Journal of Learning Design

A Systems Model Comparing Australian and Chinese HRM Education

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Abstract

This paper explores the implications for learning design in HRM education in the 21st century. An open systems perspective is used to argue the importance of establishing productive relationships between academia, professional associations, regulators and industry (resource inputs) to support the creation of optimal learning environments (the transformation process) to generate work-ready HR graduates (the product output). A comparison of Australian and Chinese curricula indicates similarities in terms of approximate programme weightings of general business units, core HRM, and elective units. It is recommended that curriculum design take into account the need to remain research-based academically, yet industry-focused, in the context of an international workplace. A key to this is the collaboration among the resource inputs. The curriculum formulation process is examined, with implications for 21st century HRM education design.

Keywords

Human Resource Management, education, HR graduate, curriculum

Introduction – The Profession of HRM

An explicit assumption is that human resource management (HRM) can be seen as a profession. It is acknowledged that the Human Resource (HR) function in organisations and the emerging profession of HRM have developed differently in different countries, in response to their various contexts. This assumption is based on the perspective that as an occupation, HRM has a clearly articulated body of knowledge underpinning the field, and prescribes performance expectations and ethical conduct of those in the profession (Farndale & Brewster, 2005).

University curricula are commonly seen as critical to ensuring the relevance of professions in society. Professions such as medicine, accounting and law have established rigorous approaches to

the education and development of individuals within their membership. Though HRM is increasingly taken to be a profession in its own right, it remains a work in progress to achieve a general consensus within business schools and in the workplace as to what constitutes the appropriate theory and skill set as a foundation for HRM.

Typically, professions are known for their disciplined body of knowledge and codes of conduct for ethical practice for members of the profession, who are required by community-accepted regulation to undertake long periods of tertiary study and vocational preparation. At first sight, HRM would seem to have these characteristics (Davidson, 2014). While there is some diversity of opinion as to the essential competencies for a HR manager, or HR professional, it is instructive to examine the inputs to the educational process by academia, professional associations, regulators and industry.

Educating the HR Professional

The future of any profession depends on the education and development process that feeds aspiring members into it, as much as on the acceptance of its professionals by a receptive market. The best possible education and development of 21st century professionals is essential for the successful future of the HR profession.

HR educational institutions planning their curricula independently may emerge eventually as having adopted an appropriate mix of content and practice, but without industry consultation, they risk committing their academics to developing, teaching, and researching in areas of HRM that are deficient in scope, depth, or long term relevance. The stakes are high, with lengthy and expensive lead times in course preparation and approval processes, in the professional development of staff, and in significant financial and reputational consequences for business schools.

Addressing the question of curriculum content has long been the subject of extensive research and comment by professional and academic stakeholders (Davidson, 2014). The conclusion appears to be that 21st century HR education needs to be evidence-based in content and industry-relevant in skill formation. Forces influencing curricular decision making come from academic research and teaching experience, and from government regulators and the wider profession itself, and through the various program accreditation and recognition processes (Coetzer, 2015).

Australian Tertiary Education Programmes in HRM

In overview, there are two broadly accepted academic paths for entry into the HR profession in Australia. These are the three-year undergraduate bachelor degree in Business majoring in HR (BBus (HRM)), and the two-year postgraduate masters degree in Business majoring in HR (MBus (HRM)). Related qualifications include the Graduate Certificate in Management (the foundation quarter of the MBus), and the Graduate Diploma in Business Administration (HRM) (half of the MBus (HRM)). The bachelor and master courses typically cover similar HR content areas although the post-graduate course is, not surprisingly, at a higher level.

Market forces are driving organisations to demand ever higher levels of competence and qualifications in their HR professionals. Entry-level qualifications are the BBus (HRM) and the GradCertMgt (HRM) or GradDip BusAdmin (HRM), and the comprehensive MBus (HRM). Typically, business schools aim at providing a broad education in business with a specialist qualification at the specified level in HRM. Increasingly, the market is expecting this academic foundation, along with practical experience gained through internships, placements, or other means of workplace learning, to produce the work-ready graduate (Richards, 2015). The diversity of expectations reflects the diverse work environments of industry in which HR professionals operate.

