

# Academics' effectiveness and professional development in Croatia: Challenges for human resource management in higher education institutions

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## Abstract

The relationship between higher education and profound global economic, social, technological and political transformations underway in recent decades is attracting growing public and professional interest. In this context, governmental bodies, higher education institutions and academics are under pressure to improve the effectiveness and professional development of academic staff. This article explores the need to adapt current human resource management practices in higher education in Croatia as a response. The article presents recent empirical data from higher education institutions in Austria, Croatia and Finland collected in the international project "Modernisation of Higher Education Institutions through Enhancement of Human Resources Management Function". Descriptive indicators of current human resource management practices in higher education institutions reveal substantially different levels of development and use of certain practices to manage the effectiveness and professional development of academics. This article discusses the role of the human resource function at higher education institutions, the possibilities of using specific human resource development activities designed for different job roles held by academics, the importance of a performance management system that suits the academic environment, and the need for a strategic approach to human resource management at higher education institutions.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions are under unprecedented pressure to satisfy requirements concerning accountability, effectiveness and applicability in all of their activities; including research (knowledge creation), teaching (knowledge dispersion) and their public role (engaging in socially relevant knowledge). For instance, the results of scientific research are expected to be directly transferable to economic development, teaching should support learners in taking on positions as future professionals, while academic knowledge should help address a range of societal challenges. To better answer these demands of modern society, higher education institutions are expected to apply new approaches to human resource management, this includes managing both the effectiveness and professional development of academics; a process that disrupts the social privileges and monopolies that academics have traditionally enjoyed. This article explores the latter, and whether policies and laws governing higher education, as well as human resource management practices, have been adjusted in response to these new demands. Most importantly: how are changes reflected in the effectiveness and professional development of academic staff? This article addresses these points primarily by presenting empirical data on current human resource management practices at higher education institutions in Croatia and by comparing with certain more developed European countries.

## 2 | EUROPEAN AND NATIONAL POLICIES FOR HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AT HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

The European Union's policies on human resource management in the academic sector clearly aim to make higher education institutions more responsible for the recruitment, development and management of their academic staff. At least three European documents that discuss the human resource (HR) function at higher education institutions and link it to quality assurance are relevant. First, the agenda for the modernisation of Europe's higher education systems (EC, 2011) posits the reform and modernisation of higher education institutions on the competence and motivation of the staff. The motivation and competence of academic staff is understood to depend on: (a) professionally implemented transparent and fair recruitment practices; (b) initial training is continued with professional development; and (c) there is a systematic approach to documenting, transparently monitoring, recognising and rewarding staff for excellence in teaching and research. Policymakers believe these conditions are needed to ensure that Europe creates, attracts and retains highly competent academic staff. Second, according to a European Commission report (2017) based on data collected in collaboration with eighteen ENQA member agencies from fourteen countries, the trend of higher education institutions' growing institutional autonomy is evident in several areas, including in human resource management policies and processes in the academic sector. Third, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), alongside key areas of quality assurance—from higher education institution management, infrastructure, and funding to curriculum development, teacher competencies, and student acquisition of learning outcomes—extends the concept of "quality" by stressing the importance of a supportive work environment (ENQA, ESU, EUA, & EURASHE, 2015). On top of staff expertise, the specific ESG standard for academic staff focuses on various aspects of the work environment like the employment process, working conditions, professional development, career advancement opportunities, and the balance between teaching and research. In addition, the report of the expert group on "Shaping the future of the human resources strategy for researchers "HRS4R" (EU, 2015) emphasises the need for a proper recruitment process for researchers. Higher education institutions which have implemented it have the honour of displaying the "HRS4R" logo.

