**The HR Ecosystem framework: Examining strategic HRM tensions in knowledge intensive organizations with boundary-crossing professionals**

**ABSTRACT**

In this paper, we use Snell & Morris’ (2021) new HR Ecosystem framework to empirically examine strategic fit and alignment tensions for knowledge intensive organizations and professional knowledge workers. Rich data were collected through in-depth interviews with 75 members of faculty engaged in knowledge-intensive work for Business and Management Schools (B&M), and the analysis of strategy documents. The application of the framework enables us to contribute to dynamic capabilities theory and SHRM in four ways. Firstly, drawing on the findings, we propose an adapted HR Ecosystem framework for analyzing knowledge intensive organizations, which incorporates tensions across the four subsystems of a HR ecosystem (strategy, capabilities, composition, and cultures). These tensions are shaped by interactions within and between levels (meso, macro and micro) and ecosystems. Secondly, our findings underscore the need for knowledge intensive organizations to engage with a plurality of collaborative and competing internal and external stakeholder interests, including those of knowledge workers who constitute key organizational stakeholders. Thirdly, our analysis shows how the views and behaviors of internal organizational stakeholders are affected by ecosystem dynamics within and beyond the physical boundaries of an organization. Fourthly, we reveal how conflicting organizational cultures connect with other HR ecosystem subsystems to constrain collegialism and cohesion. By evidencing how knowledge intensive organizations are in a constant flux of alignment and misalignment, the paper demonstrates the value of the HR Ecosystem framework in examining and informing SHRM in organizations in other industries.

**KEYWORDS:** Strategic HR; HR ecosystem; Dynamic Capabilities; Human Capital

**INTRODUCTION**

Many scholars and organizational leaders prize the realization of full strategic HR fit and alignment (Eva et al., 2018; Fainshmidt et al., 2019; Trevor & Varcoe, 2016). However, complex, and dynamic organizational tensions typically thwart their endeavors (Baker & Singh, 2019; Snell & Morris, 2021). To better understand and address these complexities, a growing body of scholars argue that we need to conceptualize strategic fit and alignment as being in flux in a HR ecosystem, which includes co-interacting and co-evolving elements or subsystems (Cross & Swart, 2021; Harney & Alkhalaf, 2021; Harney & Collings, 2021; Kehoe, 2021; Ram et al., 2021). Snell & Morris (2021) have duly developed a new HR Ecosystem theoretical framework, which builds on and extends dynamic capabilities theory. Their framework enables the analysis of the interrelationships between organizational strategy and workforce capabilities, composition, and culture(s). In this paper, we are among the first to empirically apply Snell & Morris’ (2021) framework to the qualitative analysis of HR ecosystem tensions not only within, but also across knowledge intensive organizations in the same sector and country.

We focus on knowledge-intensive organizations engaging in research and innovation by examining the HR ecosystems of university Business and Management (B&M) Schools, as they provide rich and insightful contexts for the analysis of the framework. This is because universities exemplify how the permeable nature of organizational boundaries and HR ecosystems are shaped by a multiplex of other internal and external meso-level HR ecosystems, along with macro (national and international) and micro level contextual influences. We examine the views and experiences of university B&M school academics, who use their extensive knowledge capital in the research and teaching they do and so can be considered knowledge workers. B&M school faculty constitute a valuable group of professional knowledge workers to focus on, because they are part of HR ecosystems which strategically promote cross-boundary coopetition (Boon et al., 2018; van den Broek, Boselie & Paauwe, 2018), and they are highly influential in informing developments in SHRM strategy and practice in organizations across industries (Grier & Poole, 2020).

Hence, we investigate the following research questions. Why are fit and alignment tensions generated in the HR Ecosystems of knowledge intensive B&M schools? And how do faculty working in these ecosystems experience these tensions?

 In answering these questions, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 75 professional knowledge workers. The interviewees were from fifteen B&M schools in the UK and included faculty ranging from postdoctoral researchers and teaching fellows through to Deans. Moving beyond the boundaries of a single organization enabled us to gain a broader and deeper understanding of the ecosystem(s) and boundary-crossing dynamics shaping the views and experiences of these knowledge workers.

The findings contribute to the extension of Snell and Morris’ (2021) HR ecosystem framework by situating the framework in a broader multiplex of relations and incorporating attendant tensions into the analysis of its four subsystems (strategy, capabilities, composition, and cultures). Specifically, we propose the adaptation of this framework for analyzing knowledge intensive organization, which incorporates tensions between strategy and strategies, capabilities and capacities, composition and configuration, and cultures and cohesion. In doing so, we make important contributions to the development of the HR ecosystem framework for scholars, policy makers, and practitioners. Furthermore, by evidencing how knowledge intensive organizations are constantly in a flux of alignment and misalignment, the paper demonstrates the value of the HR Ecosystem framework in examining and informing SHRM in organizations in other industries.

In the following section, we explain why Snell & Morris’ (2021) HR Ecosystem framework is required to better understand continuing change and complexity with respect to fit and alignment and the relationships between the four subsystems of the framework: strategy, capabilities, composition, and culture(s). We also elucidate the need to examine how counter tensions emerge within these subsystems between strategy and strategies; capabilities and capacities; composition and configuration; and culture(s) and cohesion. Figure 1 provides an adapted multi-level HR ecosystem framework to analyze knowledge intensive organizations before introducing the methodology used in the study. We then demonstrate how the theoretical relationships set out in the figure relate to our findings, which are organized into four sub-sections. After which, we explain the implications of the findings for theory and practice and conclude the paper.

**SHRM FIT & ALIGNMENT: THE NEED FOR A HR ECOSYSTEM PERSPECTIVE**

Much of the strategic HR literature has focused on the role of firm context in informing strategy development and the pursuit of optimal external (vertical) and internal (horizontal) fit and alignment in strategy and practice (Armstrong & Brown, 2019; Baird & Meshoulam, 1988; Delery, 1998; Gerhart, 2007). Although strategy gurus and organizational leaders have long called for full strategic HR fit and alignment (Khadem & Khadem, 2017), this goal remains elusive (Baker & Singh, 2019; Collins & Kehoe, 2016; Dulipovici & Robey, 2013; Paauwe et al., 2013). Hence, answers continue to be sought (Guest, 2011), which are unlikely to be found in this rabbit hole or *cul de sac* for theory and practice (Delery & Roumpi, 2017; Purcell, 1999). Instead, if we are to move forward, we need to re-engage with a more inclusive lens for SHRM fit, which centers on complexity and dynamism (Armstrong & Brown, 2019; Beer et al., 2015).