The curricula of tertiary programmes are typically based on the business school academics' judgement of what is appropriate for the different levels of qualification. The areas of theory and research are aligned to the professional competencies demanded by the market. In this regard, direction is provided by the Australian Human Resource Institute (AHRI) (the association for HR professionals), through its National Accreditation Committee, that accredits HR education courses, on behalf of the wider profession (Davidson, 2015).

Chinese Tertiary Education Programmes in HRM

In China, HR professionals typically undergo a somewhat different academic preparation for their roles. There are two broad paths of entry into the HR profession via university qualification. These are: the four-year undergraduate bachelor degree in Business Management (BBM) majoring in HRM (although the major is not included in parentheses in the postnominal); and, either the three-year or two-year postgraduate MEM (Master of Enterprise Management) or the MBA (Master of Business Administration) (specialising in HRM).

As in Australia, the bachelor and master courses in China typically cover the same content areas although the postgraduate courses are at a higher level and provide content in more detail. Though, in China, there is no mandated qualification for entry to the HR profession, those responsible for the HR function in organisations are able to upgrade their skills and to have their professional status recognised. Many HR professionals choose to return to part-time study to update their knowledge or improve their qualifications. The curricula of university courses are typically based on the Education Guide issued by the Business Management Discipline Guidance Committee of China Ministry of Education. This committee is composed of senior academics. As HRM is seen as belonging to both public management and business management, sources of guidance in content and teaching of curricula are provided to the universities from both areas. Each university's business school develops its own education program for the undergraduate and postgraduate of HRM majors by reference to this Education Guide. The business schools differ in some areas based on their judgment of what is appropriate for the different levels of qualification, and what areas of theory and research are aligned to those professional competencies demanded by the market.

However, the core content of most HR programmes is relatively consistent across the approximately 200 colleges and universities offering programmes with majors in HRM in China. About a quarter of these offer the master level programmes and receive special funding as part of the *211 Project* and the *985 Project* – formulated and implemented by the China Ministry of Education to "invigorate the country through science, technology and education" (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (PRC), 2010).

Though funded by the PRC and advised by the committee acting as guidance and regulator, questions still arise about the richness and diversity of curricular advice to educators. An extensive review of research on HRM in China identified that "there are insufficient dialogues among the community of Chinese business and management researchers which are crucial for knowledge building, integration of literature and theoretical advancement" (Cooke, 2009, p. 27). It is proposed that the invigoration sought by China and the enhanced professional development sought in Australia are most likely to be achieved through a vibrant relationship between the stakeholders in HR education. The challenge for curriculum planners in China, as in Australia, is to use evidence-based decision making while remaining true to a national identity with contextual relevance (Warner, 2010; Zhu, Zhang, & Shen, 2012).

It is observed that in the absence of a national professional association, most of the guidance as to curriculum content and teaching comes directly from the government's Teaching Guidance Committee that is also responsible for teacher training. Though there is overall consistency across the country, there are local adaptations of title and content of qualification. The context for reform of HR education in China has been explained as:

> The visible changes can be seen in the Chinese state's changing from a dominant employer to a regulator, with its intervention approach becoming more sophisticated from the heavy dependence on administrative regulations towards a regulator with combined mechanisms of legislation, standard setting, best practice sharing and the promotion of progressive HRM practices and corporate social responsibility.
>
> Cooke (2012, pp. 8-9)

Comparison of Australian and Chinese Master level curricula

Table 1 compares typical Australian and Chinese master level curriculum structures. The table shows that in both countries, the master level degree in HRM has about one third general business content, one third core HRM content and one third electives. Electives allow students to specialise in selected areas in or related to HRM (Davidson, 2014).

Almost all the graduate HRM programmes in Australian business schools are accredited by AHRI, having curricular content aligned with AHRI guidelines. The curricula are subject to AHRI audit every three years as part of the reaccreditation process in which the professional association thereby has input to the curriculum through the process detailed below. There is no single national association for HR professionals in China.