National policies in Croatia in terms of directions for human resource management in higher education institutions (HEI) are well defined. The Strategy of Education, Science and Technology aims at increasing management efficiency at higher education institutions (Official Gazette 124/2014, objective 2.1). Higher education

institutions are expected to function autonomously and responsibly to develop and implement an effective model of management for meeting the objectives. Although not explicitly stated, this encompasses effective management of academic staff. In addition, the funding changes in higher education in Croatia over the last few years have led to the introduction of strategically oriented planning for the promotion of academics and related funding. Further, the regular process of re-accreditation obliges higher education institutions to inform the Expert Committee and the Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE) about the number and qualifications of the academic staff, as well as precise details of their professional development, teaching load, or research activities and associated results.

The above-mentioned policies and guidelines do not indicate any loss of autonomy at higher education institutions. On the contrary, although higher education institutions' strategic planning is aligned with European and national policies as well as priorities established for the higher education sector, the formulation and implementation of a human resources management and development strategy is up to each higher education institution itself. An effective strategic HR approach is the only tool available for realising the general strategic intent of the higher education institution. It should include a common, realistic vision of the way a particular higher education institution should manage and develop its most valuable resources: its academic staff. This means a strategic approach to human resource management must include a clear definition of the systems, processes and activities the higher education institution will rely on to attract, recruit, select, evaluate, develop, promote, motivate, retain and reward its academic staff. In practice, a strategic approach to HR management in higher education institutions has not prevailed in Croatia. This is due either to organisational inertia, lack of policy level guidance, or unclear authorities and responsibilities (between the state and a certain higher education institution) regarding the recruitment and progression of academic staff.

Further, the wider field of strategic human resource management as well as particular aspects of implementing HR management and development systems, processes and activities with a view to making the necessary improvements in the academic sector are investigated relatively rarely in Croatia. Admittedly, one can find research that either studies specific human resource management processes or deals with the consequences of human resource management practices for academics. For example, Begičević Redep et al. (2015) present a model for improving the selection process in an educational context. The developed model is based on weighted criteria calculated according to the judgement of managers and professors at higher education institutions with the aim of making decisions on the best candidate for job positions at higher education institutions more accurate. Further, Turk and Ledić (2016) studied the competencies academics need at the start of their senior career and proposed a model of multiple competencies, which enables a synergy of different academic activities without strictly set hierarchical frameworks. Some of the research on the outcomes of human resource management at higher education institutions deal with the contributions made while applying different coping strategies to reduce the workload-related stress of university teachers to explaining job satisfaction and mental and physical well-being (Slišković et al., 2012) or examining specific aspects of the relationship between job attitudes, job performance and the turnover intentions of scientists (Jerneić & Kutleša, 2012). HR management research at higher education institutions in Croatia compares to that in other European countries. Namely, a large number of studies examine only certain aspects of human resource management at a higher education institution, such as: developing academic competencies (e.g., Williams et al., 2016), performance evaluation (e.g., Thornton, 2014), recruitment and selection (Siekkinen et al., 2016) or promotion of academic staff (e.g., Sanz-Menéndez & Cruz-Castro, 2019). Here, it should be stressed that a considerable proportion of the studies that address human resource management issues fall within the scope of quality assurance in higher education (e.g., Elken & Stensaker, 2018; Seyfried & Reith, 2019).

Despite a growing interest in this area, there is a lack of comprehensive research that considers the overall process of human resource management (HRM) at higher education institutions. The authors of this article participated in a recent Erasmus + funded project titled "HRMinHEI" on this topic. The HRMinHEI project focused on the modernisation of higher education institutions through the enhancement of human resources management

functions.<sup>1</sup> The aim of the project was to “map existing practices and prompt future reforms, which would foster further development of HRM policies and practices in European higher education” (Pausits, 2017, p. 8). As an outcome of the project, a comprehensive model of human resource management in higher education institutions was produced. The model is described in the following.

