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## **Analysing HRD Research in the UK Research Excellence Framework**

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## **Analysing HRD Research in the UK Research Excellence Framework**

### **Abstract**

The state of Human Resource Development (HRD) research can be assessed in various ways. This paper presents a descriptive analysis of HRD in the UK 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF2014), establishing how it is represented within the UK's national research assessment system. HRD is a relatively new field of study in the UK, and globally, but features in many business schools. HRD is represented in the REF mainly in the Unit of Assessment (UOA) 19 – Business and Management Studies, and specifically under the sub-theme: management development and management education. We determine the extent to which HRD research has been included in REF2014 by identifying the number of institutions submitting HRD research outputs and HRD impact case studies in UOA19. We also identify the types of outputs and number of HRD journals included in submissions. Our analyses suggest that most institutions submitted HRD outputs, amounting to around 4% of the total and the majority were published in non-HRD journals. We challenge the widespread use of the 'ABS list' to rate/select submitted outputs, identify implications for a range of stakeholders in HRD and offer recommendations for further research.

### **Key words**

Human Resource Development (HRD), Research Excellence Framework (REF), management learning, ABS journal ranking list

## **Introduction**

Human Resource Development (HRD), as a field of academic research, emerged in the 1980s in the USA and United Kingdom (UK) (Cho and Zachmeier, 2015). In UK universities, HRD is usually located within Business Schools, rather than Schools of Education as is more common in the USA (ibid). In the UK, university research activities are currently assessed through the Research Excellence Framework (REF), an activity judging the perceived value of research within higher education institutions. As a national quality assessment exercise, it has existed in the UK under different names since 1986 and judges all academic disciplines in various Units of Assessment (UOA), with the latest exercise conducted in 2014 (REF2014). Given its predominant location in Business Schools, Human Resource Development research is mainly included in the Business and Management Studies UOA19.. So, our research question was: how has HRD featured in REF2014, in Business and Management Studies (UOA19)? Our objectives were to: identify the number of institutions submitting HRD outputs; establish the types of research outputs (such as journal articles or books) and the most common outlets (journal titles – whether HRD or not); and identify the number and nature of impact case studies submitted.

The activities of Business and Management Studies in REF2014 have been reviewed (Pidd & Broadbent 2015) and critiqued. However, the purpose of this article is to focus on one specific area within Business and Management Studies – HRD. We believe this is relevant to Human Resource Development International (HRDI) on several levels. First, given the considerable interest in the Research Excellence Framework in the UK, and

similar research assessment exercises globally (OECD 2010; Hicks 2012), there appears to be no work that has attempted to critically analyse the state of HRD research. A national research assessment seems to be a reasonable proxy for establishing this since its declared purpose is to assess research quality. Therefore, to analyse the state of HRD research, we identify the number and types of HRD outputs submitted within UOA19 in REF2014, thus establishing a benchmark for future UK studies and for broader international comparisons. Prior to this, there has been no knowledge of how HRD features in UK assessment activities. We report, for the first time, how HRD performs in submissions in absolute terms and relative to the UOA19 as a whole. Given the paucity of studies on the state of HRD research across the world, this UK study will be informative for HRD researchers in other countries.

Second, we note that HRD is not named directly in the Business and Management Unit remit; and HRD academics had little representation on the REF UOA19 panel (REF 2014b). This is important since having representation on assessment panels has been found to be a predictor at department level of assessment outcomes (Butler and McAllister 2009; Broadbent 2010). This has implications for the assessment of HRD research activities across the world with similar assessments being adopted in many other countries (OECD 2010; Hicks 2012).

Third, our descriptive analysis reveals that REF outputs are dominated by journal articles (rather than other forms, such as books). One way of assessing the quality of journals is to adopt the UK's Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS) Academic Journal Guide (commonly referred to as the ABS list), (Willmott, 2011). Not all journals relevant to HRD are included

in the ABS list. Those that are included are only ranked 1\* or 2\*, except Management Learning (3\*) and Academy of Management Learning and Education (AMLE) (4\*). Despite REF2014 panel members clearly stating that they would assess each journal article individually, independent of which journal it was published in, many deans and directors of research employed the ABS list to ‘judge’ research quality, with ABS 3\* being widely regarded in UK business schools as the minimum requirement for an ‘acceptable’ journal article (Tourish and Wilmott, 2015). We argue that such an approach to submissions is misguided and impedes the perceptions of HRD research and career progression (see also Ozbilgin, 2009). The general problems with use of journal rankings are well documented (see for example Lee 2007; Willmott 2011; Rafols et al. 2012; Hussain 2015; Tourish and Willmott 2015, Chavarro and Rafols 2018). Our analysis in HRD contributes new knowledge to this debate. Our findings will be relevant to researchers, mentors, and deans/directors of research in business schools and other university departments, as well as journal editors/publishers within HRD. Our findings also provide important new directions for research in HRD.

The article is structured as follows. First, we explain our definition of HRD. Next, we provide the context and overview of the Research Excellence Framework exercise. We then present our research methods, followed by our analysis and findings. After our discussion, we conclude with implications for stakeholders and recommendations for further research.

### **Defining HRD**

Defining HRD is inherently difficult and contested (Lee 2001, Hamlin and Stewart, 2011). Drawing on Hamlin and Stewart (2011), we adopted a broad

view of what constitutes HRD for this project, including: learning at any and all levels (individual, team and organisational); training and development; organisation change and development; career development; management and leadership development; management learning; national HRD/Vocational Education and Training (VET); coaching, mentoring and action learning; Critical HRD; knowledge creation and knowledge sharing; employee development; higher education practice (i.e. learning, teaching and assessment in HE); and evaluation of learning and development. The inclusion of management learning raises questions of the relationship between this and HRD, discussed later. We define HRD researchers as those engaged in research in any of the above areas.