Table 1. *Comparison of typical Australian and Chinese master level degree content*

Units by Groups	Australian Master Level Degree Structure (duration 2 years)	Chinese Master Level Degree Structure (duration 2 or 3 years)
Generalist Business units	Management Theory and Practice, Strategic Analysis	Introduction to Management, Economics Statistics, Strategic Management, Psychology, Mao Zedong and Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, English
Core HRM units	HRM Theory and Practice, Organisational Behaviour, Talent Management, Managing the High-Performance Organisation, Self-Leadership, Strategic HR Development, Consulting and Change Management, Leadership and Executive Coaching, Contemporary HR Issues, Strategic HRM	Labour Relationship Management, Organisational Behaviour, Job Analysis, Testing and Evaluation of Personnel Quality, Compensation Management, Training and Development, Project Performance Management
Electives	Project Leadership, International HRM, Business in Australia, Cross-Cultural Negotiation	Strategic Management, Research Methods, Intercultural Management, Finance Management, Accounting, Marketing, Labour Policy Analysis, HRM Professional English

The determination of HRM competencies and accreditation of programmes

Many Professional bodies such as the Society for HRM (SHRM) in the United States, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) in the UK and the Australian Human Resources Institute (AHRI) in Australia have all sought to identify the critical elements of professional development for HR professionals. These professional bodies continue to conduct research into the anticipated workplaces of the future and the corresponding capabilities likely to be required by HR professionals (SHRM, 2010). For example, AHRI proposed that the changing workplace requires the 21st century HR professional to be a workforce and workplace transformer, a work-life integrator, a next generation talent manager, a performance rewarder, a learning architect and builder, a CSR marshall, an engaging communicator, a diversity champion, and a regulatory wizard (AHRI, 2010).

AHRI predicted that by 2020 the old transactional HR functions will have been transferred to smart software or outsourced with employees' careers managed from recruitment to training and performance evaluation via IT portals (Schermerhorn et al., 2014). The imperative will be to remove "excess" HR service functions and time-consuming record keeping. It is likely that strategic HR will become a core business function, interpreting context and focussed on dynamic workforce planning. The competencies supporting these functions are not yet widely available.

How is the profession to respond to these changes in its operating environment? A 2015 survey by AHRI of 821 Australian non-HR executives and HR professionals offered five recommendations for HR professionals to improve their function: (i) anticipate and lead change; (ii) live and breathe professionalism and credibility; (iii) prioritise behaviour over knowledge; (iv) be more self-critical; and, (v) champion the genuine care of employees (AHRI, 2016a). As a professional association, AHRI has researched and detailed those behaviours and underlying capabilities seen by HR professionals as essential for competent practice as an HR professional. The debate rightly invites a response by universities in their planning of research and teaching programmes. There is a certain face validity acknowledged in the expectation that HR professionals exhibit skills and behaviours that are future-oriented, credible, problem solvers along with being collaborative, courageous, and solutions-driven (AHRI, 2016b).

HR professionals rate highly the need to be "stakeholders, mentors and coaches, business-driven, critical and enquiring thinkers, expert practitioners, and ethical and credible activists" (AHRI, 2016a). However, these desirable characteristics may constitute a little more than a comforting wish list unless they can be demonstrable outcomes from both formal educational curriculum and defined professional development and support opportunities.

Overall, such surveys provide useful input to education design but need the additional implementation link to actual content and pedagogy to fulfil their purpose. Presumably this is the province of the HR educator through evidence-based decision making and tertiary teaching and learning expertise grounded in extensive experience (see, for example, Davidson, Southey, & Williams, 1995). In Australia, AHRI has taken the lead in accrediting HR educational programmes based on the alignment of content with the AHRI recommendations for specific topic areas to be included (AHRI, 2011). These topic areas are communicated to business schools as the result of discussions in AHRI's National Accreditation Committee, made up of several industry HR professionals to provide advice from a spread of workplaces, and two senior HR academics. In addition to AHRI accreditation, the giant American-oriented SHRM, with an increasingly global reach, invites Australian and other HR educators to submit their curricula for assessment leading to a statement of alignment with SHRM-recommended course content.

Even in those processes that are used to accredit university degrees majoring in HRM, there is some latitude for education providers to determine the content and structure of their HRM degrees that will provide the knowledge and skills necessary for HRM professionals to undertake their emerging roles in organisations. Variations in content and emphasis reflect different priorities across business schools.

At a higher level, accreditation of business schools is also a high priority in tertiary business education. Universities use accreditation to embed quality assurance and continuous improvement processes as well as to claim prestige and reputation in marketing within a lucrative, competitive, and crowded educational environment. The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) in the USA and the European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS) in Europe are recognised as two of the most influential quality agencies in tertiary education, with accreditation by either or both associations being highly sought after internationally.