### 3 | ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHOD

The analytical framework we have used for the development of human resource management in higher education institutions (HRMinHEI) is a slightly adapted version of “HR Navigator” (Cimerman et al., 2003). HR Navigator was developed as a comprehensive process model of human resource management by the AT Adria consulting group, a company specialising in human resource development. Originally, it was designed to be a process-consulting tool to help organisations in implementing changes, while addressing the challenges of management and leadership in organisations from different industries in Slovenia and Croatia. The model has also been used as a framework in the review and analysis of organisational interventions designed for preserving employees' mental health (Sušanj, 2012), as well as to clarify the roles of HR specialists and managers in preventing stress in the workplace (Sušanj, 2013). The HRMinHEI analytical framework (for details, see Pausits (ed.), 2017) contains ten interrelated components or sub-processes of human resource management in higher education institutions:

1. *HR strategy and planning.* The process of strategic and operational planning of all elements of human resources management in the higher education institution, based on the national policy for higher education and institution specific strategies (e.g., number of academic staff elected to scientific-teaching and associate titles required for each department in the higher education institution).
2. *Job demands.* The process of defining specific requirements and responsibilities (e.g., expected results of work and the employee competencies needed to achieve them for each academic position within the organisational structure—from assistant to full professor).
3. *Recruitment and selection.* The process and practice of attracting, selecting and filling positions (e.g., recruiting and selecting young researchers and teaching assistants).
4. *Performance evaluation.* The process and practice of monitoring and evaluating whether employees meet performance expectations and are developing the competencies they need. This includes providing feedback and planning ahead (e.g., an annual report on the effectiveness and development of young researchers).
5. *Training and development.* Continued professional education for enhancing employee competencies (e.g., training sessions to acquire new knowledge and skills necessary for the teaching or research role).
6. *Career progression.* The process of planning and aligning institutional goals with the employees' ambitions and career goals, which includes creating career pathways and defining the conditions for progression (e.g., plans for the professional advancement of academic staff to a higher scientific-teaching grade within HEI departments).
7. *Pay and benefits.* The process of motivating and rewarding employees' performance and personal development, which includes both material and non-material remuneration (e.g., the higher education institution's system of internal recognitions, awards and honours).
8. *HR analyses and reporting.* The process of preparing and disseminating a range of information on human resources for monitoring and enhancing HR management, or for a longitudinal organisational diagnosis (e.g., statistical analysis of sick-leave or academic staff's work absences).
9. *HR special issues.* The process of dealing with specific HR topics, depending on characteristics of the actual workforce as well as the historical and social circumstances of the particular higher education institution (e.g., various surveys on work-life balance, well-being or stress among academics).

10. *Information systems and personnel administration.* The process of linking technology with HR management and development to provide administrative support and to document all human resource management activities in compliance with the legal provisions and labour regulations (e.g., an internal HRIS—Human Resource Information System—solution used as the sole personnel database for all academics at a HEI).

The above analytical framework was used in the HRMinHEI research project for evaluating current human resource management practices at public and private higher education institutions in Austria, Croatia and Finland. A human resource management needs assessment survey of the management of academic, administrative and leadership positions at higher education institutions was made. Participating institutions carried out a self-assessment of the ten above noted human resource processes. Survey items were chosen to encompass various HRM practices according to actual differences in national HRM policies and higher education systems in participating countries (Pausits, 2017). All items were evaluated using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree) for assessing human resource management practices. A link to the online questionnaire was sent by e-mail to HR professionals (HR managers or HR specialists) or to academic leadership (rectors, deans, heads of departments etc.) at HEIs in participating countries, along with a written formal invitation. In total 135 respondents representing HEIs completed the HRM needs assessment survey (29 from Austria, 69 from Croatia and 37 from Finland). Data were collected in late 2017 and early 2018.

