows the sample demographics by gender and by discipline groups. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using open-ended questions, so that different dimensions from the participant's responses could be pursued by the interviewer (Kvale, 1996). The interviews followed the same format for each participant, allowing responses to semi-structured questions as well as providing the opportunity to elaborate on their responses and offer further comments. The interviews with academics holding university management positions focused on their institutional role in academic career management and institutional HRM policy making, while the interviews with individual academics discussed topics from their career trajectory to date and their career aspirations for the next ten years to how the university has supported their academic career. Performance management was specifically identified as an issue when participants discussed their academic careers and promotional experiences. Therefore, the focus of this paper is to explore the perceptions of older academics of performance management.

Table 1: Total Number of Participants by Gender and Discipline Group

	Female	Male	Total
Hard Pure	3	4	7
Hard Applied	2	5	7
Soft Pure	5	3	8
Soft Applied	6	4	10
University Management	5	15	20
Total	21	31	52

The sample was chosen using purposeful sampling, where 'the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research

problem' (Creswell, 2007: 125). The selection of participants involved the use of publicly available information on selected university websites, such as an individual academic's biography and the university's organisational chart, and was combined with the snowball sampling technique (Cooper and Schindler, 2011). Participants were approached via email with a brief explanation of this study and an open invitation to participate in this study.

All interviews were conducted at the academic's place of work at a mutually convenient time and date. The length of the interviews ranged from thirty minutes to two hours, with an average time for each interview of approximately one hour. All interviews were digitally audio-recorded and then transcribed. All participants and universities were de-identified to preserve anonymity. Each interview transcript was read in its entirety and analysis of the interview transcripts involved coding the data from each interview into 'nodes' in order to build up knowledge about the data (Bazeley, 2007). NVivo software provided a data management tool to facilitate in-depth exploration of the data and was particularly useful in managing the classification of emerging themes. Within the discussion of findings, quotations from interview participants give their academic classification level, their university grouping and their discipline grouping. No further identification is provided in the context of preserving individual confidentiality and anonymity.

FINDINGS: UNIVERSITY PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS AND OLDER ACADEMICS

Drawing on documentary data from 21 universities and interview data from 52 academics across three university groups, this study explored career management for older academics. The interviews with academics aged in their 50s specifically provided the opportunity to explore their academic career trajectories. The participants were asked whether they perceived that their academic career had worked out the way they had expected. Performance management was identified as an issue and the focus of this paper is on the findings in relation to performance management.

Firstly, documentary data analysis across the wider range of universities revealed that universities have the expected range of HRM policies and practices in relation to academic appointment, probation and promotion, study leave and performance management. One key area within the findings was the lack of purpose and the lack of process in university performance management systems. The audit reports highlighted several concerns about performance management. These ranged from criticisms that the performance management system was not working as intended (see, for example, Murdoch University, 2006) to recommendations for universities to have a more systematic and consistent implementation (see, for example, University of Notre Dame, Australia, 2008; Southern Cross University, 2008). From the interviews, it is clear that the majority of academics aged in their 50s were of the opinion that performance management as practiced in their university is meaningless and held limited value in terms of advancing their academic careers. Irrespective of academic classification level, university type, discipline group, gender and number of years in academia, their comments revealed both a lack of purpose and a lack of process in university performance management systems.

The literature argues that a clear and consistent approach to performance management by all players is necessary or else there is a risk of disconnect and dysfunctionality (Eggington, 2010). Moreover, the focus on open-ended collaborations and a high degree of mutual interdependence are fundamental features of relational contracts (Dabos and Rousseau, 2004; Rousseau, 1995), but the participants' comments imply a contrary view, that performance management is neither a shared nor a consistent process. Performance management is perceived to be only oriented towards organisational goals and objectives and held, at best, limited concern for individual goals and achievements:

> There is no evidence of the university's commitment to its staff. It's all to do with what the staff is going to have to do in order for the university to be able to achieve its goals. There is no sense in which this is a bilateral thing, in which the university has serious responsibilities to its staff. I think they've lost that sense completely that they have an obligation to us (Associate Professor (AP), Go8, SP).

