

Person Organisation Fit in UK HEI: Espoused Organisational Values versus Values in Action from the perspective of the academic

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Research Domains

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Abstract

This paper explores the alignment between espoused values and values in action within UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) through the lens of Person-Organisation Fit (PO-Fit) theory. The study uses qualitative interviews with 21 academic faculty members from 21 HEIs to investigate how well the espoused values of HEIs align with those experienced by staff (values in action). The findings highlight a significant misalignment, with many participants reporting weak awareness of their institution's espoused values. Furthermore, the disconnect between espoused values and values in action, such as a focus on metrics, compliance, and brand management, contributes to staff disenchantment and dissonance. The study suggests that for HEIs to enhance faculty satisfaction and retention, it is critical that their values are not just stated but also genuinely reflected in their culture and practices. The research underscores the importance of PO-Fit in academic settings for long-term institutional success.

Full paper

The Higher Education (HE) sector has undergone significant transformation in recent decades, driven by government reforms such as the Robbins Report (1963), Dearing Report (1997), and Browne Report (2010), which aimed to increase efficiency and effectiveness. These reforms have corporatised universities, leading to a greater focus on market-driven practices and the rise of new managerialism, characterised by a top-down corporate management approach (Parker, 2011; Shepherd, 2018).

The concept of aligning individual values with organisational values has been central to the private sector for decades, with companies aiming to create value by ensuring a fit between employees' values and those of the organisation (McDonald & Gandz, 1991). In recent

years, this practice has also become prevalent in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), where institutions frequently espouse values to reflect or influence their organisational practices (Kabanoff et al., 1995).

Person-Organisation Fit (PO-Fit) theory focuses on the alignment between an individual's values and those of the organisation they work for. It posits that when an individual's values align with those of the organisation, it leads to greater job satisfaction, higher organisational commitment, and better performance (Finegan, 2000). Conversely, misalignment can lead to dissatisfaction, reduced commitment, and higher turnover (Kristof, 1996).

This paper examines the alignment between espoused values and values in action within UK HEIs, exploring the impact of this alignment or dissonance from the perspective of academic employees through the lens of PO-Fit theory.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was used in this study, involving semi-structured interviews with 21 academic faculty members from 21 different HEIs across the UK. The interview data was processed using ChatGPT, an AI tool employing natural language processing (NLP) to assist in coding and theme identification. AI-generated themes were compared with human-generated codes to ensure rigor and accuracy, demonstrating how AI can supplement traditional qualitative research methods (Christou, 2023; Hamilton et al., 2023).

Findings

The analysis, grounded in PO-Fit theory, identified several key findings:

1. **Espoused Values Awareness:** Few participants could recall their institution's espoused values directly. While some participants mentioned key terms related to the university's broader mission, these values were not seen as influencing their professional lives. Furthermore, few participants cited the institution's values as a reason for applying for their roles, indicating weak alignment between personal motivations and the organisational culture.
2. **Discrepancies Between Espoused and Values in Action:** Many participants noted a significant misalignment between the values espoused by their institutions and the actual values in action. This misalignment, as described by PO-Fit theory, suggests poor organisational fit and was often attributed to structural constraints, leadership behaviours, and financial pressures within the UK HE sector (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005).

3. Personal Alignment with Espoused Values and Values in Action: While many participants felt a personal alignment with their institution's espoused values, the idealistic nature of these values led some to question, "Who wouldn't?" This reflects a common critique in PO-Fit theory, where the alignment of personal and organisational values is not enough if the institution's values are perceived as merely performative or marketing-driven (Cable & Edwards, 2004). Participants described a growing sense of dissonance between their own values and the values in action at their HEIs, particularly as they observed an increasing focus on metrics, compliance, and brand management. This contributed to a sense of disenchantment among staff, further eroding the fit (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005).

Conclusion

This study offers valuable insights into the alignment between espoused values and values in action within UK HEIs, viewed through the lens of PO-Fit theory. The findings reveal a significant misalignment between the values HEIs espouse and the values experienced by academic staff. Despite the presence of clearly stated values in institutional documents, these values often fail to resonate with the daily experiences of academics. The weak application of espoused values, coupled with a focus on performance metrics and brand management, contributes to a growing sense of dissonance among staff.

The misalignment between personal values and the HEI's values in action is compounded by internal and external pressures such as financial constraints, leadership behaviours, and internal structures and processes. All of the above appear to reduce job satisfaction and institutional commitment. This misalignment not only weakens PO-Fit but also leads to negative outcomes, including disengagement, and identity conflict.

The study highlights the importance of HEIs not just espousing values, but living them. For HEIs to improve PO-Fit and enhance academic faculty satisfaction and retention, it is essential that their values are genuinely reflected in their actions and organisational culture.