## 4 | CHALLENGES IN MANAGING ACADEMIC EFFECTIVENESS AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

This article reports on a selection of study findings, specifically results on effectiveness and professional development challenges facing academic staff.<sup>2</sup> Using the empirical data collected, we compare certain human resource management activities in Croatian higher education institutions with practices in Austria and Finland. The comparison allows us to contrast higher education in Croatia with more established higher education systems which thus have different conditions for the practical application of the same European higher education policies. We identified two categories for HRM activities as particularly relevant for the purpose and goals of this article. We focus on practices in HR management intended to directly regulate both the effectiveness and professional development of academic staff. First, we review selected descriptive results relating to human resource management practices that refer to the overall performance management system such as determining work tasks and expected work outcomes; periodic evaluation of performance and providing feedback; and their connection with the remuneration and incentives system. These practices address job demand, performance evaluation, as well as pay and benefits elements of the HRMinHEI model described earlier (Table 1). Second, we present descriptive results concerning the professional development process of academics such as defining which competencies are required for different academic roles, the training and development programmes for improving these competencies, as well as evaluating the effects of academics' development programmes and their connection with their career progression. These practices mainly address training and development, and career progression elements of the initial model (Table 2).

The job descriptions at Croatian higher education institutions define the job demands for academic positions, the main responsibilities, roles and tasks. We find it interesting that work performance standards used in the performance evaluation of academic staff, however, are not defined clearly—such as goals, outputs and key performance indicators (KPIs). In turn, measures for the acquisition of required competencies—that is, knowledge, skills, values and attitudes—are not part of performance evaluation. The data shows that performance appraisals were conducted quite regularly and that a good performance was relatively well recognised. All of the above estimates, except for the KPIs, which were surprisingly estimated higher in Croatia, do not vary significantly in relation to the two other countries. At the same time, use of a standardised questionnaire to facilitate the performance appraisal

**TABLE 1** HR practices for managing the effectiveness of academics

Selected HR practices for management of academic effectiveness	Austria		Croatia		Finland	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Job descriptions provide a detailed list of main responsibilities, roles and tasks for academic staff	4.2	0.85	4.0	0.95	4.0	1.21
Work performance standards (goals, outputs, key performance indicators, etc.) are clearly defined for academic staff	3.7	1.09	3.7	1.09	3.6	1.24
Key-Performance-Indicators (KPI's; results of work activities) are in use for academic staff	3.4	1.24	3.9	0.80	2.8	1.19
We regularly conduct performance appraisal	3.5	1.05	3.5	0.91	3.8	0.91
We recognize good performance	3.9	0.78	4.1	1.04	4.2	0.72
We use a standardised questionnaire to facilitate the performance appraisal	3.3	1.29	3.2	1.19	3.7	0.96
We have developed mechanisms for dealing with poor performance	3.8	0.44	3.0	0.93	2.9	1.08
We employ both fixed and performance-based components of the salary for all job positions	2.8	1.48	2.8	1.23	3.0	1.21
We provide variable pays and benefits for outstanding performance of academic staff	3.4	1.22	3.3	1.19	2.9	1.15
Rewards are clearly connected with individual work results and contribution	4.1	0.93	3.2	0.79	2.9	0.90
Managers can decide on changes in pays and benefits for the employees in their units	2.0	1.00	2.8	1.10	2.5	1.06
We have clearly defined criteria for pay and a benefits system for academic staff	3.9	1.18	3.6	0.97	3.9	0.92
We have a pay and benefits system for academic staff that recognises accomplishments in teaching	3.1	1.17	3.2	0.96	2.9	1.27
We have a pay and benefits system for academic staff that recognises accomplishments in research	3.3	1.23	3.4	1.01	3.2	1.16
We have a pay and benefits system for academic staff that recognises accomplishments in third mission/social engagement	2.7	1.14	2.8	1.19	2.7	1.13
We have a pay and benefits system for academic staff that recognises accomplishments in managerial/leadership positions	3.3	1.22	2.8	1.12	2.8	1.13
Pay and benefits system includes nonmonetary rewards (i.e., public recognition, awards, honours, etc.)	3.6	1.24	3.3	0.73	3.3	0.97

Source: Authors.

was rated lower, particularly compared to higher education institutions in Finland. Similarly, the mechanisms for dealing with poor performance were not developed, especially when contrasted with Austria. However, all three countries show similar low estimates for HEI use of both fixed and a performance-based salary for all job positions. Despite this, Austrian and Croatian higher education institutions estimated that they provided merit-based pay and benefits for academic staff to a higher extent than Finnish higher education institutions did. Moreover, rewards were clearly connected with individual work results and a bigger contribution in Austria than in Croatia and Finland. In all three countries, one finds similarly low estimates that managers can decide on changes to pay