Whether an institution is accredited or is otherwise recognised by a single professional association (such as SHRM, CIPD or AHRI) or, at a more generic level (by AACSB or EQUIS), there is an assumption made that such institutions will have degrees that have been developed with the needs of various stakeholders represented, designed and delivered to ensure quality outcomes for the professions involved. At both undergraduate level and graduate levels, the content of HRM degrees typically consists of several generalist business units, that is, management, finance, accounting, economics, marketing and the like, with some organisational units such as leadership and change management that are not specifically HRM units, and several specialised HRM units such as recruitment and selection, remuneration and compensation, performance management, and perhaps employment law and industrial relations (although there is wide variation in the names of units.

Significantly, while the profession now emphasises the contribution of HRM to the bottom line, a survey of 49 master degree programs as early as 2005 indicated that only a third required courses from non-HRM business areas (Langbert, 2005). The study observed that there was incomplete agreement as to what ought to constitute a required curriculum in HRM, and recommended the inclusion of general business units. Later commentators have endorsed this view (Coetzer, 2015; Schermerhorn et al., 2014).

Implications of HRM Education

This overview corroborates the emerging wisdom that HR professionals need to have sound foundation generalist skills in business management along with foundation knowledge and skills in a variety of core and specialist HRM areas. This balance appears to guide curriculum decision-making in Australia and China as well as in many other countries (Schermerhorn, et al., 2014).

Further, there is an obvious demand for graduates to be work-ready with relevant content knowledge and skills that can be employed in the changing globalised workplace (Schmidt, 2015). It is logical that university decision makers collaborate with professional associations and view the graduate student as the product of the education process. This raises the question of how students ought to be educated for HR roles. The traditional information-based educational methodologies are rapidly becoming outmoded and are likely to be too rigid to adapt to contemporary conditions. While expecting students to know the theory and research that supports it, there is the increasing demand from industry for critical skills and the ability to reflect productively on learning (Davidson, 2014).

Transformation Process

The curricula are likely to reflect the resource inputs from academia, from professional associations, from regulators, and from industry itself as the consumer of the educational output – the competent and responsible HR professionals in the community. This is depicted in the model in Figure 1 below.

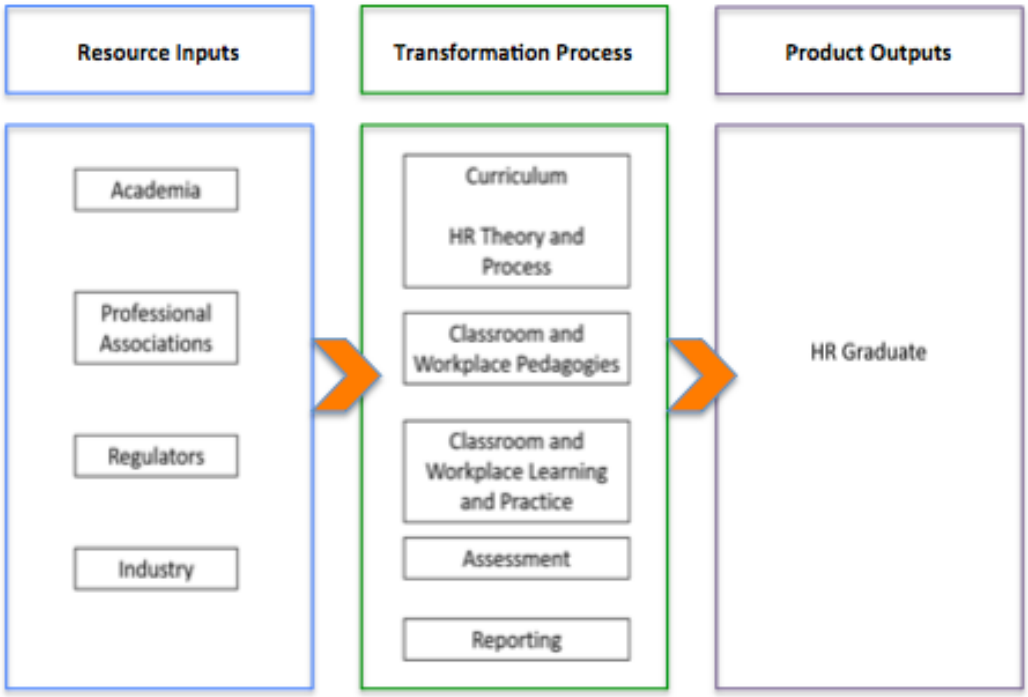

Figure 1. HRM Education Open Systems model.