### **REF2014: Context and Background**

The REF2014 replaced the earlier Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), operated on a five to six-year cycle from 1986 to 2008 by the UK Higher Education Funding Councils. The primary purpose of both RAE and REF is to evaluate the quality of university research as a basis for allocating and distributing funding to support their research activities. Activities are assessed via a REF submission, containing three elements: i) outputs, which are publications in any form reporting the results of research; ii) impact, which is a change in some aspect of society resulting from research and assessed by ‘impact case studies’; and iii) environment, which encompasses strategies for supporting researchers and doctoral students, and for sustaining a research culture. Evaluation of research quality as evidenced in submissions is based on peer assessment through the use of subject expert panels that consider submissions under each Unit of Assessment. Individual universities are free to

decide which Units of Assessment to make a submission for, and how to make those decisions.

The Units of Assessment are mainly associated with academic disciplines, mirrored in the structures of universities' faculties, schools and departments. Thus, the Unit of Assessment of interest here is Unit 19, Business and Management. This unit covers accountancy, strategic management, marketing and finance. Economics and Econometrics had its own Panel, UOA18, although there was cross-referral with UOA19. The UOA19 did not specify HRD in its remit. Two disciplines specified in the remit of UOA 19 have some relevance to HRD: management development and education; and employment relations. We understand from a Panel member (see below) that HRD related material was considered by the members of the panel associated with management development and education. However, economics-related HRD outputs may have been sent to the Economics and Econometrics Panel.

Focusing on Business and Management, there seems to be a widely held belief by many senior managers in UK business schools and universities that only journal articles 'count' in the REF. There seems to be a similarly widely held belief in the same groups that the ABS List, which ranks journals according to RAE/REF star ratings, would be applied by the UOA19 Panel to assign quality assessments of individual outputs (e.g. Hussain 2015; Tourish and Willmott 2015; Sangster 2015). Evidence suggests that these beliefs are questionable: first by published criteria and working practices issued by the UOA19 Panel prior to their assessment of submissions (REF 2014), and second by published reports of their work

after completion of their assessment (REF 2014b). Yet, business schools have purportedly relied widely and heavily on the ABS List to judge the quality of individuals' selected publications and their eligibility for inclusion (or otherwise) in institutional REF submissions. Normally, those submitted are required to have four returnable outputs, but fewer are required where individuals have personal circumstances e.g. maternity leave or are employed on part time contracts. HRD research is, presumably, most likely to be published in HRD journals but, because most are ranked as 1\* or 2\* in the ABS list, this may not be reflected in REF submissions. As with other subjects, some HRD researchers might therefore have four publications ranked as 1\* or 2\* quality in the ABS list. Many UK Business Schools have adopted the ABS ranking of 1-4\* journals to rate individual publications (Tourish and Willmott 2015) and, as such, HRD research is allegedly perceived to be relatively 'low' quality. Business Schools have employed different thresholds to include individual submissions, ranging from an average across four (or less in some cases) publications of 2.5\* to an average of 3\* or above. Such thresholds would exclude research publications in HRD ABS 1\* and 2\* journals. The authors' experience suggests that some HRD researchers have sought external evaluation of their publications by HRD experts as an alternative to use of the ABS list but this is often dismissed by those Business Schools guided exclusively by the list. It is therefore important to establish the position as evidenced by REF submissions.

### **Research methods**

This descriptive study adopted quantitative analysis of the published REF data,

supported by analyses of a smaller secondary qualitative data set, including reading: a) some of the outputs that were submitted (see below); b) the REF Overview Report; and c) Sub-panel 19 collated minutes. Despite concerted efforts, we were unable to conduct interviews with relevant REF sub-panel members to gain insight to the review process. However, we include informal observations of one panel member via personal email. Guided by our research objectives, the quantitative analysis of REF submissions was systematic in that all entries in the UOA19 dataset were scrutinized, first identifying (and coding) which journals HRD content was published in; second identifying (and coding) the themes of the case studies. Qualitative documentary evidence in the form of the REF Overview Report and Sub-panel minutes were analysed using a general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006) to identify any themes relevant to our purpose and aims, and which supported, or otherwise, our emerging findings.

REF2014 results were published online on Thursday 19th December 2014 with further data being released in February 2015 (REF 2014 a). That resource provided the dataset for UOA19 and the raw data for our project. Within this data set, and using a low inference approach (Sandelowski, 2000; Robson, 2002) we focused on identifying HRD outputs and impact material. Outputs are published research in any form including books, chapters, conference and working papers, research reports to funders and clients and journal articles. ‘Impact’ is assessed in the REF by impact case studies. Impact case studies demonstrate effect and change on some element of policy and/or practice (beyond academia) in one or more contexts and which is directly linked to previous research. We included outputs and

impact case studies if the material had a main or significant element of HRD, as specified in our definition, in its focus and content.

A total of 101 institutions submitted to UOA19, and we reviewed all 12,202 outputs, searching for HRD material in output titles, thus surveying the whole population without any sampling. The REF UOA19 database has a search facility but it was difficult to identify relevant outputs from simply their title and/or the output type. We did attempt to search using key words such as *learning* and *development* but often these related to lessons learned from business operations and regional economic development, for example, and thus were excluded. In addition, using the search facility was hampered by irregularities in the database. For example, AMLE was included both as Academy of Management Learning and Education, and Academy of Management Learning & Education, requiring both to be entered in the search facility.

