

## Gender, flexibility and opportunity: Best use of human resources in UK HE libraries

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### Abstract

**Purpose-** To give an overview of some recent research into human resource deployment in library services in UK universities and colleges of higher education.

**Design-** The aim of the research in question was to evaluate the effectiveness of HR deployment. This implied a positivistic methodological approach, maintaining that the reality under examination, human resource deployment, existed objectively and independently of the researcher. However, the research aimed to discover not only what happened but also why. So there was an overlap between the positivistic and phenomenological approach. To this end, the research collected quantitative data via a survey and this paper provides a summary of the research aim, objectives, methodology and results.

**Findings-** The research findings indicate that staff deployment patterns in the context investigated are suboptimal and that, in consequence, individual libraries should be open to scrutiny in comparison with others not only in terms of their quantifiable patterns of library usage but also in terms of the patterns of their staff provision and staff deployment.

**Research limitations-** The findings only relate to UK universities and colleges of higher education.

**Practical implications-** This research suggests five actions for practitioners.

**Originality/ value-** This research highlights the lack of benchmarking facilities in UK universities and colleges of higher education relating to HR deployment in libraries, and recommends that Sconul extends the existing data collection in the Annual Statistical return to include this HR area.

**Keywords-** Human resource management      Libraries  
Employee deployment      Staff flexibility      Gender

**Paper type:** Research paper

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## **Introduction**

There are many kinds of resources involved in any form of economic activity. These have been categorised in a variety of ways - for example, as people, capital and technology. For the purposes of this research the focus is on people: people are the critical component to success; they drive capital growth and technological expansion, or should do. These human resources need care and attention to effectively and consistently perform at a high level (Updegraff, 2004).

Human Resources are arguably the greatest and the costliest business asset. This is particularly true in education – for example, 50% of higher education institution library budgets are spent on staff (Paterson, 1999; Sconul, 2004). Within libraries specifically, people are a key resource in achieving organisational objectives (Rowley, 1996; McKenna & Beech, 1995; Paterson, 1999).

People are all different and they all have different profiles (Hatfield, 2005). They all bring different life and employment experiences, qualifications, interests, skills, abilities and competencies. Library directors need to know these profiles, to know what potential there is and to know the full extent of the resources at hand (Paterson, 1999; McManus, 2003).

Part of the uniqueness of human capital is its diversity, and within the field of Human Resource Management comes the management of diversity, which is not just about concentrating on issues of discrimination but about ensuring that all people maximise their potential and contribution to the organisation. It is a concept that embraces a broad range of people and should not exclude anyone.

The five most widely identified groups are; minority ethnic people, disabled people, older people, lesbians and gay men, and women (Kirton and Greene, 2000, p9). Managing diversity concentrates on movement within the organisation, the culture of the organisation and the meeting of business objectives. Whereas equal opportunities is often seen as something that concerns mainly HR practitioners, managing diversity is seen as being the concern of all employees, especially managers within an organisation. It differs crucially from equal opportunities in its lack of reliance upon positive action or affirmative action (Kandola and Fullerton, 1994).

## **Objectives**

Within the frame of reference defined above, this paper describes an evaluation of human resource (HR) deployment in the library services in universities and colleges of higher education across the UK and Ireland, in terms of gender balance, approaches to human resource management (HRM) and flexibility in human resource planning (HRP).

This paper is based on research conducted by the author, A.D.B. MacLean, as part fulfilment of an MSc in Human Resource Management at the Department of Human Resource Management & Development at Glasgow Caledonian University Business School, between October 2004 and July 2005. The end result was the dissertation, entitled “An Analysis of Human Resource Deployment in UK Higher Education Libraries: Gender Balance, Human Resource Management and Human Resource Planning”.

The objectives of the paper are to analyse three key dimensions of employee resourcing:

- gender balance in the workforce,
- approaches to Human Resource Management (HRM), including strategic HRM and the resource-based view

- Human Resource Planning (HRP), the extent of flexible deployment of staff, future HR requirements, succession planning and staff development.

## Methodology

In order to achieve an effective analysis of patterns of employee resourcing, it was necessary to profile library staff in terms of gender balance, flexibility of deployment and staff development. This made it possible to draw inferences on and for the management of human resources in library services.

The strategy used in this research was methodological pluralism. The aim of the research was to evaluate the effectiveness of HR deployment. As such this implied a positivistic methodological approach, maintaining that the reality under examination, human resource deployment, existed objectively and independently of the researcher. However, the research aimed to discover not only what happened but also why. So there was an overlap between the positivistic and phenomenological approach.