Snell & Morris’ (2021) HR Ecosystem framework builds on dynamic capabilities theory, which recognizes that organizational requirements for internal and external fit are subject to change (Teece, 2011; 2020). Dynamic capability scholars contend that organizations with adaptive capabilities are better able to respond to rapid changes in ways that promote creativity and innovation by realigning their internal and external competencies, renewing their current resources, and generating new ones (Al-Aali & Teece, 2014; Fallon-Byrne & Harney, 2017). However, a growing body of scholars argue that the concept of dynamic capabilities is too vague and top-down (Kraatz & Zajac, 2001; Salvato & Vassolo, 2018).

 The following section explains how these shortcomings are addressed by Snell &

Morris’ (2021) new framework by analyzing fit and alignment across four subsystems of an organization’s HR ecosystem: its strategy and workforce capabilities, composition, and culture(s). Like Snell & Morris, we do not see these as entirely discrete subsystems of a HR ecosystem, unilaterally cascading in a top-down fashion, for example, from strategy to composition, but instead as dynamically interrelated subsystems shaped by counter tensions.

**Adapting to change and complexity in multi-level HR Ecosystems**

A HR ecosystem perspective assumes that as organizations develop strategies to adapt to complexity and change, convergences and divergences co-exist, -interact and -evolve, thereby generating tensions (Mitchell et al., 1997; Patel et al., 2013). This is because organizations typically seek to benefit from the synthesis of convergences and divergences (Farndale & Pauuwe, 2018), which need to be strategically balanced to avoid deleterious outcomes (Heracleous & Werres, 2016). An explicit contention we make in this paper is that these developments take place at multiple levels, surfacing at macro (the broader external context surrounding an organization), meso (organizational) and micro levels (individual agency). While encapsulated in Snell & Morris’ framework, we seek to foreground the multi-level complexity of HR ecosystems in this paper, because direct consideration of the nexus between these levels is often missing in the SHRM and dynamic capabilities literature (Fallon-Byrne & Harney, 2017).

 A second argument we make in this paper is that we need to examine tensions between strategy *and strategies*. Much of the literature on SHRM and dynamic capabilities has focused on hierarchical strategy formulation and implementation in private firms. From a HR ecosystem perspective, strategy implementation and outcomes in these firms, and organizations more broadly, are in constant flux because HR ecosystems host a plurality of internal and external stakeholder views and interests, which generate tensions with respect to convergences and divergences (Beer et al., 2015; Guest & Bos-Nehles, 2013; Mitchell et al., 1997; Wilkinson et al., 2019). Relatedly, the dynamic capabilities literature has also been critiqued for largely ignoring the views, agency, and strategies of organizational members (Abell et al., 2008), which can undermine mutual gains and so affect workforce behaviors and strategy realization (Boxall, 2013, 2016). As a corollary, the HR ecosystem literature foregrounds the complex and ambiguous tensions between meso-level organizational policies and practices on the one hand and the micro-level agency, needs and views of organizational members on the other. It builds on calls for more people-focused approaches to HRM, which balance meso-level organizational strategy with micro-level workforce needs to improve long-term organizational sustainability (Cross & Swart, 2021; Dundon & Rafferty, 2018). Such needs include a good work-life balance and working relationships, inclusive working environments, decision-making input, and decent pay.

 We now turn to examine how the complex multi-level dynamics discussed above generate implications for workforce capabilities, composition, and culture(s) in knowledge-intensive organizations such as B&M schools. The implications of these dynamics are examined in the next section.

**Workforce capabilities, composition & culture(s): Knowledge workers & their behaviors**

Much of the literature on SHRM and dynamic capabilities has focused on fit and alignment challenges with respect to workforce capabilities, composition, and culture(s). However, they have typically been examined as discrete issues. As Snell & Morris (2021) argue, the concept of dynamic capabilities is often operationalized in empirical research in a relatively static manner. The HR Ecosystem framework enables a more dynamic and inclusive view of fit and alignment by making more explicit the interconnections between organizational strategy and workforce capabilities, composition, and culture(s). As discussed below, in this paper we demonstrate the need to also examine tensions between strategy *and strategies*, capabilities *and capacities*, composition *and configuration*, and cultures *and cohesion*.

 Academic faculty are knowledge workers who use their extensive knowledge capital and capabilities to make strategically valuable contributions to organizations and projects. However, the types of positions held by academic faculty and their contributions vary. For instance, they may be in an untenured post, tenure-track or tenured. As reflected in our UK sample, temporary contracts would equate to being untenured and ‘probation’ and ‘confirmed in post’ would typically be used instead of tenure-track and tenured. Academics in these positions may play different organizational roles and have varying levels of influence over processes governing their school or institution (Austin & Jones, 2015; Jones & Harvey, 2017; Rowlands, 2018). Like other knowledge workers (Donnelly, 2011), academics often work long hours (Grugulis, 2007; Hansen & Schnittka, 2018). Consequently, tensions between capabilities and capacities are likely to surface if the ability of knowledge workers to achieve strategic objectives is constrained by inadequate organizational support and resources (Swart & Kinnie, 2013), which we examine in this study.

Moreover, the strategic composition of workforces is becoming increasingly complex in knowledge-intensive organizations (Altman et al., 2021a; 2021b). Lepak & Snell (1999; 2008) differentiate between four human resource cohorts in an organization’s HR architecture (knowledge-based work and employment, job-based work and employment, contract-based work arrangements and alliances/partnerships) and set out aligned relationship types, modes of employment and HR practices. In comparison to individuals engaging in job-based employment, knowledge workers are more likely to be in-demand and to engage in boundary-crossing work and behaviors (Kinnie & Swart, 2019). Consequently, they may seek to supplement their main income by undertaking contracted work for other organizations or acting as alliance partners. Indeed, like other knowledge workers, academics who engage in teaching and research may provide knowledge of high strategic value to numerous organizations without being their formal employee (Kinnie & Swart, 2019; Kuvaas et al., 2013). Altman et al., (2021a; 20021b) have recently proposed the term ‘workforce ecosystem’ to characterize a structure consisting of contributors within and outside an organization. In their global survey of professionals, 80% of respondents reported that their workforce included external contributors. However, many scholars and practitioners continue to focus on organizational employees and largely ignore tensions over the contracting *of* and *for* services (Rubery et al., 2018; Tempest, 2009; Wilkinson et al., 2021).

The composition of the workforce in knowledge intensive organizations such as universities includes knowledge workers not only on different types of contracts, but also at different career stages with varying demographic attributes. We therefore examine how tensions between composition and configuration can emerge, because some individuals have greater access to resources and capital than others. More research on these understudied developments is needed because research has demonstrated the organizational benefits that can be derived from having a diverse workforce and inclusive environment including enhanced creativity, innovation, cooperation, worker satisfaction and engagement (e.g., Altman et al., 2021a; 2001b; Boehm et al., 2014; Mor Barak et al., 2016; Syed, 2021; Theodorakopoulous & Budhwar, 2015).