To address these problems, we decided to review all 12,202 outputs and impact studies from all institutions, regardless of the type of output. To ensure inter-rater reliability, we jointly read all outputs for the first 10 institutions listed, making an initial judgment as to whether the output title appeared relevant. This was easier where the output was in a journal and we could access the abstract. It was more problematic when the output was a book, book chapter or conference paper. If the output title was long, this required clicking on the item to read the full title to ensure we did not miss any potential content. If the title was ambiguous but appeared potentially relevant, we then read the abstract (if available) and judged whether the content was HRD-related. If we were still unsure, we downloaded the full output (if available) and made the final decision upon reading this. If in doubt, we discussed the content and agreed the outcome, and made a note of our decision. We coded outputs using

the key words in our definition of HRD to determine if they were related to HRD and recorded the content and where published. This was a very lengthy, time-consuming process. After verifying and validating the first 10 institutions' submissions, we then divided the remainder between us and coded individually, noting any uncertain cases. When coding was completed, we discussed and agreed the uncertain cases, drawing upon our own experience and subjective judgments as HRD scholars. All relevant impact case studies were read and analyzed individually, using the same coding system. A summary of the HRD content for each submitting institution was produced, using descriptive statistics in the form of frequency distributions. Aggregate totals of outputs have been calculated using the same searchable database.

When reviewing outputs, we excluded related material without any HRD element. For example, we excluded material related to leadership, careers, talent management or to gender studies which had no *development* content, because the work advanced understanding of leadership or gendered practices *per se*. We also excluded material on SME development which focused on consultancy and business services and advice rather than the learning and development of owners, managers and other employees in SMEs. In the area of skills, we included outputs related to skills development but not those focusing on an analysis of skills in the labour market (and their links with pay or equality, for example). We also agreed to include outputs regarding work-related education, as it has been argued that HE is a site of HRD practice (Sambrook & Stewart 2010).

In the UK, HRD research is primarily undertaken by staff employed in business schools and so their work is included in business school submissions

to UOA19. However, the REF rules allow any work to be submitted in the UOA judged most relevant by the submitting university, and this flexibility was evident when assessing submissions. For example, some outputs included in our results were the work of individuals in health science, psychology and education departments/schools. The reasons for universities deciding to include those outputs in the Unit 19 submission are not known but could include a better fit with Unit 19 rather than a psychology submission, for example, or perhaps because there was not sufficient research output in a particular university in psychology to warrant a submission to that unit, but some of the psychology outputs available fitted well with Unit 19 and so were included there. Our aim was to establish the extent of HRD research in UOA19 and not to estimate the number of HRD researchers or determine their disciplinary location.

As one of our objectives was to assess the common outlets for HRD research, we wanted to establish to what extent HRD research was published in what we termed HRD journals. This included the four with HRD in their title - Advances in HRD, HRD International, HRD Quarterly, and HRD Review. We also used the term 'HRD related' journals, which encompassed the European Journal of Training and Development (including its former title Journal of European Industrial Training), Education & Training, International Journal of Training and Development, International Journal of Management Education, Management Learning and the Academy of Management Learning and Education (AMLE). However, outputs were also published in other subject categories including: leadership development; learning; general management/organisation behavior; HRM; psychology; economics; and 'other', examples

of which are provided below.

## **Findings**

We now present descriptive statistics of data provided by the REF database, supported where relevant by qualitative material from REF documents. We note that 90 of the 101 universities submitted HRD outputs, representing 90% of the total submitted. Of the 101, 82 were in England, 12 in Scotland, 5 in Wales and 2 in Northern Ireland. All Scottish and Northern Irish universities included HRD-related outputs, with 73 English universities and 3 of the 5 Welsh universities.

### ***HRD outputs***

We identified 538 HRD outputs in the 12202 UOA19 outputs, representing 4.4% of the total. Table 1 presents the breakdown of the types of HRD outputs. (This adds up to 99.5% due to an anomaly of rounding percentages to one decimal place).

Of the 538 HRD outputs, it is perhaps unsurprising that journal articles were the dominant type, given the ease of evaluating these with the ABS journal ranking list. In the overview report of Panel C, which encompassed the sub-panel of UOA 19, (REF 2014 b, 11), it is stated that '*a wide variety of types of output was submitted for assessment. Articles, monographs, book chapters, databases, and physical artefacts were all submitted, in different proportion in different sub- panels. There are examples of each of these types of output being awarded the highest grade.*' However, on closer inspection (ibid, 12), it is noted that journal articles dominate in UOA19. In their review, Pidd and Broadbent (2015) note that '*Journal articles comprised over 95% of the outputs (11,665) submitted for assessment.*' Thus, the

dominance of journal articles in Business and Management in general is mirrored in the field of HRD.