The research collected quantitative data in the multiple case study context. The study was descriptive in that it presented a description of the phenomena under consideration, i.e. staff profiles. It was also explanatory in that it aimed to explain how or why these phenomena occurred.

The participating respondents comprised College, National and University libraries across the UK and Ireland, with the sample or subset being the Society of College, National and University Libraries (Sconul) member institutions. The number of participants in the sample was determined by combining two lists: the 166 institutions which were contacted to participate in the Sconul Statistical return (Sconul, 2004) with the list of Sconul member institutions on the web site (Sconul, a) which identifies a further 16 institutions. This resulted in 182 libraries. (MacLean, 2005, p57).

Given the scattered geographical locations of participants, data collection was carried out by self completion, using postal questionnaires (deemed to be the most cost effective and time efficient means of data collection (Bryman, 2001, p128) ). 182 self administered postal questionnaires were issued, with 70 returned, resulting in a 38.5% response rate (MacLean, 2005, p60). The likely response for postal questionnaires is variable and 30% is 'reasonable' (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2003, Table 10.1, p284). Of these 70, none were totally completed, so all 70 were incomplete responses.

The following table (MacLean, 2005, Table 5, p68) shows the respondents by Library sector

Preliminary Table: Sectoral breakdown of respondents

	Number	% of total
University Library	44	63
College of Higher Education Library	20	29
National Library	4	6
Other	2	3
Total	70	100

The percentage of the total population broadly matched the make-up of Sconul member institutions and was therefore representative of the total sample. The data were then analyzed using Excel.

## Limitations

The limitations of the research include a single method of data collection, the length of the questionnaire and the potentially sensitive issue of the subject of gender balance in the workforce. Despite these limitations the research design supported the research aim and objectives.

## Findings

These findings are summarised in the original thesis (MacLean, 2005).

### Gender

This research found that the majority of librarians are female (Table 1) and that the majority of senior managers or Heads of Divisions, are female (Table 2), with female senior managers, Heads of Divisions, being found to be most predominant in the University sector (Table 2).

Table 1: Gender balance by staff category by all respondents

Staff Category	Majority findings	Response rate	Response rate %	Missing data	Missing data %
Professional	More female than male	40, n= 70	57.14	6, n= 70	8.57
Clerical	More female than male	40, n= 70	57.14	12, n= 70	17.14
Manual	More male than female	8, n= 70	11.42	55, n= 70	78.57
Technical	All male	8, n= 70	11.42	47, n= 70	67.14

Table 2: Gender of senior managers, Heads of Divisions by sector

	Majority findings	Response rate	Response rate %	Missing data	Missing data %
University	More female than male	12, n= 44	27.27	15, n= 44	37.5
College	Equal gender balance	3, n= 20	15	17, n= 20	85
National	More male than female	2, n= 4	50	2, n= 4	50
Other	Missing data	0	0	2, n= 2	100

In spite of this, the majority of staff occupying the most senior posts, i.e. the Directors of Library Services or Head Librarians, are male (Table 3). On the other hand there are more female than male staff working part-time in job-share partnerships (Table 4)

Table 3: Gender of Directors of Library Services

	Response rate	Response rate %
Male	35, n= 70	50
Female	33, n= 70	47
Missing data	2, n= 70	3

Table 4: Gender balance in part-time job-share work by sector

	Majority findings	Response rate	Response rate %	Missing data	Missing data %
University	More female than male	21, n= 44	47.72	19, n= 44	43.18
College	All female	3, n= 20	15	17, n= 20	85
National	All female	2, n= 4	50	2, n= 4	50
Other	Missing data	0	0	2, n= 2	100

Although liP status does not make a difference to gender balance in the workforce (Table 5), there is, within libraries of similar size, a similarity in the gender balance in the individual staff categories (Table 6). Thus, size (rather than liP status) does appear to matter in terms of gender balance.