Relatedly, knowledge intensive organizations like universities typically seek to establish and maintain a meso-level culture characterized by commitments to collaboration and collegiality. However, as demonstrated in our study, tensions between cultures and cohesion can emerge as convergences and divergences regarding strategy, capabilities, and composition interconnect within broader HR ecosystems to induce greater fragmentation (Marchington et al., 2005; Weil, 2014).

The key features of the HR Ecosystem framework set out in this section are encapsulated in Figure 1, which is adapted from Snell & Morris (2021: 232) and based on the research findings presented in the fourth section of our paper. Only the original elements of the diagram appear in grey font. Perforated lines are used to convey the permeability of the levels and arrows are used to illustrate the dynamic interactive nature of ecosystem relationships. As illustrated in the diagram, organizations develop meso-level strategies to deal with the complexity of integrating their HR ecosystem vertically and horizontally with a changing macro-level environment and views and behaviors at a micro level, which we have added to the figure to depict this multiplex.

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In this paper we argue that as organizations simultaneously seek differentiation (divergence) and integration (convergence), counter-tensions emerge within the four subsystems of a meso-level organizational HR ecosystem (strategy, capabilities, composition, and cultures). We have added ‘strategies’, ‘capacities’, ‘configuration’ and ‘cohesion’ to the figure to depict tensions between ‘strategy and strategies’, ‘capabilities and capacities’, ‘composition and configuration’ and ‘culture(s) and cohesion’. Importantly, such tensions are influenced by members of a HR ecosystem who have their own micro-level interests, engage in boundary-crossing activity, and use their agency to respond to tensions with respect to convergent and divergent interests. The following section explains the methods of data collection to examine fit and alignment tensions in B&M schools in the UK.

**METHODS AND DATA**

To answer the research questions posed in the introduction to this paper and gain in-depth insight into the HR ecosystems of knowledge intensive organizations and tensions from a knowledge worker perspective, a qualitative research design was adopted. This was because it enabled insight into participants’ views and experiences of the social construction of HR ecosystems and their alignment in their own words, reflecting an interpretivist epistemology (Symon & Cassell, 2012; Cassell & Symon, 2015). A critical epistemological lens was adopted (Edwards, 2017; Keegan & Boselie, 2006), in order to embed the views and experiences of workers within broader ecosystems comprising a plurality of interests and structural tensions shaped by social, political, technological, and economic factors (Snell & Morris, 2021). The target sample population were highly educated and articulate, so well-placed to provide rich insights into the changing complexity of convergence and divergence tensions in HR ecosystems (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The conduct of the study was carefully designed and conducted to prioritize the validity, reliability, rigor, credibility and robustness of the research and its findings (Cardano, 2020; Pratt, 2009; Silverman, 2019; Symon et al., 2018).

**B&M Schools in the UK and data collection**

There are currently over 100 B&M schools in the UK (CABS, 2021). According to the latest UK HESA (2022) data, 18, 280 academic faculty worked in the field of Business and Administrative Studies in 2020/21, 17% more than in 2014/2015. There is variation among institutions across a range of dimensions, including the emphasis placed on research and teaching and their position and participation in national and international rankings (e.g., *QS World University Rankings*, *Times Higher, Shanghai Jiao Tong*), student satisfaction ratings (e.g., *The* *National Student Survey* - NSS), and panel-based assessments (e.g., the *Research Excellence Framework* - REF). The REF evaluates UK HE institutions based on the quality and volume of research outputs, impact outside academia and research environment over recurring 6-to-7-year periodic timeframes.

Rich original data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The second author conducted the interviews and kept a research diary as an *aide memoire* to reflect on any key points and themes emerging over the course of the interviews (Nadin & Cassell, 2006). Given that organizational boundaries are subject to varying degrees of permeability and workplace relationships increasingly transcend these boundaries (Cross & Swart, 2021), it was important to move beyond an organizationally bound analysis of fit and alignment to a HR ecosystem perspective incorporating the views of participants from multiple B&M schools and levels of seniority. Consequently, 75 interviews were conducted in total (49% F/51% M), with faculty holding different vantage points at a range of B&M schools in the UK (n=15). The composition and characteristics of the sample is summarized in table 1. A purposive sampling approach was adopted and so the breadth and size of the sample helped enhance the representativeness of the sample and the credibility of the data and findings.

Participants from the researchers’ academic networks were initially invited to take part in the study. The sample was then built progressively over time by targeting other participants

meeting the sampling criteria who could provide insight into a range of views and experiences. None of the participants were from the authors’ affiliated school. This enabled the participants to speak more freely and enabled researcher independence from the participants’ schools.

The sample size substantially exceeds the median number of interviews (32.5) identified in Saunders & Townsend’s (2016) review of qualitative sample sizes in organization and workplace research published in high-ranking journals. Data saturation was evaluated before completing the data collection phase of the study.

69% of the sample were UK nationals and 90% worked full-time. HESA (2022) data shows that in the field of administrative and business studies, 45% of academic staff identified as female, 61% as UK nationals and 68% full-time. Thus, our sample was broadly reflective of the demographic composition of the sector.

 The post-doctoral researchers and teaching fellows/assistants were employed on temporary contracts. Most of the other participants were employed on permanent, full-time contracts. 56 of the 75 participants were confirmed in post. The participants interacted with faculty in other universities in the UK and/or internationally through collaborations, networks, associations, conferences, and work relationships. Most held internal roles and were members of committees at program, group/department, school, or university level.

The age range of the participants spanned from 24 to 73 years of age. Most of the sample had at least five years’ experience in the sector, with one having more than 45 years’ experience. Most had worked for multiple universities over the course of their career, and many held external academic roles, so were able to draw on their experiences of multiple HR ecosystems in the sector.

The interviews lasted for over an hour on average, ranging from 46 to 109 minutes. They were conducted from late February to early August 2020 mainly online or by phone due to the Covid-19 outbreak. All the interviews were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed into textual data. The accuracy of the transcriptions was checked before being added to the data set for analysis. Follow-up interviews were conducted with participants where greater detail or clarification was needed.

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During the interviews we sought to examine the validity of the HR ecosystem framework whilst minimizing the potential for confirmation bias (Gao et al., 2017). The interview questions were therefore carefully designed to probe key elements of Snell & Morris’ (2021) HR ecosystem framework, including change, complexity, plurality of interests, strategies, composition, capabilities, and cultures, without directly imposing the framework. This approach enabled us to gather new credible insights and facilitate abductive theory development. We did this through examining how the participants’ experiences of work were influenced by a combination of internal organizational factors (e.g., workplace inclusivity and cultures), external factors (e.g., engagement with national frameworks for HE and international accreditations) and individual factors (e.g., individual role and career stage).