**Table 1: Varying types of HRD outputs by percentage of total HRD outputs**

| Articles | Books | Chapters | Conf/working papers | Reports |
|----------|-------|----------|---------------------|---------|
| 95.5%    | 1.1%  | 1.6%     | 1.1%                | 0.2%    |

To identify which were the most common outlets for HRD outputs, first, we analysed outputs in what can be considered HRD journals. Of the 538 HRD outputs, 94 were published in HRD journals. We divided these into journals with HRD specified in the title (n=15 outputs) and those with HRD related titles; e.g. with ‘training’ or ‘learning’ in their names (n=79 outputs). All those with HRD in the title were listed as ABS 2\* journals. Management Learning (ML) was by far the most popular of HRD related journals with 47 outputs (see Table 2), perhaps because of its ABS 3\* ranking. In addition, the second most popular HRD related journal was AMLE, an ABS 4\* journal. Education and Training (ABS 1\*) was, perhaps surprisingly, the third most popular (n=11). Human Resource Development International (HRDI) (ABS 2\*) was the most popular of those with HRD in their title, with 9 outputs. The European Journal of Training and Development (EJTD) (ABS 1\*) had some (n=3) but International Journal of Training and Development (IJTD) (ABS 2\*) had none.

The low number of outputs in HRD titled journals (n=15, less than 3% of total HRD related outputs) and HRD related journals (n=79 or 14.7%) suggests that many UK researchers are not supporting these journals, choosing instead to publish in non HRD journals. HRD titled and HRD related journals accommodated only 17.5% (94) of the total number of HRD outputs (n=538), of which just under 9% were in Management Learning and 3% in AMLE. We

comment later on to what extent Management Learning and the Academy of Management Learning and Education might be considered HRD journals.

**Table 2: Number of outputs in HRD Journals (along with ABS \* ranking)**

|        | Outputs in HRD <i>titled</i> journals (n=15, 2.8%) |      |      |      | Outputs in HRD <i>related</i> journals (n=79, 14.7%) |      |     |      |    | Total n = 94 |        |
|--------|--|------|------|------|--|------|-----|------|----|--------------|--------|
| Title  | HRDI   | HRDQ | ADHR | HRDR | IJTD   | ETJD | E&T | IJME | ML | AMLE         |        |
| ABS *  | 2*   | 2*   | 2*   | 2*   | 1*   | 1*   | 1*  | 1*   | 3* | 4*           |        |
| Number | 9  | 2    | 3    | 1    | 0  | 3    | 11  | 1    | 47 | 17           | n = 94 |

We also compared outputs in HRD journals with outputs in related business and management subject categories, plus a general category of ‘Other’ covering less directly related disciplines (see Table 3). The ‘Other’ category had the largest percentage (32.5%), followed by human resource management (HRM) (16.3%) and general management/organisation behaviour (GM/ORG) (14.3%). Therefore, just one category (Other) was more popular than HRD titled and HRD related journals (17.5%).

**Table 3: Percentage of HRD articles published in HRD and related subject categories**

| HRD Titled and Related | Learning | Lead Dev | G.Mgt / Org | HRM   | Psychology | Economics | Other |
|------------------------|----------|----------|-------------|-------|------------|-----------|-------|
| 17.5%                  | 3.7%     | 3.5%     | 14.3%       | 16.3% | 5.2%       | 7%        | 32.5% |

HRD content appeared in various categories and journals, illustrated in Table 4.

**Table 4: HRD articles published in non-HRD journals by subject categories**

| <b>Category</b>                 | <b>Examples of journals in which HRD content was published</b>   |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Leadership                      | The Leadership Quarterly<br>Leadership and Organisation Development Journal  |
| Learning                        | Journal of Workplace Learning  |
| General Management              | Organization<br>Journal of Organisational Behaviour<br>Journal of Management Studies<br>British Journal of Management<br>Human Relations<br>Journal of Change Management<br>Journal of Organisational Change Management<br>Journal of Management Inquiry |
| HRM                             | Personnel Review<br>Human Resource Management<br>International Journal of HRM<br>Work, Employment and Society<br>New Technology, Work and Employment   |
| Psychology                      | Journal of Vocational Behaviour  |
| Economics                       | Socio-Economic Planning (NHRD)<br>Economic and Industrial Democracy<br>Production Economics  |
| <i>Other</i>                    |  |
| Accounting                      | Accounting Forum, Accounting Education, International Journal of Auditing  |
| Education                       | Computers and Education, British Journal of Educational Technology,<br>Studies in Higher Education, Teaching in Higher Education, Journal of Education and Work, Oxford Review of Education  |
| Geography                       | Urban Studies, Environment and Planning, Economic Geography);<br>international business; (Journal of World Business, International Business Review, Thunderbird  |
| Public sector/<br>social policy | Social Policy, Social Science and Medicine, Public Policy Administration, International Journal of Public Sector Management  |
| SMEs                            | Entrepreneurship and Regional Development, Entrepreneurship: Theory and Practice, International Small Business Journal   |
| Miscellaneous                   | Research methods, R&D management, sociology, strategic management, information systems, safety science, business ethics, and operations management.  |

We analysed which ABS ranked journals HRD outputs were published in.

Between them, ABS ranked 3\* and 4\* journals dominated at 66% of the total

number of HRD outputs. This finding is similar to the overall profile of

UOA 19 (REF 2014 b, 10), illustrated in Table 5. We suggest this is further

evidence of the influence of the ABS List.

**Table 5: Percentage of HRD articles in journals ranked according to ABS List.**

|                   | Not in list | 1*   | 2*    | 3*    | 4*    |
|-------------------|-------------|------|-------|-------|-------|
| HRD               | 10%         | 8.5% | 15.5% | 40%   | 26%   |
| UOA 19<br>overall | 0.8%        | 5.8% | 30.1% | 42.8% | 20.5% |

We were unable to interview panel members to gain their insights into the review process. However, one panel member observed in an informal email to us, '*I suspect the bigger issue might be whether good HRD papers were not submitted to the exercise if they were not published in 3\* journals. That, in my view, would have been a mistake as they could have been positively evaluated by the Panel...*' This reflects our finding that the majority of HRD articles selected for REF2104 were published in ABS list 3\* and 4\* journals. It also supports our suggestion that those articles were selected for submission to REF2014 for that very reason.