The pedagogical "how" of the transformation process is likely to rely less on the straightforward transmission of information and more on the personal development of the student (Muff et al., 2013). Implications for 21st century HR education include the use of technology to enable cross-cultural work experience during the student's program along with internships and occupational placements to provide real-world experience that facilitates reflection on what is being learned. In an increasingly connected world of work and commerce, international business knowledge and skills are likely to be seen as critical threshold competencies rather than optional extras. Education programs will need to incorporate approaches and content to deliver on this workplace knowledge and skill set, a point made a decade ago (Langbert, 2005). The assessment and reporting function provides a mechanism for the assurance of learning, emphasing that the transformation process is in a dynamic relationship with the product output (the HR graduate).

Thus, it can be expected that HR education will become more internationalised to prepare students for the global workplace with expectations of mobility and cross-cultural competence and interpersonal skills. Concepts of student-controlled group learning around specific scenarios and issues in HR are not new and have been well canvassed (Davidson, Southey, & Williams, 1995). Recommendations such as global immersion, reflective learning and the emphasis on critical thinking made over two decades ago are still relevant (e.g., Bigelow, 1994; Rinesmith, Williamson, Ehlen, & Maxwell, 1989; Weick & Van Orden, 1990). They continue to appear in business education journals (Bisoux, 2011; Shinn, 2011).

Looking ahead, to maximise relevant learning and thus work-ready competence, it is also likely that there will be a greater curricular interest in HRM placements, internships, and work-integrated learning (WiL) (Abraham, 2012). WiL provides students with an opportunity to integrate academic learning with real-world experience. It encourages both industry feedback on individual capability and self-reflection (Jackson & Wilton, 2016, p. 282). The increasing importance accorded pre-graduation work experience has been examined in the planning profession (Grant-Smith & McDonald, 2015), who held that employers of planners expected graduates to be work ready. It is not unreasonable to assume similar expectations exist in HRM.

Key areas in which WIL promotes career development learning include the ability to self-assess work-related capabilities, insight into the realities of a profession, exposure to guidance and mentoring by established professionals, and enhanced confidence and career planning and networking. It is proposed that such education is critical for the HR profession's future relevance (SHRM, 2010).

Conclusion

A comparison of Australian Masters level HR programs with those offered in China indicates considerable alignment of approximately one third generalist business content, one third core HR content, and one third electives allowing specialisation depending on the student and the context. Even allowing for the influence of culture, this ubiquitous degree of alignment suggests an overall relevance of the content with industry needs and priorities in both countries. This commonality across the two national systems is likely to be significant when considering student exchanges and internships internationally as well as when assessing the demand for the globalised graduate who is expected to be mobile and inter-culturally competent through 21st century learning and experience.

The profession of HR is under organisational pressure to perform as a business partner, and its members are required to be appropriately qualified in generalist business skills, rather than in just a narrow range of core HR functions. Curricula need to reflect this.

Inputs to the master level curriculum are likely to be optimally sourced from academics, comprising those institutions responsible for offering curricula (presumably on the basis of evidence-based decision making), from the professional associations who represent the profession – and also directly from the customers – society and its industries – who know what skill sets they require in entry-level as well as senior HR professionals. Whereas in Australia, where the professional association makes considerable input into HRM curriculum planning, in China the absence of a professional HRM association means that most curricular guidance comes not from the profession offering feedback, and from industry associations, but from the regulator (the Teaching Guidance Committee of the Ministry of Education). It is difficult to assess the impact of this difference between the two national systems. It is possible that in time, curricular development may be supplemented and improved by coordinated input from the profession to business schools.

The emphasis on graduates' emerging with work-ready capability is likely to require business schools to increase their engagement with industry directly through alliancing in work-integrated learning design and various practicums, internships, placements, and other international experiences that contribute to a 21st century education. An alliance model for work-integrated learning that involves tertiary educators communicating directly with professional associations, regulators, and industry may ensure that students graduate with real world knowledge and capabilities.

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