The following are examples of some of the interview questions posed. How do the strategies of your school and university influence your work? Do you have an opportunity to influence these organizational strategies through internal roles or otherwise? What type of relationship do you have with your managers and what kinds of strategies do they adopt? What strategies do you adopt to navigate the challenges you face? How would you describe your workload? Are there adequate opportunities and resources for you to learn new knowledge and skills? How diverse are the staff in your school? Do you work with staff on temporary or casual contracts? How would you describe the culture in your organization? These types of questions were supplemented with more probing questions in line with a semi-structured approach to the interviewing.

The analysis of publicly available strategy and policy documents from the 15 schools and universities also provided a basic foundation for our understanding of the strategies and policies of each of the schools/universities. These documents were downloaded from the websites of the organizations. They included details on their organizational strategy, values, goals, priorities, and rankings. Other documents focused on research strategies, sustainability strategies, well-being policies, and equality and diversity strategies and policies. A total of 42 documents were examined, which provided insight into the formal strategies in place, along with school and university level engagement with the broader HE system.

**Data Analysis**

Analysis of the transcript and documentary data was conducted and refined progressively to enhance the credibility of the findings (Bazeley, 2020). We abductively oscillated between theory and the data (Gao et al., 2017). Template analysis was adopted because it allows for the flexible iterative integration of existing knowledge and literature with data, in line with our approach to theory development. We coded a transcript and used the data to develop a preliminary template that reflected the focus of the research questions and the themes examined in the study (King, 2012). This included *a priori* first order themes of strategy, capabilities, composition, and culture(s). To check the initial coding of the data and the potential for biases, including confirmatory bias, we asked four researchers who were independent of the study and not familiar with the framework to openly code an interview transcript without using the template developed. We then compared the coding of the data to identify and discuss any differences in the coding. For example, we made minor adjustments to our initial coding by re-labeling or combining some of the codes. To better reflect the findings from the data we also made more significant changes to the template by introducing macro-, meso- micro- levels and tensions between ‘strategy and strategies’, ‘capabilities and capacities’, ‘composition and configuration’ and ‘cultures and cohesion’, as featured in our adapted version of Snell and Morris’ (2021) framework (see Figure 1).

The data were then imported into NVivo12 to organize the analysis of the data. The project team reviewed the coding of the first five transcripts and made further minor amendments to the template. The authors then proceeded with the coding and re-checked the coding after 20 transcripts had been coded. We repeatedly reviewed and discussed the validity and reliability of the coding to ensure the quality and reflexivity of the coding. Table 2 sets out the coding structure.

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 This careful and rigorous iterative process enabled us to uncover strategic and organizational dialectics, which demonstrate why HR ecosystems, such as those examined in this study, are in a constant flux of alignment and misalignment. We now examine these tensions.

**FINDINGS**

The primary data provided in-depth insight into the complexity of the HR ecosystems of UK B&M schools, including how various stakeholders, relationships and multi-level influences contribute to a constant flux of fit and alignment and associated tensions. In line with Figure 1, this section of the paper is divided into four sub-sections and examines tensions surfacing with respect to: strategy and strategies; capabilities and capacities; composition and configuration; and culture(s) and cohesion. Drawing on the theoretical framework set out in Figure 1 and the findings from our study, we advance propositions to be examined by future empirical research.

**Strategy and Strategies**

At a macro-level, international accreditations, rankings (e.g., AMBA and QS World University and MBA Rankings) and national-sectoral performance frameworks such as the UK’s REF, informed school- and university meso-level strategies to varying degrees. These rankings and frameworks featured prominently in the participants’ accounts, university and/or business school strategy documents and websites. The analysis of the documents revealed converging goals around the achievement of world-leading excellence in research, teaching and knowledge exchange through collaboration, collegiality, knowledge generation and innovation. Interestingly, the participants discussed how the strategies of UK universities and B&M schools were characterized by convergence and divergence tensions at a sectoral level, which impacted on the degree to which they deviated from established strategic models in the sector.

*They have all these strategy meetings and what it boils down to really is you try and teach really well … research really well … bring in money … have industry links, contribute to policy or something like that … and it’s your university’s distinctive contribution. It’s not.* (Professor, I30).

A salient frustration for most of the participants was that although universities are rated using macro-level metrics, the over-prioritization of key performance indicators (KPIs) in meso-level strategy development impacted on their institutional purpose and potential. This is exemplified in the following interview excerpt.

*We’ve got KPIs for this, and KPIs for that, but they seem to completely miss what’s going on in reality; what education is for and the potential … there for the institution.* (Professor, I28).

At a micro-level, faculty could exercise varying degrees of discretion over the conduct of their work and their strategic behaviors and relations within and outside their workplace. This included engaging in interpersonal interactions with peers in other schools and universities to discuss strategy and practice. A Dean explained how she often turned to senior faculty in other schools for advice and ideas. However, the participants broadly expressed frustration with the increasingly bureaucratic and hierarchical nature of meso-level strategy development and practice.

*Traditional universities were collegiate bureaucracies…that had hierarchies,*

*rules, and centralization but [as part] of a much more horizontal peer-based*

*system. What’s changed is the nature of the bureaucracy rather than its existence…we’ve become far too top heavy with bureaucracy.* (Professor, I70).

Most explained that the amount of bureaucracy they had to deal with impeded their strategic endeavors and input into broader organizational strategy development, which will be returned to when examining tensions between capabilities and capacities. Some of the participants were members of their University’s Senate Committee and/or attended all staff meetings, but these forums offered limited scope for open dialogue. A few had previously engaged with their university’s HR department and tried to shape certain strategic initiatives, such as training and development programs or the conduct of equal pay audits, but this was not undertaken widely or routinely.

 The actions and agency of the participants holding senior management roles were steered by meso-level strategies in nuanced ways. However, their personal strategies and approaches to leadership and management influenced the implementation of school and university-level strategies and the extent of influence faculty had over decision-making. The participants who felt the senior management team in their school adopted a more collegial approach claimed that they had opportunities to provide feedback on strategies and working practices which were taken onboard where possible within the constraints of the broader university-wide system; and those with administrative roles had some influence over the implementation of strategies related to their role. Collegial senior faculty were characterized as acting as a ‘buffer’ by representing the interests and needs of colleagues, challenging certain strategies, and negotiating compromises where possible. However, most referred to having limited influence over decision-making within and beyond their school, even when they held more senior roles*.*

*Once you get an admin role at a certain level, you become part of the management team at your level. When I was part of the lower management*

*team, I felt that I had to pass to lower levels what was decided from the top with little possibility of influencing any kind of decision.* (Senior Lecturer, I10).