### ***HRD impact case studies***

Another important measure of the quality of HRD research used in REF2014 is impact, assessed through impact case studies. Of the 432 submitted in UOA19, we identified 40 HRD impact case studies (9%). More than a quarter of those (n=11) were SME related (see Table 6). This is perhaps unsurprising and fits with the many articles in the 'other' category, as some of those were published in SME journals. The next largest areas (n=4 in each) were:

vocational education and training, including work-based learning and modern apprenticeships; and business education, including accountancy training.

There were three case studies in each of the following areas: change management/OD; leadership/management development; coaching and mentoring; graduate labour force/employability; general skills development (e.g. creativity, innovation, time management); and trade union learning.

Career development featured in two case studies and there was one on maximizing human resources. It is perhaps reflective of the applied nature of HRD that the subject features more strongly in proportional terms in impact case studies than in research outputs.

Table 6: Distribution of HRD impact case studies by subject content

| Subject content | SME | VET | Bus ed | OD | MD | C&M | Grad employ | Skills dev | TU learn | CD | HR | Total |
|-----------------|-----|-----|--------|----|----|-----|-------------|------------|----------|----|----|-------|
| Number          | 11  | 4   | 4      | 3  | 3  | 3   | 3           | 3          | 3        | 2  | 1  | 40    |

## Discussion

We now discuss and reflect on our findings. First, we focus on the quantitative representation of HRD within REF2014, and then consider the potential impact of the assessment process on HRD's representation. We attempt to inductively make sense of these findings and make connections with relevant literature. In doing so, we raise some related and additional issues and questions, specific to how HRD featured in REF2014. These are later linked to the limitations of the study.

Our findings reveal that there is some HRD representation in the majority of submissions, which we consider a positive outcome and suggests some status in UK universities. However, the majority of universities included less than 10% of HRD outputs in an individual submission. Only 18 submissions had 10% or greater HRD outputs in an individual submission. Overall, only 4% of the total number of outputs submitted to UOA19 were HRD outputs. This could be considered disappointing or, conversely, a reasonable representation given the relatively 'young' age of HRD as a field of study in business schools. While there is some HRD research activity at most universities, the indications

are that in most cases this research focus is not central to the institutions' activities.

Given the sheer volume of over 191,000 total outputs in REF2014, we have focused our analysis on Unit 19 ( $n = 12,202$  outputs). We acknowledge that analyzing only UOA19 has potentially included and excluded some HRD researchers, influencing our analysis of HRD's representation. For example, HRD researchers (as recognised by those in the field) publishing in both HRD and non-HRD journals are not included in our results if their work had no recognizable HRD content. This acknowledges the multi-disciplinarity of HRD researchers (Rigg et al. 2006), who might have chosen to conduct and publish some of their research work in other fields of study. Conversely, it was noticeable that some known to the authors as (UK and internationally) recognised HRD researchers were not submitted to UOA19. We cannot know with certainty but there is considerable anecdotal evidence (from widespread discussion with UFHRD members) to suggest that this is the result of beliefs that i) only journal articles (rather than books or book chapters) counted for REF2014 and ii) the ABS list would be used by the REF UOA19 Panel to assess the quality of those articles. This observation suggests that work to dispel such beliefs is important for HRD researchers.

We also acknowledge that we have not included outputs from other UOAs and that some HRD-related outputs may have been submitted to these. Thus, it is possible that our findings under-estimate the extent of HRD research across UK universities. This warrants further research across all Units of Assessment to more accurately/inclusively determine the representation of HRD within REF2014. This could further augment the representation of HRD

research in REF2014. However, we argue that most UK HRD researchers would be submitted in UOA19, given their dominance in business and management studies and being located in business schools.

Given our broad definition of HRD, we acknowledge some outputs have been deemed HRD but have been authored by individuals who might not consider themselves HRD researchers. Examples include labour market economists who have conducted work on skills development policy relevant to NHRD/VET or psychologists publishing work on learning or on leadership development and who might define themselves as economists and psychologists rather than as HRD researchers. Such work has been included in both forms of material; outputs and impact case studies. Therefore, our analysis of the representation of HRD might be generous. Although many of these have not been published in what might be considered typical HRD journals, we could argue that the profile of HRD has been raised through researchers seeking to publish HRD research in non-HRD and highly-ranked ABS journals.

We have identified that in the REF2014 many HRD researchers sought to publish HRD research in Management Learning and AMLE, rather than 'HRD' titled journals. We cautiously raise the question: can/should HRD be accommodated in management learning – both the field of study (as appears in the REF nomenclature) and the so-titled journals? HRD, focusing in part on learning and development in organisations, might be considered the broader academic domain in which management learning can be located.

Building on Sambrook and Willmott's (2014) consideration of the relationship between HRD and management learning within education and

practice, we question whether they are indeed natural partners or uneasy bedfellows within the context of REF2014, with its focus on research and publications.

Our findings indicate that HRD representation in UOA19 in REF2014 has been influenced by contradictory perceptions of the REF assessment process, particularly regarding the focus on journal articles as the main indicator of research quality. Our findings also suggest that the beliefs that only journal articles count and that the UOA19 Panel use the ABS List are flawed, for the following reasons.