In the literature, performance management is typically understood to be a reciprocal agreement that is fundamental to a positive employment relationship. Yet, there seems to be a lack of tangible support for the achievement of individual goals as highlighted in the following comment:

> It's about what you've done and what you're hoping to do and planning to do, but I don't think I've ever really seen anything about what can the university do to support me. I don't recall that being a part of it at all (Senior Lecturer (SL), ATN, HA).

Lack of Integration and Purpose

Performance management is a holistic management process and should be interrelated strategically with other HRM policies and practices such as reward allocation and promotion (Hartel and Fujimoto, 2010). Yet the interview data analysis suggests that performance management is not integrated with other HRM policies and practices:

> There's no incentive mechanism available in the university. So having a system that tries to encourage people to excel and yet doesn't offer them any [reward] – I mean the only possible reward for excelling is you don't get fired next time (Professor, IRU, HA).

The lack of integration of HRM policies and practices with rewards and other career management support mechanisms may be because there is a general consensus that performance management is an informal process – 'it tends to be more informal than formal or done with a cup of coffee' (Professor, Go8, HP); that the process may be impromptu – 'In terms of performance management, it was all mostly ad hoc stuff. Lots of chats and things about how we were but it was certainly not any sort of formal performance management system' (Professor and dean, ATN) and that as a process it is conducted intermittently – 'I don't know if we have performance management systems. We occasionally have an

interview with your superior but it's just been ad hoc and I think once in three years I have had such a thing' (SL, ATN, HA).

Performance management is seen as a compulsory administrative management exercise and it is perceived that there is no organisational capacity or willingness to regard it as of any strategic importance. As a result, most academics interviewed admitted that they do not take the performance management process seriously:

I talk to my supervisor and then we then fill in the bits. My supervisor tells me how to fill it in properly so that it fits. My supervisor then fills it in and says now this is how they [HR] want you to do it so you have to sort of change the words a bit, so it just becomes a bit of word smithing. My supervisor said now this is the way it is (AP, ATN, HP).

The majority of participants maintained that there is no genuine or clear purpose to conducting performance management in the university and that essentially the performance management system is ineffective and lacking in any career value:

We have our performance review every year, but it's not done seriously. It's just something you do, both the people being interviewed and the interviewers, they don't regard it as being a serious enterprise. It's not a significant thing. No one considers it a worthwhile thing to do. Neither the interviewer nor the interviewee can determine much, if anything, about the year's work and career plans (SL, Go8, HA).

Several reasons were offered to explain the flawed process of university performance management systems: university management adopts a laissez faire approach, it has developed copious forms that are required to be completed – 'It's so much paperwork and lip-service' (Lecturer, ATN, HA) – and requires a time-consuming process which 'most of us regard it as yet another imposition on our time' (AP, IRU, HP). Further, there is a lack of skills and training of all involved: 'Middle management just don't understand how to use [performance management]' and overall 'the university hasn't a clue how to use it' (Professor, IRU, HA). At all levels in the university 'the weak link always is the people who do it … the academics who engage in it and the academic supervisor who does the role' (Professor, ATN, SA).

One of the main features of the academic profession is the ability to exercise autonomy in academic work (Altbach, 1991; Anderson et al., 2002). However, the ability to exercise academic autonomy may well be undermined, in light of the comments suggesting that performance management is a process of compliance and control:

There [are too many] compliance systems and requirements that are restrictive and [impose] much on one's time, really unnecessary and there is a lot of paperwork. There's about 10–15 pages to read and fill out and it's a waste of my time (Professor, IRU, SA).

Several comments implied that the process of performance management was susceptible to manipulation and misuse:

> People will set themselves easily obtainable targets so they can't possibly be criticised for not meeting their targets. So there's no sense in which it's actually used to really encourage proper development or excellence. It's just completely worked around and that's what people do ... they work around it. I've become very conscious that what most people do, possibly everyone, is simply play the game. There's something wrong with the system (Professor, IRU, HA).