*I think it’s very much been top-down…I think the Professoriate is disenfranchised …there’s an image of where the Department should go; it doesn’t come from discussion…The relationship with the Head of School is non-existent…that is unusual because in all my other institutions, whether we agreed or disagreed, there was always a kind of relationship of sorts.* (Professor, I22).

The participants with and without managerial responsibilities explained how they had formed or were in the process of forming their own strategies to navigate fit and alignment tensions and the changing nature of the HR ecosystems they engaged with. These strategies could be beneficial, but also detrimental to their employing organization due to the loss of distinctive and valuable human and social capital. This included the departure of line-managers and senior leaders, which could positively or negatively affect relations and strategies in multiple ecosystems.

A crucial point repeatedly raised by the participants was that the distinct knowledge and social capital universities seek to develop and shape among academics to meet organizational objectives in a changing broader environment, is often attractive and transferable to other universities within and outside the UK sharing broadly similar meso-level objectives (Morris et al., 2021). Indeed, given that university boundaries are relatively permeable, some of the participants pursued their own career and earnings strategies beyond their immediate employer and undertook additional work for other universities within or outside the UK (Marchington et al., 2011; Swart & Kinnie, 2017). In some cases, they switched employers after engaging in this type of boundary-crossing work.

Other micro-level strategies adopted by faculty to navigate the HR ecosystems they engaged with included distancing themselves from managers adopting top-down approaches and/or refraining from sharing ideas on how to improve practice because they envisaged from experience that their ideas would not be taken onboard in a meaningful way. Moreover, they developed their own strategies to protect their time which could generate friction between ecosystem members and across ecosystems. Consequently, a continued focus on top-down strategy misses the complexity generated by individual-level strategies and how they may converge and diverge with the strategies of other parties at different levels of an ecosystem or ecosystems. This leads to our first proposition,

***P1****: In navigating internal and external HR ecosystems and stakeholder interests at different levels, knowledge workers in business and management schools develop micro-level strategies, which converge and diverge with employer strategy.*

These dynamics coalesced with tensions in the relationship between capabilities and capacities. These tensions are examined next.

**Capabilities and Capacities**

Macro-level performance assessments and rankings along with changing student expectations communicated ‘ideal’ organizational and individual capabilities relating to teaching, research, impact, grant capture, international reach, and student support. The documents emphasized the recruitment of highly skilled and competent faculty who would be supported in developing these ideal capabilities and deliver world class academic excellence. However, the interview data revealed tensions over the time, resources and social capital needed to make the most of faculty and organizational capabilities.

A key point highlighted by most participants was that although they recognized their employer faced various macro-level pressures, meso-level bureaucratic strategies and changing student expectations required them to spend an increasing amount of time completing administrative tasks. This included collecting data for ranking and accreditation bodies and documenting information. The following quote demonstrates how administrative burdens curtailed the time faculty had to make full use of their existing knowledge, skills, and creativity.

*I don’t have enough time to do teaching and research as it is, let alone trying new methods and approaches. I could be applying for more grants, trying to work more on external engagement, building networks, those types of things. Administration is one of the main culprits, it just continues to grow and takes more and more of my time.* (Senior Lecturer, I50)

Faculty were typically expected to engage in paid or unpaid external citizenship to develop networks and enable career progression, as shown in the quote below. Although such citizenship could facilitate faculty and ecosystem development and enable knowledge sharing, the cross-boundary nature of these tasks was time-consuming as they involved navigating the goals and interests of the individuals and HR ecosystems they interacted with.

*International reputation is … important ... that means going to conferences, taking on roles within conferences, having visiting fellowships outside the UK … I think to me that’s probably what makes my workload unmanageable, not actually what’s given to me in my workload.* (Professor, I26).

Individual access to meso-level resources to aid networking differed across the sample. Some of the participants had access to annual conference budgets and research accounts, which varied by school and seniority, while others had to compete to secure funding, which may not cover all of their research and conference expenses.

 Tensions between capabilities and capacities were also evident with respect to internal citizenship expectations. For instance, some of the participants indicated that if faculty remained at an institution for a long period of time, they typically accumulated internal citizenship responsibilities. Interestingly, 23 of the participants (18F/5M) stated that female faculty were more likely to hold formal pastoral roles and/or to provide more informal pastoral care to students. Five of the female participants said that they enjoyed such roles, with four of these highlighting the significant workload pressures connected with these roles. These dynamics were primarily ascribed to women being informally steered toward such roles based on the types of maternal and interpersonal roles they typically occupy in society more broadly, or women volunteering for such roles and this going largely unchallenged. The micro-level agency of faculty, line-managers and senior managers therefore influenced the allocation of responsibilities.

*If there’s a role coming up, what I say to [the department heads] is, ‘I know who you would like to do that job, but you can’t ask that person to do that again; you have to ask someone else.* (Dean, I31).

*It’s very complex, because in a way it’s unsaid. It’s not like females are told … you have to do this. I think it’s more like females feel they have to do it. In my institution, the men are a bit more strategic, they are like I’m not going to … get involved in this. I’m going to do research.* (Lecturer, I18).

 The participants spoke of how they tried to develop micro-level strategies to deal with workload challenges. For example, bunching meetings together, setting specific times to answer e-mails, seeking advice from mentors, turning down external roles, finding more time-efficient ways to complete tasks, or avoiding tasks or roles where possible. However, these were coping mechanisms rather than long-term solutions.

*You just have to fit research in, you have so much to do all over the year now, there’s no give anymore. You’re trying to take out fires all over the place … You’re constantly answering emails in the evening, late at night in bed. You don’t question it, because you don’t even realise, you’re doing it, when you’re actually working 24/7.* (Lecturer, I5).

 Importantly, some faculty explained how they would agree to take on additional responsibilities because they knew their line-manager who also faced capacity issues would recognize their support and reciprocate in the future, whilst others said they had refused to do so because they did not expect recognition and reciprocity to be forthcoming and had observed the same colleagues repeatedly being asked to take on additional work (Morris & Oldroyd, 2017).

 Of those working full-time, nine of the participants referred to resisting pressures to work outside of normal working hours due to their own assessment of capability and capacity tensions and their management. This is exemplified in the comments of I40.

*I no longer have a young child at home but for a long time I just didn’t have the time to look at my emails at the weekend … And so, I’ve always maintained that. I work hard during the day and I’m productive during the day and I think that the University gets enough out of me*.

Nevertheless, most of the participants contended that they typically had to work long hours to find the temporal capacity to meet the local and international demands they faced in ecosystems riven with complexity and change. Thus,

***P2****: The capabilities and capacities of knowledge workers in Business and Management schools are shaped by internal and external HR ecosystems and stakeholder interests at multiple levels.*

Tensions between capabilities and capacities interacted with those relating to workforce composition and configuration. These tensionsare examined in the following section.