The UOA19 Panel report states that while journal articles accounted for 95% of the outputs submitted, outputs included 168 authored books, 179 book chapters and 103 working papers. Pidd and Broadbent (2015) state '*the sub-panel welcomed the inclusion of high-quality books and monographs.*' Our own work reveals that some outputs (including from what are termed in the UK as 'research intensive' universities and those highly rated in UK university ranking lists) were editorials, conference papers and working papers. For example, Bristol, Oxford, City, Warwick and London Business School among others included books, chapters, conference and working papers. This dispels the belief that only journal articles counted in REF2014. Highly ranked universities were also not tied to the ABS list. Some specific examples to illustrate the point include Birmingham and Bristol universities including articles in journals below ABS 3\*, and indeed in journals not included in the ABS list.

Regarding the ABS List in the REF, an unpublished analysis by a UOA19 panel member of 1000 outputs (REF 2014) reveals that only about half the

journal outputs received the same grade as their ABS journal rank, slightly more than a third scored below and about one in seven scored above. There is only a 39% chance that an output in an ABS List 4\* journal will be assessed as 4\* by the UOA 19 Panel. Pidd and Broadbent (2015) state, ‘*Within this sample, ABS 2s have about a 30% chance of being a 3, and only a 10% chance of a 1.*’ There is therefore a much less than direct correlation between the ABS List ranking of the journal and the UOA19 Panel ratings, and more than sufficient evidence in this analysis to dispel the belief that the Panel used the ABS List to rate outputs. As noted in the collated minutes of sub-panel meetings (REF 2014 c, 20), ‘*Members were reminded that if they were having difficulties in deciding on a score for an output, they could seek advice from other panel members.*’ This again demonstrates that panel members read outputs and did not rely on the ABS list. As a final observation on this topic, the Panel Overview Report in the REF results states that the analysis found ‘*that a range of grades was given to outputs in the same journal whatever the overall ranking of that journal*’ (REF 2014 b, 56). Whilst the focus of our study was on the quantitative representation of HRD in UOA19 in REF2014, it is important to reinforce the official process regarding the use of journal articles and the ABS list, with a view to assessing HRD representation in the next REF assessment in 2021. We do not dismiss the credibility of the ABS list, but challenge its use by Business Schools as the sole means of selecting outputs (and thus predominantly journal articles) for REF submissions. We also argue that is unjustified to judge the quality of HRD research published in the four HRD titled journals by using the ABS list.

HRD appears to have limited representation in the REF UOA19 overall

when compared to total outputs submitted. This may be related to the wider lack of submissions to this area of the UOA. As noted by the Panel, '*The area of management development and management education contained rather fewer submissions to the REF than one might have expected. Outputs covered a range of areas from aspects related to doctoral studies to training and development activity. Outputs submitted to the panel were disseminated through a variety of publications, but predominantly in peer-reviewed journals. There was a surprising variability in quality in terms of originality, significance and rigour. Many of the weaker outputs failed to make a contribution to theory or practice*' (REF 2014 b, 63-64).

Related to this, in the leadership, knowledge and *management learning* category the Panel note, '*The theme of knowledge and learning pervades a whole range of sub disciplines, sectors, themes and functions. Papers were received that focused on many aspects of learning, including issues for trainers and learners. Outputs submitted to the sub-panel in this area were usually journal articles, many of which are now seen to be within the mainstream of management and business research*' (REF 2014 b, 64). This is encouraging, as HRD/training research is apparently increasingly accepted as a legitimate field of study in mainstream business and management.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

We have presented findings establishing the quantitative representation of HRD in UOA19 in REF2014. We conclude that whilst HRD outputs and impact case studies were included, HRD appears to be currently of marginal significance in the REF UOA19 overall and in single submissions when compared to total outputs submitted. We make three contributions: first

establishing the state of HRD research within REF UOA19; second, critiquing the use of the ABS list within this process; and third, highlighting the ambiguous relationship between management learning and HRD, and associated impact on journal selection.

First, given the considerable interest in the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the United Kingdom, there appears to be no work that has attempted to critically analyse the status of HRD research. To address this, we have identified the number and types of HRD outputs and impact cases submitted within Unit of Assessment 19 in REF2014, thus establishing a benchmark for future studies. Prior to this, there has been no knowledge of how HRD features in assessment activities. We report, for the first time, how HRD performs in absolute terms and relative to the UOA19 as a whole. We therefore make a small contribution to the ongoing debate regarding UK research quality assessment (Pidd and Broadbent 2015), focusing on a subject associated with the REF nomenclature of management development and education.

Second, our analysis reveals that REF outputs are dominated by journal articles, which can be easily assessed using the ABS list. We argue that such an approach to submissions is unhelpful and impedes the perceptions of HRD research and career progression. The various general problems with use of journal rankings are well documented (see for example Lee 2007; Willmott 2011; Rafols et al. 2012; Hussain 2015; Tourish and Willmott 2015). Our analysis in HRD contributes new knowledge to this debate, and our findings provide new directions for research in HRD and management learning. In addition, our analysis confirms that HRD features in impact case studies in the REF, and this may be considered a positive outcome.