Cynicism towards Management

A second key area of the findings revealed that older academics possess a sense of ambivalence and cynicism towards management in regards to their role in performance management. This was evident in the documentary data analysis (see, for example, Murdoch University, 2006) and across a number of the interviews. This can potentially create a climate of distrust and limit the possibility of open and honest participation by both parties during the performance discussion (Rousseau, 1989; Rousseau and Greller, 1994). This sentiment was reflected in the following statement:

> The university top heavyweights place too much pressure on academics, they need less compliance and the compliance costs are enormous. It is better utilised elsewhere. What is the value being added by all of this? There is no value being added with this (Professor, IRU, SA).

In the universities studied in depth, the performance management system is centrally driven and is developed by HR staff who have little knowledge about academic work or of the university environment. An experienced professor and dean pointed out:

> My university had several attempts to put performance management systems in, all of which were profound failures, because they were run largely by the HR department with absolutely no knowledge of that sort of academic side of the business: what academics do and how academics work and think. They [HR] expect all of the academic leaders who are supposed to be running [the performance management system] to understand what to do without any training, and they also weren't interested in training the others. If you don't train people on what to do with it then you don't get a successful system. They [HR] didn't seem to want to put the effort into that (Professor and dean, ATN).

In some instances, participants felt their concerns about performance management are shared by academic university managers, particularly at middle-level management such as their HoS and deans, but there is a sense of powerlessness by all in a centrally controlled system:

I raised some of the concerns but the head of school head felt exactly the same way, empathised totally, realised the performance management system is broken and can't do anything about it either (SL, ATN, HA).

There is a question about how serious university management is about its performance management system, specifically at middle-level management and regarding its use other than as a tool of compliance. Academics maintain that university management does not read or act on information in the performance documentation it receives and, moreover, turns 'a blind eye' to the legitimacy of the information:

I filled it in deliberately negative with no career aspirations to open up dialogue to see if anyone or the system was working, knowing that no one was going to read it. It was a waste of time, so I didn't bother putting one in the next year. When the Head [of the School] asked and I said it was all done, it wasn't the case (Lecturer, ATN, HA).

Negative Attitudes towards Performance Management

Critical comments and negative perspectives about performance appraisal and performance management are not scarce (Simmons, 2002), and this was evident in this study. The third key area in the findings revealed predominantly negative attitudes among all participants towards performance management. Furthermore, the documentary data showed that the performance management process must be handled in a sensitive, open and consistent manner (see, for example, Murdoch University, 2006).

For both academics and academics holding university management positions, performance management was described variously as a 'joke', 'chore', 'rubbish', 'great burden', 'profound failures', 'superficial', and an inflexible and cyclical tool:

Most people see it as a chore. They only do it when they're told they actually have to do it. Most people hate doing it. I think it's kind of silly for senior staff. I think it is overly rigid and overly prescribed (Professor and HoS, IRU).

Some academics felt that performance management as practiced is belittling:

Performance management is a humiliating thing you go into once a year where they sort of nag at you and tell you off and you sit there and stare out the window and grit your teeth and finally it's all over (Lecturer, ATN, SA).

The interviews suggested that performance management is viewed as essentially disciplinary, even punitive and invoked a sense of punishment, as highlighted in the following comment:

I think it's rubbish. There's no sincerity about its use, whatsoever. It's appalling. I think the administration is hopeless in this university. I think it's clear that very few people

take it seriously. It's clear that everybody is scared of this whole thing and the extent to which it may be used to beat them over the head or to kick them out in times of budget cuts. It's very hard for the university to fire someone, but we now have in place this mechanism that assesses people's performance and I think a widespread fear that that may be used in processes like that (Professor, IRU, HA).

An important aspect of relational contracts is an open-ended relationship involving considerable investments by both employees and employers (Rousseau, 1995). However, this appears to not be the case, given the particularly disconcerting and negative comments made about university management, specifically middle-level managers and how they insincerely utilise the performance management system. In some cases, academics aged in their 50s expressed feelings of anger, resentment and exasperation that they have towards university middle level management:

They're [management] interested in keeping other people down as far as I can see. A lot of them are psychotic. Talk about psychotic managers, I think a lot of them are. They haven't got HR skills, people skills, negotiation skills, information system skills, accounting skills, strategic skills. They don't believe in, the better you make the staff, the better you are (Lecturer, ATN, HA).