**Composition and Configuration**

To adapt to macro-level change and complexity as discussed in the previous two sections, the strategy documents highlighted organizational goals to recruit diverse workforces with a variety of ideas and skills. However, the composition of the workforce in the sampled schools included staff at a range of seniority levels with varying degrees of capital, which generated configurational tensions across multiple HR ecosystems.

Meso-level strategies for numerical and temporal flexibility led to most of the sampled schools increasingly using non-standard teaching contracts (temporary, part-time and/or zero-hours contracts). The following quote from a program director sets out how this could lead to the loss of valuable faculty capabilities when contracts were not renewed or made permanent when needed at departmental level due to contrasting interests in the HR ecosystem(s).

*Our use of casual contracts has gone through the roof in the past six years. It was either that or we wouldn’t have had new staff at all, because the university was really tightening recruitment. If we’re not dropping hints there’s a permanent contract coming, they’re going to be looking for somewhere else. If you’ve got somebody on a three-year contract, they’ll be used to the culture, the department, the style of teaching, they’ll be experienced. Basically, you don’t want to train people up and have them go somewhere else if you can avoid it.*

Temporary contracts suited the needs of some academics, for instance, through enabling phased retirement or to provide an additional source of income. Depending on the length of a contract, they could be viewed as a career investment to acquire a research profile, teaching experience and a permanent position. However, as shown in the quote below from a teaching fellow, academics on temporary contracts could feel disconnected from the future of the organization and therefore refrain from sharing their ideas on how to improve.

*In meetings, I don’t put forward any suggestions, because … I just don’t have that connection to the future of the organization. I know I won’t be there, so what they do there is not really relevant to me. I was more eager at the start, but the longer I’ve been there, the more I’ve realized there’s no point.*

For some, the reduced availability of permanent positions combined with their gender, conflicted with their needs for security and led to their decision to exit academia. A researcher (I19) who had been employed on a series of short-term research contracts with limited scope for geographical mobility due to her husband’s job and their children, stated:

*I’m trying to get out of academia now because I want to work in a permanent role … I can’t keep being on this treadmill when I have transferable skills.*

Even after securing a permanent position, meeting university expectations that were influenced by macro-level frameworks and rankings was deemed increasingly challenging for early career academics. Meso-level strategies aimed at this group varied in terms of progression expectations, access to organizational networking and research funding and mentoring. At a micro-level, early-career academics had less resources, experience, and social capital available to them compared to more senior colleagues and resolving these cross-boundary issues was deemed to require more than mentorship schemes. As a professor explained:

*When you’re an early career academic you need more time to think creatively, to build networks. You need to learn how to deal with different relationships and navigate tasks. Mentorship schemes are often presented as the strategic solution. Yes, very important, but these issues expand beyond the mentee-mentor relationship.*

 Tensions between composition and configuration also emerged because of macro-level demographic inequalities which could intersect with individual career stage and employment status. Business schools are part of broader national and international HR ecosystems, where multi-level pay and representation gaps persist, despite strategic goals to enhance diversity and inclusion through explicit commitments to equal treatment and opportunities (Frank, 2020; Triana et al., 2021).The participants and strategy documents referred to the Athena Swan Charter, which aims to tackle sector-level gender pay and representation gaps by awarding universities and departments based on their promotion of gender equality. However, despite being a positive development, most participants stressed how enduring horizontal and vertical sector-level imbalances made the task of dismantling white male hierarchical dominance of the sector by the Athena Swan Charter fundamentally challenging. Meso-level goals were set to achieve better demographic balances, but formal and informal obstacles could curtail or hamper women’s career advancement. Strategically informed appointment and promotion criteria were used to demonstrate commitments to equal opportunities and a level playing field. The interpretation and referent application of these criteria by internal and external faculty steered the composition and configuration of faculty in a HR ecosystem.

*Universities have generally moved much more to criteria-based assessment … but you’re often relying on the candidate and/or referees creating a narrative about why this set of outcomes is ‘innovative teaching’, ‘excellent research’, ‘excellent impact’ or whatever. Women are generally less good at bigging themselves up … [and] referees are generally pretty awful at putting a gender lens on their narratives.* (Professor, I6)

To progress in career and academic hierarchies, ‘ideal’ academics are expected at a micro-level to exhibit absolute temporal, locational and functional flexibility, and the ability to manage the increasing cross-boundary workload as identified above. This gendered ideal made vertical progression more challenging for female academics due to several reasons. Firstly, like women in other fields of work, they typically take on more care and domestic responsibilities. Secondly, even for women without care responsibilities, white male dominated structures and networks within and outside their school can potentially generate progression obstacles. Thirdly, engaging in formal and informal pastoral care as discussed in the previous section, often involved ‘invisible’ service, and could hinder the career progression of women (Davies et al., 2020; Docka-Filipek & Stone, 2021). This extended to membership of Athena Swan committees, which inadvertently added to the workloads of women and ethnic minorities. Given these findings, we advance our third proposition.

***P3****: The composition of Business and Management schools and the individual attributes of knowledge workers influence access to resources and career progression opportunities, generating configurational tensions.*

These intra-organizational and inter-ecosystem strategic dialectics shaped HR Ecosystem cultures. Tensions between cultures(s) and cohesion are examined next.

**Culture(s) and Cohesion**

The participants’ accounts cast light on how international competition, changing student expectations, performance rankings, national frameworks, and representation gaps at a macro-level as discussed in the previous sections, produced divergent meso-level cultures which contributed to cohesion tensions. Interpersonal relations within subcultures could become strained as faculty simultaneously cooperated and competed with others, contributing to coopetition (Boon et al., 2018; van den Broek et al., 2018), which extended beyond organizational boundaries at multiple levels.

Inter- and intra-university competition over research, teaching and impact esteem cascaded within and between the HR ecosystems of the universities and their subunits to produce a culture of competitive ‘tournaments’ (Cable & Murray, 1999; Kalfa et al., 2018). Eight of the universities referred explicitly in their strategy documents to the competitive environment, securing competitive grant income and/or attaining competitive advantage. The other universities and business schools suggested competitive conditions by referring to their exact position in rankings and setting specific goals around their rankings in the future.

This competitive culture contrasted with the values of collegiality and well-being communicated in the strategy documents. An array of related meso-level well-being initiatives were extended by different parties in the HR ecosystems, including stress-management and mindfulness workshops. However, such initiatives were effectively little more than a Band-Aid at a micro-level as shown in the quote below. Although the participants referred to collegial and informal micro-level relationships with internal and external colleagues which helped them to navigate diverse cultures, faculty participation in competitive tournaments to meet university expectations, secure permanent work and/or progress in their career also strained micro-level relations and hampered faculty well-being, notably when they worked long hours.