Third, our analysis has highlighted the ambiguous relationship between management learning and HRD, and the influence this might have on journal selection, particularly in view of REF-type exercises. This ambiguity can, in part, be explained by the ambivalent and over-lapping nature of both fields of study, which creates difficulties in categorising what is/might be HRD and management learning. We have cautiously grasped the contentious issue: can/should HRD be accommodated in management learning – both the field of study (as appears in the REF nomenclature) and the so-titled journals? We have argued that HRD could be considered the over-arching field of study, incorporating learning at all levels within an organisation, and thus could include a specific focus on management learning. Yet, management learning could be categorised as an element of the much broader and more established management field of study. Given the use of the term management learning, this might suggest the importance attached to it by the UOA, and might also reflect the highly-ranked management learning journals. So rather than the field of HRD accommodating management learning researchers, it appears that HRD researchers are attempting to be accommodated in the field of management learning. This could be due to their research fitting more closely with that specific sub-categorisation and/or the higher ranking management learning journals.

The UOA19 had two relevant categories: management development/education and leadership/knowledge/ management learning. The UOA panel noted differences in submissions between management development/education and management learning. The panel noted the lack of submissions to the development/education category. It also highlighted the

variable quality of outputs in this category, where submissions encompassed a wide range of topics, including training and development, but no reference to HRD. This might support debates about the nomenclature for the broad array of activities related to learning and development (Walton 2003), as earlier highlighted in our definition of HRD for this study. This also supports our questioning of the relationship between management learning and HRD. We identify that in REF2014 many HRD researchers published HRD research in Management Learning and AMLE. Whilst the study of management learning can be considered a sub-theme of the broader HRD field, Management Learning and AMLE are perhaps not ordinarily overtly considered to be HRD journals. Thus, publishing here could equate to eschewing mainstream HRD journals, and potentially reducing their perceived quality and impact. This constructs a potential divide between HRD and management learning. Yet, others have sought to find connections between these in the context of education and practice (Sambrook & Willmott 2014). We extend this endeavour from a research and publication perspective by analysing HRD material submitted to REF2014 and considering the impact of the ABS highly ranked management learning journals on the status of HRD research in the UK. We conclude that whilst HRD and Management Learning might be natural partners in education and practice, they appear to be uneasy bedfellows in the context of the REF and associated assessments of research quality. This has important implications for a wide range of stakeholders.

#### *Implications for stakeholders*

We now consider the implications for four key stakeholders, especially in relation to publishing HRD outputs: early career

researchers/those targeting REF 2021; research mentors/managers; deans/directors of research; and journal editors and publishers. These implications are also of relevance to stakeholders beyond the UK, particularly in other countries with national research assessment exercises.

We acknowledge the pressures for early careers researchers and those targeting REF 2021 to focus on publishing in 3\* and 4\* ABS journals (Mills et al., 2014). However, with the exception of Management Learning and AMLE, HRD journals are currently ranked 1\* and 2\* in the latest version of the ABS list (and some have no ranking). This apparent ‘low status’ of HRD journals will deter such researchers submitting their work here. This has obvious implication for career progression, given the apparent if misguided value of ABS rankings in employment movement, particularly in the run up to REF exercises. However, it is reassuring that many alternative journals publish HRD outputs, and many of these journals are ranked 3\* and 4\* in the ABS list.

The current low status of HRD journals in the UK ABS list and subsequent discouragement/ avoidance of publishing in them will only exacerbate the perceived negative state of HRD as an academic field of study/discipline by those making judgements based on journal rankings. Although the ABS list is specific to the UK, the use of journal ranking lists internationally affects the state of HRD and thus has implications for HRD researchers across the globe. As mentors, it is difficult to encourage new academics to publish (more) in HRD journals, given the insistence by some (many?) Business School Deans and Directors of Research to assess potential

outputs exclusively by the ABS ranking. Yet, around only one half of journal outputs submitted received the same score from sub-panel members as their ABS journal ranking, slightly more than a third scored below and less than 15% scored higher. Thus, there is no direct correlation between the ABS list and UOA19 Panel member ratings, perhaps providing research mentors and managers some scope to take the potential ‘risks’ of encouraging - and submitting - outputs in ABS ranked 2\* HRD journals, which have a 30% chance of being scored higher by sub-panel members.

It is surprising that, despite insistence by REF sub-panel members that they would not and did not use the ABS ranking list, many Deans/Heads of Business Schools and Directors of Research persisted in assessing (all) outputs by the ABS rank of the journal, an inference based on the dominance of journal articles in the actual REF submission and by previous work (e.g. Tourish and Willmott, 2015). Thus, it seems they rejected HRD journals in addition to book chapters and books, to the possible detriment of HRD researchers and the field of HRD. It seems facile to simply suggest that future REF panel members reaffirm/reinforce their stance of NOT using the ABS journal ranking list as experience informs us that this message is simply ignored by those making decisions about REF submissions. Another more constructive approach might be for prominent UFHRD members who are/have been Heads of School to further develop their links with the ABS to achieve greater HRD representation to refute and dispel the misguided beliefs highlighted in this research, and elsewhere (Hussain, 2015; Tourish and Willmott, 2015). From an international perspective, prominent HRD researchers in other senior roles, such as within the American Academy of HRD, could use their positions to articulate this

message.

Our analysis reveals the prominent and highly-regarded position of the (ABS 3\*) Management Learning and AMLE (ABS 4\*) journals. Again, it would be facile to simply recommend increasing the ABS ranking of HRD journals. We acknowledge the efforts by current and previous editors to attempt to increase the ABS rankings of the more established HRD titled journals, such as HRDQ and HRDI. It is encouraging that HRDQ has achieved SSCI accreditation, but this has not resulted in a higher ABS ranking. Publishers are also aware of the crucial importance of journal rankings, but this is critical in business and management where the ABS list (and others such as the Australian Dean's list) commands so much influence. Members of editorial teams must continue to work with their publishers to accelerate the process of increasing the ranking of HRD journals in the ABS list. Our project has clearly shown that much HRD research is being published in non-HRD journals within business and management. This is research that we believe editors and publishers of HRD journals would wish to attract and publish themselves. However, HRD researchers publishing their work in non-HRD journals is not necessarily negative for HRD as a subject discipline.