**TABLE 2** HR practices for managing academics' professional development

Selected HR practices for management of academics' professional development	Austria		Croatia		Finland	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Along with job descriptions, a detailed list of required employee competencies is provided for academic staff	4.2	0.66	4.3	0.77	4.1	1.11
We use the development of required competencies (knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, etc.) in staff performance evaluation	3.7	0.87	3.6	0.87	3.6	1.00
We conduct individual training and development needs assessment for academic staff	3.9	0.96	3.8	0.92	3.5	1.17
Direct superiors play a central role in the training and development needs assessment for their subordinates	4.2	0.83	3.6	0.94	4.0	0.85
We provide training and development programs for upgrading academic staff competencies in teaching	4.6	0.70	4.1	0.82	4.3	0.49
We provide training and development programs for upgrading academic staff competencies in research	4.1	0.88	3.8	0.94	3.9	0.79
We provide training and development programs for upgrading academic staff competencies in third mission/social engagement	3.3	0.67	3.0	0.98	3.0	0.77
We provide training and development programs for upgrading academic staff competencies in management/leadership	4.5	0.71	3.1	1.09	3.8	0.72
We measure training and development effects	2.9	1.18	3.0	0.86	2.6	0.95
We provide pre-defined promotion criteria for academic staff	3.1	1.13	4.2	0.74	2.9	1.17
Career progression criteria for academic staff consist of balanced teaching, research, social service and management competencies	3.3	1.33	3.9	0.84	3.1	0.98
We provide additional specific career progression criteria (i.e., honours, awards, prior managerial/ leadership function, etc.)	2.8	0.67	3.6	0.84	2.3	0.89
We have defined succession plans	2.3	1.12	3.1	0.84	2.4	1.05

Source: Authors.

and benefits for the employees in their units, and relatively high estimates that higher education institutions have clearly defined criteria for the pay and benefits system for academic staff. The pay and benefits system for academic staff recognises accomplishments in research more than teaching, social engagement, or leadership roles in the three countries. Still, rewarding one's leadership role is somewhat better assessed in Austria. Finally, the pay and benefits system included non-monetary rewards (i.e., public recognition, awards, honours etc.) at almost the same level in all three countries, but still assessed slightly higher in Austria than in Croatia and Finland.

The individual training and development needs assessment for academic staff was relatively similarly estimated in all three countries, although it is obvious that direct superiors play a central role in that process to a significantly greater extent in Austrian and Finnish than in Croatian higher education institutions. Training and development programmes are provided for upgrading academic staff competencies in teaching and research to a greater extent than for their social engagement or management and leadership competencies. The latter was provided significantly more at Austrian and Finnish higher education institutions, suggesting that greater importance is attached to these competencies in these two countries. Finally, it should be noted that, despite the relatively

positive evaluations of this aspect of human resource management, the measurement of training and development effects was assessed to be relatively weak, not only in Croatian higher education institutions, but in the two other countries as well.

According to self-assessment data, pre-defined promotion criteria for academic staff were provided to a significantly greater extent in Croatian higher education institutions than in their Austrian or Finnish counterparts. The same goes for estimating that the career progression criteria for academic staff is associated with a balance between teaching, research, service and management competencies, which was rated higher in Croatia than Austria and Finland. Croatian higher education institutions defined additional specific career progression criteria (i.e., honours, awards, prior managerial/leadership function etc.) more than in Austria or Finland. Likewise, succession plans were less defined but still better than in Austria and Finland. Perhaps the better estimates of the HR practices for career advancement at Croatian higher education institutions can be explained by the fact that there is actually no real differentiation in the awards related to performance, making both academics and higher education institutions more focused on promotions. In Croatia, academic performance evaluation is mainly based on the legislation governing the promotion system, which means that anyone holding the same scientific-teaching title has the same income, regardless of their actual effectiveness.