*Everything is competitive and everything we need to do takes time. Then you have people who try to be strategic and avoid work, which gets picked up by other people, who are already working evenings and weekends. Yes, we have this well-being stuff, but the problem is that we have too many things to do, and universities don’t seem to have a strategy to solve the problem.* (Professor, I20).

Most of the participants observed that some form of research volume and quality evaluation was needed to demonstrate accountability to stakeholders within the wider HR ecosystem. However, despite the emphasis in the strategy documents on interdisciplinary knowledge creation and a collegial culture of research excellence, conflicting meso-level cultures fueled by the REF were deemed to reinforce formal and informal divisions and inequalities across the HR ecosystems. For instance, REF submission rules discouraged internal inter-disciplinary collaboration, because an output could only be attributed to one author within a unit of assessment. The system also encouraged the prioritization of individualized career interests and behaviors as exemplified in the quote from one of the Professors in the sample.

*I’ve had an example of colleagues plagiarizing my work and stealing my ideas*

*and so… I don’t normally present stuff within my institution, unless it’s already published or very near published, because I’ve had my fingers burnt* … *It’s the REF that is causing this more than anything, it’s putting people under such pressure that they’re behaving in these ways* (I26).

 REF outcomes at a meso- and micro-level could also conflict with the emphasis placed on inclusivity in the strategy documents. Although, meso-level recruitment practices varied by institution, the participants explained how the run up to a REF return was typically associated with the appointment of more male professors on high salaries. A male professor (I22) explained the top-down nature of this recruitment and selection process, which undercut strategic commitments to equal opportunities and led to conflicting cultural signals.

*HR talks about equality … A lot of new Professors are coming in … all men on unbelievable salaries [as] part and parcel of a re-profiling exercise.*

 For the participants, the HR function had little power to counter convergence-divergence tensions and deliver pay equality. HR were expected to support established university cultures and practices, rather than effecting real strategic change. As a professor (I26) explained:

*There’s a very good person in HR who is sort of the Diversity Officer … but she has absolutely no power to make sure there’s payment equality.*

 Pay gaps emerged in other ways too. For example, the participants discussed how at a micro-level, men were often better placed to leverage the variety of individual capital available to them to harness cross-boundary work opportunities across multiple universities in the UK and internationally, or to secure alterative job offers to leverage in salary negotiations. Disrupting these tensions and resisting unequal pay was often left to individual female academics, who may try to secure alternative job offers themselves, or submit a formal case to their university arguing that they should be paid equally to a male counterpart in their school. However, even when successful, such strategies were usually only short-term solutions. Many of the participants referred to how the leadership of their university (for instance, Vice Chancellors and their deputies) needed to play a greater role in tackling pay gaps. They also stressed the view that collective effort across the sector would be needed to achieve real change.

 Conflicting meso-level cultures were also evident with respect to the flexible interpretation and application of equal opportunities as exemplified in the quote below from a Professor concerning co-appointments. The quote also underscores how school HR ecosystems are affected by other organizational levels and ecosystems.

*The husband was a well published professor with a huge track record and the university wanted to hire him, then the business school was approached and told they had to hire his wife, so a job advert was designed to fit her* (I1).

Adding a further layer of complexity, some participants referred to how meso-level dual-hiring policies were presented as part of equality and diversity strategy. For instance, the assumption being that female academics with male partners were less likely to apply for and accept a job offer if their partner was not offered a job opportunity in the same institution. However, the participants mainly referred to how they had observed male rather female academics successfully negotiating the appointment of their spouse or partner.

A Senior Lecturer (I65) referred to how micro-level attempts to informally negotiate a co-appointment generated tensions within his school. He also noted how international cultural differences influenced these organizational and cultural dynamics.

 *Trying to sneak in your partner is not seen well here at all by the selection*

*committee or my colleagues, but it does happen, people try. In some countries, spousal hiring in academia is considered perfectly fine.*

Some of the other participants had expressed their concerns to line-managers or more senior colleagues about meso-level appointment practices that conflicted with equal opportunities. However, there were different views within and across HR ecosystems which constrained micro-level attempts to disrupt cross-boundary cultures and tensions. Thus,

***P4****: Divergent organizational cultures cooperate and compete within and outside Business and Management schools and impact on internal cohesion.*

By applying a HR ecosystem framework, this section has demonstrated how convergences and divergences with respect to fit and alignment were complex dynamics, which cut across the four subsystems to produce a multiplex of tensions. The final section of the paper explains the implications of the findings for theory and practice.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

In this research paper, wedrew on Snell & Morris’ (2021) new HR ecosystem framework to gain a deeper insight into the complexity of dynamic strategic fit and alignment. Specifically, we examined how and why organizational HR ecosystems and multi-level influences generate tensions for SHRM fit and alignment in knowledge intensive B&M schools and how these tensions are experienced by professional academics who are knowledge workers. To answer these questions, we collected organizational strategy and policy documents and interviewed faculty engaged in teaching and research who were well positioned to account for change and complexity as well as convergences and divergences. We now unpack the novel and significant contributions the findings make to theory and practice.

Firstly, the study presented in this paper responds to calls for the empirical analysis of HR ecosystems theory (Cross & Swart, 2021; Harney & Alkhalaf, 2021; Kehoe, 2021; Snell & Morris, 2021) by being one of the first to apply Snell & Morris’ framework and evidence its validity and broader relevance. The application of the framework enabled us to move beyond the relatively static view of internal and external fit dominating existing SHRM and dynamic capabilities literature. This is because the framework highlights the need to examine how convergences and divergences in the subsystems of strategy, culture(s), capabilities, and composition interact in a HR ecosystem, which is part of a broader multiplex and includes a range of actors and stakeholders.

We also contribute to the further development of Snell & Morris’ (2021) framework and dynamic capabilities theory by proposing an adapted framework for examining the HR ecosystems of knowledge intensive organizations. In line with Figure 1, we have empirically elucidated how counter tensions emerge across the four subsystems of HR ecosystems in B&M schools in the UK (strategy, capabilities, composition, and cultures). Importantly, we show how tensions between ‘strategy and strategies’, ‘capabilities and capacities’, ‘composition and configuration’ and ‘culture(s) and cohesion’ are shaped by interactions within and between levels (meso, macro and micro) and ecosystems. For example, the nature of these tensions in B&M schools are influenced by international rankings and national frameworks at a macro level, the meso-level organizational HR ecosystems of other business schools, and the converging/diverging interests and cross-boundary strategies of faculty at a micro-level. These multi-level interactions lead to complex and dynamic outcomes for B&M schools seeking differentiation (divergence) and integration (convergence), and internal and external stakeholders with varying needs and objectives.