Table 5: Gender balance in liP Institution libraries by staff category

	Majority findings		Response rate %	Missing data	Missing data %
Professional	More female than male	16, n= 26	61.53	3, n= 26	11.53
Clerical	More female than male	17, n= 26	65.38	3, n= 26	11.53
Manual	More male than female	3, n= 26	11.53	20, n= 26	76.92
Technical	More male than female	4, n= 26	15.38	14, n= 26	53.84

Table 6: Gender balance in staff categories by size of staff complement

	Majority findings	Response rate	Response rate %	Missing	Missing
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				data	data %
Professional: small complement	More female than male	10, n=27	37.03	2, n=27	7.40
Professional: medium	More female than male	20, n=31	64.51	3, n=31	9.67
Professional: large	More female than male	8, n=12	66.66	2, n=12	16.66
Clerical: small complement	All female	13, n=27	48.14	6, n=27	2.22
Clerical: medium	More female than male	24, n=31	77.41	3, n=31	9.67
Clerical: large	More female than male	9, n=12	75	3, n=12	25
Manual: small complement	Equal gender balance	2, n=27	7.40	25, n=27	92.59
Manual: medium	Equal gender balance	8, n=31	25.80	23, n=31	74.19
Manual: large	Equal gender balance	2, n=12	16.66	8, n=12	66.66
Technical: small complement	All male	4, n=27	14.81	21, n=27	77.77
Technical: medium	More male than female	5, n=31	16.12	18, n=31	58.06
Technical: large	Equal gender balance	2, n=12	16.66	8, n=12	66.66

### **Opening hours and use of staff**

All libraries open after 17.00 Monday to Friday (Table 7), during which time the majority of libraries are staffed using a combination of existing staff and specially contracted staff (MacLean, 2005). The majority of libraries which are open after 17.00 Monday to Friday also close at 22.00 (ibid.).

Table 7: Number of libraries open after 17.00, Monday to Friday

	Response rate	Response rate %
Yes	70, n=70	100
No	0, n=70	0

The majority of libraries are open over the weekend (Table 8), during which time the majority of libraries are staffed using a combination of existing staff and specially contracted staff. More specifically, the majority of those libraries which are open over the weekend have opening times of Saturday 10.00-17.00 and Sunday 13.00-17.00. When asked, the libraries in the minority not open over the weekend said that the reasons for this were that no other university facilities were open and it was too expensive.

Table 8: Number of Libraries open over the weekend

	Response rate	Response rate %
Yes	64	91.5
No	5	7
Missing data	1	1.5

In the majority of libraries, staff capabilities were 'often' taken into account when considering future HR needs (Table 9).

Table 9: Response rate for staff capabilities 'often' being taken into account

Response rate	Response rate %	Missing data	Missing data %
29, n=70	41.42	5, n=70	7.14

### **Use of planning and the extent of staff flexibility**

Succession planning is 'sometimes' considered and when it is, it is mainly among Professional staff (Tables 10 and 11).

Table 10: Response rate for 'Sometimes' considering succession planning

Response rate	Response rate %	Missing data	Missing data %
42, n=70	60	3, n=70	4.28

Table 11: Staff categories in which succession planning would be considered

	Response rate	Response rate %	Missing data	Missing data %
Professional	50, n=70	71.42	20, n=70	28.57
Clerical	35, n=70	50	35, n=70	50

Manual	2, n= 70	2.85	68, n= 70	97.14
Technical	12, n= 70	17.14	58, n= 70	82.85

The majority of libraries are of traditional hierarchical structure with staff 'fairly' flexibly deployed and integrated into other work areas (Tables 12 and 13).

Table 12: Library structure

	Response rate	Response rate %	Missing data	Missing data %
hierarchical	36, n= 70	51	0	0
Flatter	34, n= 70	49	0	0

Table 13: Library structure by sector

	Response rate	Response rate %	Missing data	Missing data %
University: hierarchical	31, n= 44	70.45	0	0
Flatter	13, n= 44	29.54	0	0
College: hierarchical	3, n= 20	15	0	0
Flatter	17, n= 20	5	0	0
National: hierarchical	2, n= 4	50	0	0
Flatter	2, n= 4	50	0	0
Other: hierarchical	1, n= 2	50	0	0
Flatter	1, n= 2	50	0	0

In contrast to the findings under gender, libraries with a smaller staff complement do not deploy staff more flexibly than libraries with a larger staff complement (Table 14).

Table 14: The extent of flexible deployment of staff by size of staff complement

	finding	Response rate	Response rate %	Missing data	Missing data %
Small	Fairly	12, n= 27	44.44	4, n= 27	14.81
Medium	Slightly	14, n= 31	45.16	1, n= 31	3.22
Large	Fairly	7, n= 12	58.12	2, n= 12	16.66

While the majority of libraries are not in IiP institutions, IiP status itself was not a significant point of differentiation in terms of flexibility: as was found in the majority of all libraries surveyed, IiP libraries 'fairly' flexibly deploy staff (Tables 15 and 16).

