

IR, HR or ER: Student Perceptions of Meaning

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For over twenty years, academics in Australian tertiary educational institutions have debated the terminology that should be used to describe courses of study concerning aspects of the employment relationship. In the midst of battle between the advocates of an Industrial Relations (IR) focus and those advocating the cause of Human Resource Management (HRM), there arose a 'Third Force' known as Employment Relations. Few centers of Industrial Relations learning have survived into the 21st Century.

Underpinning these changes have been often deeply held and conflicting views about the role of tertiary education and the learning needs of students. This process has been fuelled by the rising dominance of pro-capitalist views and ideas associated with managerialism, efficiency and excellence. Reflecting changes in society generally, demand for courses has shifted from Humanities and other areas to Business Faculties. Learning for jobs has largely replaced a quest for knowledge and understanding. The explosion in postgraduate business degree offerings and full-fee paying students has further necessitated the offering of courses seen to satisfy corporate needs. Students themselves are key stakeholders and their views taken into account. The factors shaping their perceptions are also important for understanding and for developing an appropriate response.

In this paper, the results of a survey of 100 students concerning their views about the meaning and usefulness to them of subjects in employment relations, human resource management and industrial relations are discussed. The results are analysed according to two cohorts: first, students possessing 'extensive work experience' (WE) defined as five or more years of relevant work experience and secondly, students possessing 'limited work experience' (LWE). The results indicate that both WE and LWE identify courses in HRM as more relevant to their needs than courses in IR or ER. They also indicate that students' understanding overall of the meanings of HR, ER and IR are predominantly consistent with definitions and understandings expressed in the relevant literature. However, the results also indicate a significant difference in the responses of WE and LWE groups regarding several important aspects of teaching in the field, including a stronger perception among WE students of the importance and usefulness of study in the IR field.

Introduction

If the extent of debate about the subject content of particular fields of inquiry provides an indicator of the extent of vitality and interest in the field, then it must be concluded that the study of the employment relationship is one of great intellectual and passionate activity! For over twenty years, there has been a good deal of debate among academics in Australia and overseas concerning the meaning and subject content of the field of Industrial Relations (IR) (Deery & Plowman 1980; Dabscheck and Niland 1981). Since the late 1980's, the debate concerning the meanings, content and relevancy of IR and

HRM fields of inquiry has flourished (Legge 1989) and for nearly ten years, the debate has been enriched by those offering and arguing for a 'third way' known as employment relations (ER) (Mortimer & Morris 1995; Fastenau & Pullin 1998; Bamber and Lansbury 1998).

In Australia, the teaching of industrial relations as a distinct focus of study in universities dates back to the 1960's with Chairs in industrial relations being established at Monash and Sydney Universities and the University of New South Wales in the late 1960's and early 1970's. The first Australian introductory text on the subject, K. F. Walker's *Australian Industrial Relations Systems*, was published in 1971 (Walker 1971). In 1980, Stephen Deery and David Plowman wrote what J. E. Isaac described in his Foreword as the first general text on the subject of industrial relations since Walker's text ten years earlier (Deery & Plowman 1980: ix). A year later, Braham Dabscheck and John Niland wrote in the Foreword to their book *Industrial Relations in Australia* (in contrast to Deery and Plowman's *Australian Industrial Relations*) that "Industrial relations has become an increasingly popular subject in universities and colleges of advanced education" (1981: 5). Indeed it had, but the tide was not far from changing under pressure from business and other competitive forces. In Australia, activity in the area labeled HRM emerged in the mid to late 1980's although HRM practices were firmly established in the United States by the early 1980s and the 'Harvard Model of HRM', which is still widely taught in Australian universities, was developed (Beer *et al* 1985) (Deery *et al* 2001: 38). By the beginning of the New Millennium, few universities in Australia had not participated in shifting the focus of their courses from IR to HRM. It is interesting to note that neither IR text published in 1980-81 made any mention at all of 'human resource management'.