How the four sets of tensions play out across inter-connecting organizational ecosystems will vary by industry and organization. However, the analysis of these and potentially other multilevel counter tensions in future HR ecosystem research, will enrich understanding of the contemporary challenges faced by organizations and ecosystem members and the complex inter-relationships between convergences and divergences. We have advanced four propositions which connect Figure 1 and our research findings. These propositions can be tested by future empirical research on HR ecosystems in academia and be adapted to investigate HR ecosystems in other industries.

In addition to contributing to the development of the HR Ecosystem framework, secondly, our findings demonstrate the need to engage with the plurality of collaborative and competing internal and external stakeholder interests shaping strategy development (Kaufman, 2015; Snell & Morris, 2021), rather than assuming a unilateral top-down perspective (Schuler & Jackson, 1987; Becker et al., 1997). Importantly, our findings show that faculty are key organizational stakeholders who engage in indeterminate exchanges with their employing university (Collings, 2014; Marchington, 2015; Morris et al., 2021). The emphasis placed by the dynamic capabilities literature on employees as resources, which can be reconfigured by organizational leaders to adapt to change, downplays the role played by the dynamic strategies of workers and their agency (Fallon-Barney & Harney, 2017; Schilke et al., 2018). Our findings reveal that fit and alignment applies to individual knowledge workers who use their agency to navigate convergences and divergences they face and their interests.

This is particularly important in cross-boundary contexts for work where temporary or permanent workers may be more committed to their profession and internal/external parties rather than a specific organization (Rubery et al., 2002; Snell & Morris, 2021). Turnover can disrupt an ecosystem and lead to the loss of valuable knowledge (Cross & Swart, 2021; Kinnie & Swart, 2019) and knowledge workers can pursue strategies that are detrimental to an organization if they feel their needs are not being adequately met. Thus, the affective commitment of organizational members, influenced by the organizational and human relations climate (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Cafferkey et al., 2019) remains relevant in cross-boundary contexts, albeit in different ways. For instance, informal relationships may become more important, along with the extent to which an organization’s perceived purposes align with an individual’s values within a broader HR ecosystem. Although the sample had relatively high levels of discretion, it is important to recognize that many were actively seeking more meaningful participation in substantive strategy development. While macro-level forces including national frameworks and performance rankings significantly influence and constrain organizational strategies, the experiences of academic faculty demonstrate scope for greater collaborative leadership, where decision-making is shared more evenly (Heffernan et al., 2016; Marchington, 2015; Morris et al., 2021).

Thirdly, applying an ecosystem perspective can counterbalance the unitary assumptions

embedded within much of dynamic capabilities and SHRM literature by showing that internal stakeholders include a range of worker groups who are affected by influences within and outside the physical boundaries of an organization. Specifically, we highlight the significance of career stage, demographic attributes, and employment status(es). Our findings show that pay and representation gaps in B&M Schools are generated by interactions between HR ecosystems and their members, which are likely to be relevant to other types of organizations (Grugulis & Stoyanova, 2012). Our findings address calls from scholars for heterogeneous individual attributes and diversity and inclusion to play a more integral role in research on SHRM and dynamic capabilities (Armstrong et al., 2010; Cooke et al., 2021). Diverse workforces and inclusive environments are important to enable organizations to balance organizational strategy with workforce needs and to enhance staff retention, cooperation, and creativity (e.g., Altman et al., 2021a; 2021b; Mor Barak et al., 2016; Syed, 2021; Theodorakopoulous & Budhwar, 2015). Furthermore, within the SHRM and dynamic capabilities literature, there has been relatively little analysis of HR ecosystem members on non-standard contracts, despite as Cross & Swart (2021) point out, the strategically valuable contributions they can make.

Fourthly, while literature on SHRM and dynamic capabilities emphasizes the importance of fostering a collaborative knowledge sharing organizational culture (Doz, 2020; Hong et al., 2019), we demonstrate the need for more research on how conflicting meso-level cultures intersect with other HR ecosystem subsystems to mediate and moderate collegiality. In our findings, the REF and performance ratings and rankings significantly influenced organizational and individual strategies, but comparable performance frameworks, metrics and competitive cultures are evident in other industries (Park & Conroy, 2020; Swart et al., 2014; Tzini & Jain, 2018) and need to be examined further. Moreover, high workloads and long working hours cultures can hinder collaboration, innovative thinking, and capability development, which conflict with commitments to well-being and diversity and inclusion across industries (Heffernan & Dundon, 2016; Mariappanadar, 2014; Van Beurden et al., 2021). Importantly, our findings contribute to literature critically examining how knowledge workers who are perceived to be more productive or capable in completing particular tasks often find themselves presented with greater workloads than other knowledge workers (e.g., Morris & Oldroyd, 2017). These complexities along with how they connect with individual attributes such as gender and career stage need further attention in future dynamic capabilities research, because they constrain the potential for cohesion and cooperation, and lead staff to pursue a more attractive employer or career (Morris et al., 2021).

The findings also generate practical implications for practitioners and policy makers (Corley & Gioia, 2011). To improve fit and alignment, organizations need greater awareness of how the four subsystems of the HR ecosystem and their counter-tensions interact in the context of competing and convergent stakeholder interests. Incorporating the views of a wider range of stakeholders into strategy development would improve fit and alignment, while also contributing to the development of a more people-focused culture (Dundon & Rafferty, 2018). With greater emphasis on diversity and inclusion, a deeper understanding of cross-boundary contexts is needed if strategic goals are to be achieved and valued staff are to be retained (Altman et al., 2021a; 2021b). This includes carefully considering how non-standard contracts are used and the support mechanisms in place for those in the early stages of their career. Finally, subcultures are likely to continue to emerge, but organizations need to pay more attention to how collaborative cultures are constrained. For example, by reviewing performance management systems, individual workloads and how recruitment and reward practices are implemented.

In terms of the study’s limitations, the views and experiences of the researchers could have influenced the interpretation and analysis of the data as insiders of the type of HR ecosystem being examined. We sought to limit the scope for this by checking the initial coding of the data and the potential for subjectivity and bias by asking researchers independent of the study to review our interpretation of the data. In addition, we repeatedly reviewed and discussed the validity and reliability of the coding thereafter to minimize the potential for the findings to be skewed. It could be argued that the research findings are specific to B&M schools in the UK and that the findings are limited by the nature and size of the sample. However, the aim of the study was to examine HR ecosystems in an illuminating knowledge intensive context, to identify tensions that may be evident in other organizational contexts in varied forms and with different implications for ecosystem members and alignment processes. Consequently, future research could compare the interactions between permeable HR ecosystems within and across organizations and countries (Sanders & De Cieri, 2020) to identify diverging and converging internal and external tensions and incorporate wider stakeholders into the analysis of an organization’s HR ecosystem(s).

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