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Challenging Times: an analysis of current developments and future prospects for industrial relations in the UK HE sector (0104)**Aims and objectives:**

The paper reports the preliminary outcomes of a twelve-month scoping exercise to identify what, at this pivotal moment for UK higher education, are the central industrial relations issues facing the sector. The purpose of the scoping exercise was not to yield a comprehensive list of substantive findings, but rather to map the terrain for a larger-scale study. It did this by:

- a) developing a conceptual framework that takes full account of recent, relevant literature (particularly 'grey' sources) as well as the substantive outcomes of the pilot study, and
- b) devising a research strategy that takes full account of the procedural outcomes of the pilot study, particularly with regard to ethics and access.

We have chosen to present the paper as part of the symposium on *The University as Workplace* because we wish to maximize opportunities for discussion of this work-in-progress with colleagues engaged in similar research.

Research Questions:

The following research questions have underpinned the scoping exercise:

1. What theoretical frameworks such as those within published literature on industrial relations, already exist to support an analysis of IR issues in the UK higher education sector?
2. From the perspectives of key participants (detailed below), what are the current IR issues in UK higher education?
3. From the perspectives of key participants, what are the future IR issues in UK higher education?
4. What would be the most appropriate research design for a larger-scale study on the same topic, and how might such a study overcome issues relating to ethics and access?

Rationale:

In recent years, the UK higher education sector has grown substantially in terms of its strategic significance, and experienced considerable change in terms of form and structure. To date, these changes have been largely driven by the twin impulses of seeking to improve social mobility whilst also seeking to maximise competitive advantage in a globalised knowledge economy. However, this increase in scale has been accompanied by a range of complex 'push-pull' pressures within the sector.

On the one hand, there has been a clear trend towards seeking to unify HE institutions, and seeking to overcome historical divisions. This might best be illustrated by the removal of the binary divide in 1992, but it is also exemplified by the introduction of the Framework Agreement for the Modernisation of Pay Structures in Higher Education in 2004. The Framework Agreement sought to provide a national pay framework for all academic and support staff covering both pre and post 1992 institutions – it represented ‘the largest human resources exercise conducted in the sector for many decades’ (UCEA 2008:6).

At the same time, however, there been the encouragement of the ‘entrepreneurial university’ and the culture of academic capitalism (Slaughter and Leslie 1997). In this latter scenario, institutional difference, autonomy and flexibility are privileged. These ‘push-pull’ pressures are reflected in the composition of those groups representing employee and employer interests. Although both employers and academics in the sector are now represented by single bodies (UCEA and UCU respectively), considerable differences and divisions remain. On the employer side, individual institutions are represented by a multiplicity of sometimes conflicting ‘mission groups’, whilst employees’ organisations have struggled to come to terms with the unified negotiating machinery (JNCHES) that was presaged by the Bett Report (1999). In addition, the combined impact of the Comprehensive Spending Review and the Browne Report (2010) is likely to accelerate the pressures towards further fragmentation and inter-institution competition.

The developments outlined above are generating substantial industrial relations issues. At one level, the number of disputes is likely to rise as individual institutions face more and more pressure to reduce payroll costs and intensify academic ‘productivity’. At another level, the IR structures designed to ‘manage’ these tensions are likely to come under increasing pressure themselves as union demands for sector-wide parity are met by employer demands for increased flexibility.

Despite the significance and scale of these issues, UK HE industrial relations are very under-researched. Although there is an established literature relating to academic labour, this seldom makes links between scholarship as work, and scholars as workers, organised or otherwise. Similarly, although there has been increased interest in the management of universities (most notably Deem et al’s ESRC study, 2007), such studies pay little attention to industrial relations issues, despite union density in the sector being relatively high, and industrial relations structures within individual institutions being quite well-established. This is all the more surprising given that the IR structures within compulsory school have been the subject of two ESRC-funded studies, and that the turbulent developments in further education are regularly reported upon. The fact that there are no comparable studies in the HE sector means that even small-scale scoping studies like this one can make a valuable contribution to our understanding of this under-researched but highly significant aspect of university life.

Research Design:

The scoping research has encompassed three elements:

1. A systematic literature review. This began with a search for all articles written in English in refereed journals between 1985 (publication of the Jarratt Report) to 2011. It was

global in scope, although it focused particularly on the UK, USA, and Australia. It also included a search for relevant material from 'grey' sources, most notably trade union and employer publications, relevant material published by individual HEIs and publically available, and also newspaper and professional journal sources (such as the *Times Higher Education Supplement* Archive).

2. 'Scoping interviews' with key informants. Data collections is on-going, so it is not possible, at this stage, to specify precise numbers – the total is expected to be between 10 and 15. The sample includes Vice-Chancellor(s), HR Directors and trade union officers, at both national and local level. Representatives of both chartered and statutory universities have been deliberately included in order to reflect key differences across the sector.

3. Data analysis, formulation of research questions and research design. This work will follow on from an analysis of all the collated material. The resulting research questions and research design will be presented to the conference audience for critical review.

References:

Deem, R., Hillyard, S. and Reed, M. (2007) *Knowledge, higher education, and the new managerialism* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Slaughter, S. and Leslie, L. (1997) *Academic capitalism: politics, policies and the entrepreneurial university* Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press.

UCEA (2008) *A review of the implementation of the Framework Agreement for the modernisation of pay structures in higher education* London: UCEA.