There is no feeling that management have any recognition of the people who are actually seen as being valuable. Occasionally you think it would be nice if management had enough understanding of what we do to recognise what goes on (AP, IRU, HP).

There were only a handful of positive comments about performance management and these primarily focused on the potential opportunity to discuss one's career with another academic or colleague: 'I think what is effective is just the discussion with another colleague about your work and what you can do' (AP, ATN, HP) and 'the fact that the [performance management] system includes people talking about their careers to one another is a very good thing' (Professor, IRU, HA).

DISCUSSION

This study explored the perceptions of academics aged in their 50s on performance management as part of a larger study on career management for older academics. The findings from this study revealed overwhelming feelings of dissatisfaction, coupled with cynicism and anger, towards the purpose and process of and the role of management in university performance management systems. Underpinning this were criticisms of a simplistic organisational orientation for performance management, essentially a control and compliance tool susceptible to manipulation and misuse. The findings did not show any variation based on academic classification level, university type, discipline group, gender and number of years in academia. In light of this, the psychological contract was utilised to interpret these findings as a means to understand the employment relationship.

It is reasonable to infer that academics' compelling negative perceptions of performance management are shaping the psychological contract. More specifically, this study argues that the relational aspects of psychological contracts for older academics have been violated.

There are several possible reasons for this inference based on the earlier discussion of successive generations of performance management (Lonsdale, 1998). To reiterate, the features of the fourth generation approach to performance management should include factors that motivate academics, be a non-judgemental process and should focus on cooperation between all players. Yet, it is fair to infer from the overwhelmingly negative and at times angry and sceptical views expressed by participants that the much anticipated fourth generation approach to performance management has not yet materialised in Australian universities.

Interview data revealed that performance management in universities is perceived to be meaningless as it lacks mutual purpose and is poorly implemented. It is perceived to be ineffective as performance management is orientated towards organisational goals and objectives and neglects the role of the individual and career development of academics, and is generally unsupportive of career management. Consequently, academics are ambivalent towards its operation and cynical about university management in its controlling use of performance management systems. The performance management system that the participants were commenting on appears more characteristic of either the first and second generation approaches to performance management rather than Lonsdale's (1998) third and fourth generations of performance management. Moreover, the interview data echo Simmons (2002) on his critiques of performance management in universities, where:

> The introduction of performance management into knowledge-based organisations such as universities has been regarded as a managerialist approach that is unwarranted, unworkable and an infringement of academic freedom and severely restricts creativity (Simmons, 2002: 91).

Just a decade later this view of performance management is captured within the interview data:

> The philosophy was focused on enhancement. Now it's focusing much more on delivery of what you'd said you'd do. This is a negative because it makes people play safe and you don't want to try different things, so people will not be as adventurous as they once were. I know we'll play to the piper's tune unfortunately and that shouldn't be what academics should be about. Academics should be about, not radicalism necessarily, but it shouldn't be saying 'well what do you want me to do and I'll do it for you' (AP, ATN, HP).

Furthermore, three-quarters of the study participants had entered academia before 1990, with the average number of years in academia being 25. Thus, the majority of participants

would have witnessed the introduction of performance appraisal into universities during the late 1980s and would have experienced the evolution of this HRM practice, or, in reality, how performance management has stagnated in its development over the past twenty years. It can be argued that there has been a 'sluggish' approach to the development of a university performance management system. For this reason, the scepticism, cynicism and frustration expressed by academics aged in their 50s about performance management are entirely justifiable.

It is reasonable to infer from the interviews that academics aged in their 50s are generally concerned more with the relational aspects of the psychological contract, although, given the study focus on career management, there was no explicit probing of the psychological contract of academics. The relational aspects of the psychological contract are about developing positive open-ended relationships in the socio-emotional sphere of trust and loyalty. This would be highly appropriate and relevant in an organisation focused on knowledge and knowledge production employing highly educated and specialised professionals. The negative feelings and attitudes to performance management found in this study reinforce the findings of earlier empirical research on the psychological contract and academics (O'Neill et al., 2010). This work identified the importance of good management and leadership, fairness and equity, good workplace relations, maintaining academic freedom and enabling academics to act as professionals.