Research and teaching in the areas of IR, HRM and ER has always been associated with disagreement about meaning and content. Dabscheck and Niland, for instance, asserted in 1981 that "The field of industrial relations has many faces" (1981: 13). Much more recently, Deery *et al* assert that the many attempts to define industrial relations merely serve to illustrate "the diversity of views held about its exact scope and content" (2001: 5). Some writers have focused upon the differences between IR and HRM and, in particular, drawn attention to the others' limitations, contradictions, challenges and opportunities (Legge 1989; Deery *et al* 2001: 56-7). Some writers have gone so far as to entirely dismiss the other's contributions; for example, Keenoy and Anthony's assessment of HRM "To explain it is to destroy it" (1992: 238). Some writers have taken the view that either IR or HRM can subsume the other. Deery *et al*, for example, argued that "Most commentators agree that the field of industrial relations should expand to take account of the wider aspects of the employment relationship" (2001: 5-6).

Kaufman (1993) and Kelly (1994) are among those who have argued that the focus of industrial relations upon conflict and institutions coupled with the decline in unionism and the growth of HRM has caused a decline in the vitality and relevance of the field of study. From the late 1980's in Australia some academics were arguing for a more integrated approach to the study of employee relations (Hayward & Mortimer 1988). During the 1990's some academics in Australia expressed their concern and frustration with the IR versus HRM debate and formed the International Employment Relations Association (IERA) which has since attracted members in a number of other countries. Mortimer and Morris (1995) and Fastenau and Pullin (1998) advanced arguments in favour of an ER approach asserting that the divisions between HRM and IR were becoming increasingly blurred and suggested that a new approach known as employment

relations (ER) might be the product of this convergence. Mortimer and Leece further argued that there are severe limitations to Human Resource Management inheriting the mantle as an explanatory framework and present a case for the adoption of the "Employment Relations" model as a more satisfactory framework (2002: 17). They argued that from an Australian viewpoint, the limitation of the HRM model is that it does not consider the institutional practice of industrial relations including the determination of wages and conditions, requirements to consult on matters of terminations, change and redundancy and review of dismissals.

During the past twenty years, courses focusing upon aspects of employee relations offered by the School of Management at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) have changed their names and focus several times, thus reflecting the debate discussed above. Some of these changes resulted from consensus staff discussions whilst others were associated with, at times, conflictual change processes. In the 1980's, terms such as 'industrial relations and personnel management' dominated but by the 1990's, 'employment relations' dominated subject and course names. During the first few years of the 21st century, HRM became the dominant focus of undergraduate and postgraduate specializations, although subjects continued to be offered with IR and ER titles and focus. However, how these changes have altered students' understanding of the subject area is not understood, nor students' wants and interests concerning subject content appreciated.

In this paper, the results of a survey of 100 students concerning their views about the meaning and usefulness to them of subjects in employment relations, human resource management and industrial relations are discussed. The results are analysed according to two cohorts: first, students possessing 'extensive work experience' (WE) defined as five or more years of relevant work experience and secondly, students possessing 'limited work experience' (LWE).

Methodology

A survey questionnaire was developed aimed at gaining insights to students' expectations, goals and preferences concerning learning related to the issues associated with people in a work context as well as students' understanding of the meaning of HR, ER and IR terminology. Several questions required respondents to indicate forced choice responses while others required responses according to a seven point likert scale. The literature concerning meanings of HR, ER and IR was utilized extensively to construct questions and optional responses.

Questionnaires were distributed to students enrolled in a postgraduate core MBA unit. The unit was offered in two formats to accommodate the different needs of students: those with extensive work experience measured as five years or more (WE); and those with limited work experience (LWE). The core subject(s), which both WE and LWE students cohorts were enrolled in at that time, was titled ER but students had been informed the subject(s) would shortly be renamed as HR. The content of the course had previously been restructured to adopt a major focus on management's role in dealing with HRM but through an ER perspective which highlighted the importance of IR issues and recognized the ER or combined HR and IR experiences of employees and other key stakeholders. The Harvard Model of HRM (Beer et al 1985) was utilized within the course to facilitate students' understanding of employee relations. The following message was communicated both verbally and in text in the preamble to the questionnaire: that "participation in this survey, whilst being highly valued and appreciated by the

researchers, is entirely voluntary. Participation in the survey has no relationship with any assessment procedures in your subject(s). Responses to the survey are entirely confidential. Only aggregate results will be reported and your completed questionnaire will only be available to the researchers”.

100 completed and anonymous survey questionnaires were received and subsequently analysed. 60 respondents indicated that they were LWE and 40 indicated WE.