Table 15: Number of libraries in IiP institutions

	Response rate	Response rate %
Yes	26, n= 70	37.14
No	42, n= 70	60
Missing data	2, n= 70	2.85

Table 16: Response rate for IiP institution libraries 'Fairly' flexibly deploying staff

Response rate	Response rate %	Missing data	Missing data %
11, n= 26	42.30	4, n= 26	15.38

## Discussion

### *General interpretation*

Addressing the question "how effective is HR deployment?" we would suggest the following interpretation of the findings above.

Gender balance in the workplace is showing a marked improvement over time. However the primary research shows persisting gender segregation, and this finding confirms and is confirmed by other research, for example that conducted by Maxwell and Ogden with McTavish (2004, p2) in which the 'inhibitors to and enablers of the career development of female managers' are discussed. (MacLean, 2005, pp 92-93).

Contemporary HRM approaches emphasise the need to adopt a more flexible approach to HR deployment. The primary research showed that libraries are offering extended opening hours into the evenings and over the weekends, and are providing a staffed service during these times. As a result, staff are being deployed in more than one capacity, rather than in one specific role. These research findings reflect findings elsewhere, for example McKenna and Beech (1995) who reported that where such flexible patterns of deployment exist such there can be a tension arising from the number of staff required to maintain a service and the roles in which staff are deployed in order to fulfil the service provision. (MacLean, 2005, p93).

However, in spite of the fact that commentators such as Taylor (2002) have identified the need for flexibility in structures to assist with the flexible deployment of human resources, these investigations show that, by and large, libraries have not extensively adopted this 'best practice'. The majority of libraries surveyed still favour traditional structures which can inhibit the 'rapid response' of human resources as and when required. (MacLean, 2005, p93).

The research findings showed that the majority of institutions do not hold LiP status. As the only generally recognised people standard, LiP provides the requisite framework to provide the means to achieving organizational success through human resources. It is in this area that the research findings differ most from the findings of the supporting literature in the wider non-library context.

So, what are the implications of all this for practitioners?

### ***Impact in practice***

Gender and vertical segregation persist in the workplace in general (Heap, 2005; EOC, 2005), and, this is manifest in the library workforces surveyed where there are predominantly male Directors of Library Services, and predominantly female senior managers, Heads of Divisions. (MacLean, 2005, p 94). "Vertical occupational segregation exists when men and women both work in the same job categories, but men commonly do the more skilled, responsible or better paid work. For example the majority of school heads may be men while the majority of teachers are women, the majority of hospital consultants may be men while the majority of nurses may be women." (Hakim, 1981: 521, quoted in Blackburn, R. M. and Jarman, J., 1997)

### ***Damaging the organisation***

If the existence of such gender and vertical segregation results in competent staff being denied the opportunity to progress and contribute towards the organization meeting its mission objectives, then this is to the detriment of both the organization and the member of staff. An additional immediate implication is that if there is a gender imbalance in the workforce as a whole, or within individual staff categories, posts or levels of appointment, then this will be visible to anyone entering the workplace. This could affect the decision making of any client or potential employee considering an interest in the organization. Both of these implications are within the employer's control.

Demographic changes are outwith the control of the employers. There are fewer people of working age available to be included in the Labour Market (Heap, 2005). In order to maintain a workforce, employers will have to accept greater diversity in the workforce, and this diversity will embrace not only gender but also age and background. Visible diversity which reflects the surrounding community will in turn attract positive interest in the organization. (MacLean, 2005, p 95).

### ***Financial considerations***

Competitive advantage lies in the cost-effective deployment of staff in general (Orlando and Johnson, 2001). In the libraries surveyed there is a consensual

approach to opening hours and the deployment of staff during these times; Most libraries surveyed 'Slightly' or 'Fairly' flexibly deploy staff. Whether these approaches are cost-effective would require further verification through financial analysis. (MacLean, 2005, p95).

Those in charge of library services ought to try to determine whether, as the Follet Report called for value for money concerning library resources (University of Edinburgh 1993), current practice is in fact cost effective or simply the majority approach. The empirical findings show that all libraries are open in the evenings after 17.00 and that during this time the majority of libraries are staffed using a combination of existing staff and specially contracted staff. However, a minority of libraries staff their libraries otherwise and perhaps this alternative approach is the best cost-effective use of staff. Similarly, the empirical findings show that 91.5% of libraries are open over the weekend, with the majority of libraries staffed during this time using the combination of existing staff and specially contracted staff. However 7% of libraries do not open over the weekend. The reasons stated were that it was too expensive and no other university facilities were available during this time. Perhaps this minority of 7% takes the most cost-effective approach. (MacLean, 2005, p 95).