The overall results indicate that substantial differences exist in the level of development and functionality of certain human resource management practices. Differences in survey responses on current practices that correspond with the HRMinHEI model suggest that some HR management practices were more prominent while others were less pronounced. In particular, the observed HR practices that refer to job demands, training and development, and career progression, on average, attract relatively higher ratings, while the HR practices of performance evaluation, and pay and benefits relatively lower average estimates. It may thus be concluded that the existing human resource management practices in Croatian higher education institutions are concentrated more on the placement, development and career advancement of academic staff than on measuring and monitoring their effectiveness, providing them with relevant feedback, and rewarding academics for their performance. Given that performance evaluation, feedback and associated rewards are considered to be the key HR management process that integrates other processes, the question arises as to whether the functioning of this particular process could be improved to become a central managerial tool available for higher education institutions to achieve their strategic intent. For now, such attempts have negative connotations and are criticised by academics themselves, commonly referred to as managerialism (Shepherd, 2018).

In addition, considerable differences are found in human resource management practices. For example, in the area of defining job demands, the competencies required of academics are described to a greater extent than the desired job outcomes or their performance indicators. Similarly, despite a high score for teaching skills training and the development of research competencies, measuring associated effects is less prevalent in practice. Further, although Croatian higher education institutions clearly define the criteria for the salaries and benefits of their academics, their degree of autonomy in allocating budget funds for new job positions is quite low. This finding is understandable given that decisions on planning the recruitment of new staff, as well as academic career progression, are centralised at the state level and based solely on budget constraints on academic staff's salaries.

Evident differences were also found among the three countries in specific human resource management practices. The most important for future management and development of Croatian academics include performance evaluation practices (e.g., using a standard form for performance appraisal, dealing with poor performance)—survey responses estimated this as comparatively low for Croatia. Also, practices related to training and development including the role of one's immediate superior for the training needs analysis of subordinates; this was more pronounced in the two other countries than in Croatia. Croatian higher education institutions devoted comparatively less attention also to the training and development of managerial or leadership skills. However, we must point out that marked similarities can also be found among the countries, especially in terms of the relatively lower estimates of the performance management process of academics, which may thus be seen as a general challenge facing HR management at all higher education institutions, not just in Croatia. In addition, the practice



of determining the job demands for academics is similar in all countries, as is the greater recognition of academic accomplishments in research than in teaching, social engagement, or managerial and leadership roles, when we consider the area of pay and benefits. Likewise, equally across countries, managers are not able to make decisions on rewarding their subordinates, just as the effects of the training and development of academic staff was reported as poorly measured in all three countries.

## 5 | FUTURE STRATEGIC APPROACH TO IMPLEMENTING HRM IN HEIs

This section presents overall recommendations that we propose for the human resource management function in Croatian higher education institutions. Based on our analysis of survey results, we discuss (a) the institutionalisation and role of the HR function at higher education institutions; (b) specific HR activities to develop the different roles of academics; (c) the need for a strategic approach to HRM in higher education institutions; and (d) the role of performance management systems appropriate for the academic environment.

First, the results indicate the need for a faster development and transition of the human resource management function from an administrative to a strategic one, as HRM should play a strategic role in HEIs. Of course, responsibility for HR management activities would remain with the academics themselves, yet the responsibility for establishing and maintaining the HR system and process should be left to the experts. In other words, the first step in professionalising human resource management as a fundamental function calls for establishing human resource development units similar to those in Austria and Finland, to replace current personnel administration departments. HEIs in Austria and Finland have established HR departments with well-defined roles for staff development in line with institutional goals. The next step is to formulate HR strategies aligned with the overall strategic intent of HEIs. As advocated by Evans and Chun (2012), this allows HR units to become strategic partners to HEI management. Of course, this will not be easy to achieve since there is resistance to strategic HRM at HEIs, mainly due to a lack of understanding of the importance and value of strategic HR principles, but also organisational inertia as a consequence of a rigid organisational structure.