Within this study, academics voiced concern over the compliance focus of performance management where the system tended to be punitive. Academic university managers are appointed as leaders in their discipline and they are expected to show leadership in the management and direction of their faculty and the university, but there was little evidence of this. Furthermore, academic university managers were seen to be poorly skilled with limited training in the performance management system and the process did not allow for a focus on the career development of academics but rather acquiescence to management goals and expectations. It is certainly not the working environment that would be expected of highly educated professionals, leaders in their disciplines and advanced educational institutions.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations to this study. The first is that the interview participants were drawn from three different university types, which potentially limits the generalisability of the findings. However, the institutions were purposely selected to reflect the diversity found in Australian higher education and the numbers of institutions were extended to 21 institutions in the documentary data. A second limitation relates to this study being restricted to Australian universities and clearly a study that incorporated universities from other countries would be useful to determine whether the findings are similar. However, the international studies on the academic profession, which include Australia, suggest that our study has relevance beyond Australia. Nevertheless, future research could extend our work to involve a broader range of universities and from different countries to make appropriate comparisons.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper argues that academics' compelling and predominantly negative perceptions of performance management are shaping the psychological contract. More specifically, it could be said that the terms and conditions of the relational aspects of the psychological contract for academics aged in their 50s have been violated, in light of the feelings of anger, resentment and exasperation expressed by academics towards university management on the meaningless use of performance management that has limited concern for individual goals and achievements. Given these findings, an implication for universities is that this can lead to not just perceptions of dissatisfaction and inequity, in the sense that it is just organisational and goal-oriented, as reflected in the findings of this study, but can involve feelings of betrayal and deeper psychological distress. According to the literature (Rousseau, 1989; Robinson and Rousseau, 1994; Turnley and Feldman, 1999), an employee can respond to psychological contract violations with decreased loyalty to the university and increased neglect of their role within the university such as half-hearted efforts at work, increased cynicism about organisational life in general and increased intentions to leave the organisation. In view of this, it is maintained that understanding the psychological contract of academics aged in their 50s can offer university management vital information on its HRM policies, helping it to enhance and maintain high levels of motivation, satisfaction and performance among its older and experienced academics through innovative HRM policies and practices. As Freese and Schalk (1996: 507) argue:

> The key word in managing psychological contracts is communication. By communicating with employees, a HR manager can find out what the expectations of employees are, how these expectations have been created, and what his or her role has been in the process of psychological contract making.

To conclude, the findings of this study have broadened previous research on performance management and academics and make a contribution to the literature on the academic profession and university management and leadership. Firstly, this study provides a greater awareness of the views of academics aged in their 50s on performance management. To our knowledge there is no prior research that specifically focuses on this age cohort of academics. As this age cohort is close to 40 per cent of the Australian academic workforce, they represent a strong voice for the attention of university management and are a 'highly experienced resource motivated to continue producing significant research and undertake impactful teaching' (Larkin et al., 2010: 12). Secondly, this study focused on both the employee and employer perspectives on performance management. Earlier work (Larkin and Neumann, 2009) examined university HRM policies and practices across a broad cross-section of Australian universities covering two-thirds of Australian universities and the findings of Larkin and Neumann (2009) discussed the lack of career policy within universities, the very reactionary approach to HR and the independent audit assessment of university management vulnerability in relation to HRM. Further work on university leadership (Larkin et al., 2011) has highlighted weak leadership with often

ambivalent and even contradictory attitudes towards academic staff. Such findings lend further weight to the large volume of national and international evidence of distrust and dissatisfaction with university management and leadership. There is a paucity of research that explores academic perceptions of performance management and utilises the psychological contract as an interpretative framework to understand the employment relationship. Given the positive relationship between psychological contract fulfilment and employee performance (Turnley and Feldman, 1999), the findings of this paper provide important messages for university management on the perceptions of academics aged in their 50s in regards to the employment relationship, the academic career and the role of the university. An organisational climate of eroding trust, decreased motivation, reduced commitment and feelings of anger and injustice are clear indications of psychological contract violation and unproductive and unresponsive HRM policies and practices.

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