#### *How to be flexible?*

Most libraries did not report that they were completely flexible in the deployment of staff, but that they do so 'Slightly' or 'Fairly'. The argument would appear to be, as far as is feasible in the staff categories concerned, between on the one hand, fully training staff to be completely versatile so all staff are interchangeable and on the other hand training staff to become experts in their specialist area.

If staff are able to turn their hand to anything, when a gap appears in service provision, staffing levels have to be at such a level as to allow for the movement of staff to provide cover. Tasks have then to be either prioritised or re-allocated thus enhancing the existing workload of colleagues. The ability to integrate staff into other work area requires perhaps dormant skills to be kept up-to-date, so as to be able to respond as and when required.

If staff specialise in one area of work, when gaps appear, there is no adequate way of temporarily filling the gap and maintaining service provision. The advantage of flexible deployment would appear to benefit both employer and employee.

#### *Valuing people*

People hold the key to more productive and efficient organizations (Taylor, 2002, p vii) and in the libraries surveyed the majority of host institutions do not hold the people standard of Investor in People. (MacLean, 2005, p 96). IiP status is just one of many indicators by which organizations can benchmark themselves. Whether an employer is an Investor in People can influence potential employees and business partners. Another implication is that at a working level, employees will know that their contribution is valued.

The research findings showed that 37.14% of institutions are IiP. This finding can be seen as pivotal and its' implication key. HR is resource based. IiP status shows a commitment by the employer to the employee. Not to be an Investor in People is an opportunity missed. IiP status can lead to greater staff commitment, greater flexibility attract greater gender balance.(MacLean, 2005, p96).

#### *Benefits to all*

The flexible deployment of staff benefits all. The employee gains greater job satisfaction, and, in the current climate of job evaluation has the chance to more fully use all their skills, abilities and capabilities. Also they can attain new skills. This may in turn improve retention rates. The employer in turn gains a fully flexible workforce, which is able to be deployed responsively to fill any gaps that occur in service provision through staff absence. With staffing budgets taking up a large part of the total library budget, this ensures the cost-effective use of



human resources. When there is no guarantee that a vacancy will be filled, having a responsive staff protects the potential vulnerability of an area of service provision.

#### *Demonstrable fairness*

The co-operative approach may result in more administration, the drawing up of a rota system and the demise of an individual expert in a particular area; however the gain is a uniformly high level of performance, wherever it is needed.

If employers claim that the employee is their greatest asset then each employee should feel valued and know that their capabilities are being fully utilised and stretched. The outward sign of an investment in employees is the People standard, Investor in People. It may be that institutions prefer to put into action their investment in staff rather than aim to achieve the letter-head. However, the achievement of the logo is the public declaration to existing and potentially future staff that their contribution is valued.

Another public sign of an employer's commitment to the fair and equal treatment of staff is the first impression on entering a workplace. That first impression could be that the workforce is predominantly male, young, white and able bodied. The employer must be aware of the current gender balance, inter alia, in the workforce and whether it is fully representative of the demographics of the area surrounding the place of work.

Taylor (2002, p 3) writes that

'If employee resourcing...is to make a long-term contribution to the success of an organization...there is a need regularly to review the policies and practices used in order to maximise the contribution of the employee resourcing function to organizational success' (quoted MacLean, 2005, p98).

These words highlight the resource based nature of human resource management and development, and the importance of its' review to maintain its' currency, relevance and legitimacy.

#### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

In conclusion, this research suggests the following five actions for practitioners:

- The HR function in libraries' institutions review policies on recruitment and that Directors of Library Services review the gender balance in their libraries workforce: looking at gender in the different categories of library staff, the different jobs and salary grades.
- Directors of Library Services review library practices: opening hours and the deployment of staff during these times. That they undertake a cost analysis exercise to determine whether practices are indeed cost-effective, or simply the majority approach.
- Directors of Library Services encourage the integration of staff into as many work areas as is feasible.
- Institutions that are not already Investors in People consider trying to achieve the status.
- Finally, Sconul adopts the use of generic performance indicators into the existing Statistical Return, which will facilitate benchmarking, the sharing of current practices and may encourage debate on what is the most effective and efficient approach to HR deployment. (MacLean, 2005, pp 98-99).

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