This resistance to the induction of a strategic approach to the management of academic staff, in addition to the institutional ones mentioned above, also has individual roots. Academics cannot be regarded as “ordinary” human resources. Anyone who has ever managed academic staff would agree they are very special and hence very demanding to lead; they might rightly be called “unmanageable” human resources. This is in part due to their role as top-level knowledge workers. They possess rare expert knowledge and continuously learn to develop very specific competencies and complex skills, which they use in different areas of their work. The work activities of academics are becoming more and more diverse (Musselin, 2007) because their work duties no longer only include the traditional research and teaching roles, but many others (Gordon, 1997). These new roles expected of academics may be classified in four overarching functions: (a) community service, (b) professional service, (c) leadership, management and consultancy, (d) and developmental project work (Gordon & Whitchurch, 2007). Precisely because they are so special, academic staff demand, yet also certainly deserve, a special approach to management that ensures high-quality academic staff, while motivating, educating and developing them to perform well and contribute to achieving institutional goals. In doing so, it is important to keep in mind all the roles played by academics, not only the traditional research and teaching role, as the current HR practices show. For example, the results of this study show that higher education institutions in Austria and Finland to a greater extent provide training and development programmes for upgrading academic staff competencies in management and leadership; in Austria they even have a pay and benefits system for academic staff that recognises accomplishments in management and leadership positions.

Some authors advocate a well-designed holistic approach to academic leadership to reduce the tensions between particular roles (Blackmore & Blackwell, 2006). We propose that the model used in the HRMinHEI project for institutional diagnosis, can also serve as a comprehensive framework for a holistic approach to developing the

efficiency and competencies of academics. It provides a strategic approach to every single aspect of HR management while streamlining it with HEI strategy. As strategic HRM involves the planning and implementing of various processes, systems and activities, the key is to consistently apply process logic and adapt the model to particular HEIs. Our findings indicate that performance management processes are important for the development of HRM at HEIs in Croatia. Such mechanisms are already developed in Austrian HEIs to deal with poor performance; rewards are clearly linked to results and contributions of individual academics.

Performance appraisal is a cornerstone of effective human resource systems since it represents a strategic tool for changing, as well as a system for controlling, individual performance (Devanna et al., 1984). Linking performance management to promoting and rewarding academic staff is unfortunately often perceived negatively. However, it does not have to lead to “terrors of performativity” (Ball, 2003), “quantification of outputs” and “hard managerialism” (Trow, 1993), the decline of the academic profession due to the excessive “metrification of quality” (Lorenz, 2015) or too much “quantified control” (Burrows, 2012). On the contrary, performance evaluation should be understood and used as the only effective motivational tool to link institutional goals with individual performance and development. It is theoretically based on goal-setting, control and self-regulation theories as well as generally well-recognised and empirically verified work on motivation theories (Donovan, 2001). The few empirical studies that have been carried out have demonstrated that performance management is a key strategic HRM feature with positive effects on academic staff in HEIs. For example, Smylie and Wenzel (2006) found that, among other strategic HRM processes, reward and evaluation are some of the significant factors that affect the effectiveness of teaching and learning processes. Similarly, using quantitative and qualitative methods, Türk (2008) showed that the pay-for-performance system has guaranteed highly motivated staff. Recently, Mathies et al. (2020) confirmed the impact of performance-based funding on researchers' publishing patterns in international scientific journals. Of course, we are aware, and the literature suggests, that effective performance appraisal in the public sector, and hence in higher education institutions, differs from that in the private sector (Mansour et al., 2015), meaning one must be very careful while applying performance management systems in higher education institutions. Yet, despite this, we are convinced that performance evaluation, as the key to strategic human resource management works because it provides transparent expectations in performance and development terms so neither HEIs nor individual academics can justify inefficiency by referring to a loss of academic freedom, identity and autonomy. The essence, it seems, lies in taking responsibility for success and development on both the institutional and individual levels. And that is exactly what is needed in the Croatian HE system where the idea of autonomy, connected with academic freedom, often leads to non-transparency and a lack of responsibility (Zgaga et al., 2013).