We conclude that this descriptive study assessing the representation of HRD research in the REF UOA19 has a number of valuable outcomes. First, it provides a benchmark for future related research. For example, similar analyses could be conducted on the previous UK based RAE assessments and future REF assessments to track developments in the state of HRD research. Second, the results of the project may help HRD researchers make stronger cases for inclusion of HRD research in future REF assessments.

Third, the results provide data on the status - as judged by inclusion of outputs in the REF - of the various journals. This will be of value to journal publishers and editors as well as to HRD researchers. There will also be potential value for journals seeking data to influence journal ranking lists.

*Limitations and Recommendations for further research*

We have recognized some of the constraints of this study in our earlier discussion. Here, we summarise the limitations and consider them as opportunities for further research.

First, it is important to indicate our positionality in relation to the study and to explain our attempt to identify and 'set aside' our assumptions in the process of analysing the data. We are both HRD researchers, well-published in HRD journals, and founding members of the University Forum for HRD, which sponsored this study. However, we also engage in and publish research beyond mainstream HRD and thus adopt a broad, rather than myopic, view of HRD within Business and Management. One of the authors was involved in preparing the School's REF submission, thus gaining insight into the internal process. One of the authors invited a panel member to discuss the assessment process at a School research seminar, but his clear policy of not using the ABS list was ignored.

Whilst both authors had outputs submittable to REF2014, one author's work was not included, the explanation being that the outputs were not in ABS 3\* or 4\* journals. Thus, we have two alternative perspectives on the internal university submission process, both during and after REF2014. Whilst these experiences might have shaped our assumptions, we have limited our analyses and reflections to the available REF UOA19 data and panel documents. In

addition, while acknowledging debates on the efficacy and even its possibility, we applied the process of ‘bracketing’ in data analysis to set aside our assumptions and biases (Tufford and Newman, 2010). Other anecdotal observations are made on the basis of extensive discussions with HRD colleagues, thus not exclusively representing our own views.

We acknowledge that we have only analysed HRD research submitted in UOA19 and further similar research could be conducted in Units such as education, health and psychology, to reveal whether or not HRD research is more widespread than our small study suggests.

Our study focused on UOA19, where outputs were dominated by journal articles, easily assessed using the ABS list. Future research studies could investigate through in-depth interviews how and why deans/directors of research ‘selected’ outputs (mainly articles) to include in REF submissions, particularly focusing on the use (or not) of the ABS list. As the panel noted, good quality research was also published in other forms, such as books. Such qualitative data could shed light on the quantitative findings presented here.

From our findings, we noted earlier that some prominent HRD researchers were not submitted to REF2014. This limits the representation of HRD in the assessment exercise. We recommend further research is conducted to address the questions: which HRD researchers were submitted; what were the various institutional mechanisms used and decisions made to select these individuals and understand why others were not. This is important to understand in preparation for future REF exercises to help raise the perceived profile of HRD research in UK Business Schools.

Also related to this, in an informal email to us, one panel member offered the following suggestion: '*to identify well cited/regarded HRD articles and see if they were submitted. If not, then you might direct questions to those responsible for making the selection of outputs submitted to REF.*' We were unable to address this suggestion in this small study, but we recommend that further qualitative research through interviews with university decision-makers should be conducted in this area.

Another emerging research question is: to what extent do institutions have 'preferred' (ABS high ranked) journals and is this related to staff serving as editorial board members? If this is confirmed, there might be an argument for attempting to establish HRD researchers on such editorial boards. It would be interesting to hear the views of editorial teams on this, perhaps adding further insight to perceptions of HRD within the business and management arena.

Given the potential connections between management learning and HRD, in the UK and globally, future research could investigate through in-depth interviews or a questionnaire survey how and why HRD researchers select journals in which to publish. This may provide a fruitful avenue to further consider the multiple forms of HRD knowledge and practice in the global research assessment context.

Finally, we acknowledge that the study is largely descriptive and extrapolates from REF data a number of conclusions concerning the effects of ABS journal rankings on HRD researchers' behaviour. Thus, further research is needed to gather additional data from HRD researchers as to whether ABS journal rankings influenced their choice of research topics, whether they perceive that higher ABS ranked journals accept HRD papers, and even

whether ABS rankings influence how researchers self-define as HRD researchers. Related to this, themes of identity and career trajectories in the light of the REF are also relevant areas for further qualitative research. Currently, it is not clear whether ABS or REF is marginalising HRD or indeed whether HRD researchers are drifting to less research-intensive institutions. Such additional research might demonstrate the extent to which the REF and similar performance metrics might alter patterns of research, researcher behaviour and academic careers, in the specific case of HRD.

The source of the data and examples informing this article is UK specific, and in particular the results of submissions to REF2014. Other countries also conduct similar reviews of national research activity, so our discussion is relevant in the international HRD context. Further research is required to explore (perceptions of) the state of HRD research globally. Given the international context of HRD theory and practice, this may provide a platform for further quantitative survey research analyzing (and comparing) HRD in the global research assessment context.

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