Survey Results

Of major importance are the findings of the survey regarding students’ perceptions of the contemporary relevance of study in the fields of HR, ER and IR (Q.9). The differences between groups for all Question 9 sub items based on whether “Experienced” (WE) or Limited Work Experience (“LWE”) were tested using Pearson Chi Square. There was a statistically significant difference between groups for Q9.1, Q9.2, Q9.12 and Q9.16 at the .05 level. These results are reported below. A more comprehensive analysis of the data collected is planned for future publication.

Q9.1 “Industrial Relations is really just about conflict”

Both groups on average disagreed with this statement. (LWE 3.22 and WE 3.48)

There was a significant difference between the WE students and LWE students, with WE students disagreeing more than LWE students.

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	14.816	6	.022
N of Valid Cases	100		

Q9.2 “Employment Relations is really just about conflict”

Both groups on average disagreed with this statement, and the disagreement was stronger than for Q1. (LWE 2.5 and Exp 2.78). LWEs disagreed more on average with this statement than WE students.

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	11.819	5	.037
N of Valid Cases	100		

Q9.12 “Industrial Relations represents the ‘old’ world”

Both groups on average disagreed with this statement. (LWE 3.5 and WE 3.65)
However LWE students disagreed more than WE students, with this difference being statistically significant.

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	12.830	5	.046
N of Valid Cases	100		

Q9.16 “Human Resource Management is really very interesting”

Both groups on average agreed with this statement. (LWE 4.35 and WE 4.98). However WE students agreed with this statement more than LWEs. This difference was statistically significant.

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	13.345	5	.038
N of Valid Cases	100		

The study of HRM (Q9.16) achieved the highest average relevancy rating on the seven point Likert scale (WE 4.52 and LWE 4.45), followed by Q9.17 “Employment Relations is really very interesting” (WE 4.13 and LWE 4.0).

Other Results**Q9.15 “Industrial Relations is really very interesting”**

On average, LWE students tended to disagree with this statement whereas WE students averaged just above the midpoint (neither agreeing nor disagreeing). However this difference was not statistically significant. (LWE 3.38 and Exp 4.10).

It can be seen from these results that the perceptions of WE and LWE students differs with WE students with the latter most strongly expressing interest in HR rather than ER or IR.

Q9.3 “Human Resource Management is really just about conflict”

Both groups on average disagreed with this statement, and the disagreement was stronger than for Q1, but similar to Q2. (LWE 2.4 and WE 2.42)

Conclusions

The results indicate that both WE and LWE identify courses in HRM as more relevant to them than courses in IR or ER. However the nature of this perceived ‘relevancy’ requires further investigation. In particular, the sources of the perceptions are likely to be important. It is possible that the dominance of literature concerning HRM has shaped perceptions rather than an appreciation of the subject content or even job prospects. The survey results also indicate that students’ understanding overall of the meanings of HR, ER and IR are somewhat consistent with definitions and understandings expressed in the relevant literature. However, the results also indicate a significant difference in the responses of WE and LWE groups. LWE students, who are predominantly international

rather than local Australian in origin, tended to more neutral responses. This aspect of survey responses warrants further and broader consideration as the implications extend far beyond this current study.

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Preface

This was the third IERA conference in San Francisco and the outcomes of the conference have contributed to the IERA objectives of encouraging international employment relations research and of building an IERA international network of academic and practitioner colleagues through international conferences.

This conference achieved some very important outcomes for IERA which members will be able to utilise for their own scholarly purposes into the future. IERA members from several countries presented research papers concerning aspects of employment relations in Australia, the USA, Britain, Canada, the Philippines, Fiji and the European Union. Papers presented at the conference addressed a wide range of ER issues within the overall conference theme of Employment Relations at the Industry and Regional Levels.

A strong sub-theme of the conference concerned the clothing and textile industries. Thanks largely to the efforts of Greg Teal (School of Management, University of Western Sydney) attendees were able to learn about the contemporary and disturbing nature of employment relations in these industries from a number of experts including Igor Nossa (Chief Advocate, Textile Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia) and from US experts George Wedemeyer, Brenda Cochrane, Peter Olney and Katie Quan.

Some papers presented at the Third IERA San Francisco Conference were submitted for review and for possible publication. All papers submitted for publication were submitted to a double blind peer review of the full papers submitted, as well as a refereeing of any subsequent changes. In some cases this resulted in papers being rejected for publication.

I would like to sincerely thank the many people who acted as referees for these proceedings, including many academics from a variety of countries. Their attention to detail as well as their constructive recommendations for changes were greatly appreciated.

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