Performance evaluation systems should be designed to support conditions and a framework for the continued development of academics, while securing the freedom, individuality and identity of all academic staff including doctoral students, teaching assistants, experienced researchers, lecturers, mentors, scientific project leaders and deans. As this area of higher education is still developing (Kwiek & Antonowicz, 2015), we propose the introduction of performance evaluations as a unified system that deals with accountability on both the institutional and individual levels. The guidelines developed within the HRMinHEI model<sup>3</sup> can be used for supporting the operational planning of the processes, tools and activities needed.

Despite inflexible and centralised administrative rules and regulations, and a limited budget for hiring and promoting academic staff, HEIs should accept the responsibility for strategically managing the performance and development of their employees. Or, as noted by Archer (2005), every element of people strategy and personnel practice (from recruitment, training and development, staff retention and performance management) should be aligned with the direction of the higher education institution, as is happening today with the best universities. To summarise, the current status of the academic profession and higher education institutions in Croatian society is marginal (Brajković, 2016) and in our opinion this can only be changed through a well-designed and well-considered strategic use of human resource management systems and practices.

## 6 | IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND POLICY DEVELOPMENTS IN CROATIA

In conclusion, implications of the above findings for research and policy development of human resource management in higher education institutions in Croatia appear on three levels: national, institutional and individual. At the national level, while directives for HRM at HEIs formally exist, there is a lack of genuine verification of their implementation. This is evident from the criteria and procedures for rewarding and promoting academics, which are still under the authority of state bodies in Croatia; these remain focused on scientific achievements and neglect teaching and other emerging academic roles. Two solutions are possible. First, strategic directions need to be further clarified so as to give real autonomy as well as responsibility for implementing human resource management systems to HEIs. Second, it is desirable to speed up the processes of "programme contracts". Namely, accelerating the preparation and signing of performance agreements between the Ministry of Science and Education in Croatia and HEIs in which the budget for a particular HEI is determined at the national level according to the programme (including teaching, research and public function) for which the higher education institution is responsible.

At the institutional level, HEIs should take systemic responsibility for their own academics' effectiveness and development. That is, institutional strategies are still not being clearly translated into strategies for HR development, while responsibility for the implementation of the strategic intentions are even less individualised. We propose that programme contract responsibilities are translated into concrete individual responsibilities of academics where both the strategic HRM role of a particular HEI as well as the transformation of the purpose and significance of its HR department comes to the fore.

Finally, at the individual level, academics should seek to clarify what their institutions expect of them and accept personal responsibility for devising their own career path within the institutionally specified requirements, managing their own effectiveness and development process for different roles that are needed at their HEI, and gaining systemic rewards for performing these roles. In this way, academics will take on an active role in helping their higher education institution create appropriate strategic human resource solutions.

### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The HRMinHEI project (2016–2019) was funded by the European Commission's Erasmus + programme. It was led by the Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE), from Croatia. Four European higher education institutions participated in the project: Danube University Krems, Austria; University of Tampere, Finland; Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Rijeka and University College Algebra from Croatia (<http://hrminhei.eu/project/>).
- <sup>2</sup> For full results, see HRMinHEI Output 2: Report on preparing and conducting HRM needs assessment survey at HEIs in participating countries: [https://hrminhei.eu/assets/Uploads/Docs/daad796a96/O2-report-final\\_v5.pdf](https://hrminhei.eu/assets/Uploads/Docs/daad796a96/O2-report-final_v5.pdf).
- <sup>3</sup> Guidelines for Human Resources Management at Higher Education Institutions are available at: <https://hrminhei.eu/assets/Uploads/Docs/54952582af/General-guidelines-for-developing-HRM-in-HEIs-1.pdf>.

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