

# **Conformist innovation: An institutional logics perspective on how HR executives construct business school reputations**

*In this paper we explore whether Legge's classic 1970s criticism of human resource (HR) executives as 'conformist innovators' is still relevant. Drawing on institutional logics, we analyse HR managers' rationales for choosing particular university business schools to provide senior executive development. Our mixed methods study demonstrates that senior HR managers socially construct and enact business school reputations by drawing on strategic rationales. These rationales are embedded in societal, field and organizational logics, especially the extant reputational rankings of international business schools and an 'ideal' template of elite business schools. We find that these rationales, and the decisions they evince, tend to confirm the traditional picture of conformist innovation among HR executives. We discuss the implications for the reputation of HR as a profession, their employers and business schools.*

**Keywords:** HR rationales; business school reputations; conformist innovation; institutional logics; HR decision-making.

## **Introduction**

Almost five decades ago Legge (1978) mounted a withering assessment of personnel professionals as 'conformist innovators' (Legge, 1978). This assessment critiqued personnel managers' unreflexive and unproblematized compliance with a rational but bounded economic agenda when managing change in their organizations. Conformist innovation, she argued, was driven mainly by personnel professionals only doing what was necessary to enhance their image and short-term career prospects with their employers, thus

neglecting the broader social interests of stakeholders in wider society. She further argued such bounded rationality could have long-term negative consequences for the firm, society and, ultimately, the reputation of the personnel profession itself. In this paper we examine whether Legge's (1978) classic analysis of personnel managers as 'conformist innovators' still stands as a relevant critique of senior HR professionals, and, if so, what might be the implications for their professional reputations and those of their employing organizations.

The focus of our analysis is the rationales that HR executives draw on when making decisions over partnering with business schools for senior executive development. We believe the decisions taken by HR executives reflect the extent of their embedded agency and are a good test of conformist innovation. Embedded agency arises when executives are unable to make independent and rational choices due to the structural constraints of societal, organizational and field-level logics (Seo & Creed, 2002). Moreover, these choices can have an impact on firms' talent management and, consequently, sustainable success. For example, Spector (2003) criticized HR for being the unindicted co-conspirator in the Enron disaster because they recruited MBA graduates from top tier schools, which concentrated heavily on finance and hard analytical tools. Similar sentiments were echoed by Mabey, Egri and Parry (2015) who discussed the 'questions business schools don't ask' when designing leadership programmes. So, our focus on Legge's critique of HR as conformist innovators and its relevance to the current profession led to our research question: how do senior HR executives behave when justifying their decisions to partner with particular business schools for executive development?

**Institutional logics as a theoretical framework for understanding HR rationales**

A review of the literature shows there is little previous research on HR decision-making rationales, with a few notable exceptions including Guest and King (2004) and Subramony (2006). There has also been a dearth of research into how and why HR practitioners make decisions on partner selection for executive development, which has important consequences for leadership and talent management practices in organizations (Mabey et al, 2015). This lack of research leaves an important gap in our understanding of how the HR function addresses the key problems of executive development. To address it we draw on institutional logics as a method of analysis (Lawrence et al, 2009; Thornton, Ocasio & Lounsbury, 2012) because we believe it offers new insights into HR decision-making. Institutional logics has become one of the most important theoretical frameworks in organizational and management theory; yet, with only a few exceptions (e.g. Almandoz, 2015; Bevert & Poulfelt, 2015; Martin, Farndale, Paauwe & Stiles, 2016), there is very little reference to it in the HR literature.

Institutional logics have been defined as: *'...the socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality'* (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008: 101). Logics provide a meta-theoretical framework for analysing how individual and organizational actors' interests, identities, values and assumptions are embedded in different structural levels of context. Thornton et al (2012) identified three such levels used in organizational analysis: society, field and the organization itself.

***Societal- and field-level logics.*** Societal-level logics or ‘inter-institutional orders’ (Friedland and Alford, 1991) combine to shape individual, organizational and field-level actors and their agency. These inter-institutional orders are markets, corporations, professions, the state, family and religion, which often combine to create tensions for key organizational professionals (Besharov & Smith, 2014), such as HR executives.

Field-level logics are the meso-level of analysis (Fligstein & MacAdam, 2012), which we propose in this context will be demonstrated by the extent to which HR directors reflect the institutionalized reputational rankings of business schools. These rankings have become an important institutional actor in business education (Enders, 2014; Wedlin, 2011). Field-level logics are also evident in how business schools compete among themselves within a system reflecting the elite American business school model (Juusola, Kettunen & Alajoutsijarvi, 2015; Wedlin, 2011). This is evident from business schools’ attempts to manage reputation rankings and accreditation procedures in order to enhance their status and identity (Trank & Washington, 2009). An institutional logics approach rejects the tenets of rational choice theory by arguing that professions within organizations are constrained by a nested institutional order comprising stable field- and societal-level logics. The most important stable field-level institutional orders being past, present and expected business school reputational rankings (Lejeune & Vas, 2014). These two levels of analysis (field and societal) are often used to explain how individuals and groups within organizations respond to logic multiplicity; for example, the extent to which multiple logics are compatible and central to an organization’s functioning (Besharov & Smith, 2014).

## **Logics and HR legitimacy**

An institutional logics perspective is also a theory of action and change because it stresses the mutual constitution of structure and agency in organizations (Thornton, et al., 2012). In response to earlier criticisms of determinism in neo-institutionalism, institutional logics poses significant degrees of freedom for organizational actors, such as HR executives, to exercise 'bounded intentions' in decision making. This notion places March and Simon's (1993) bounded rationality into an institutional framework by arguing that the bounded intentions of actors are circumscribed by their 'institutional embeddedness' and the cognitive limits resulting from their multiple identities, frames of interpretation, goals and foci of attention. For example, we would expect to find evidence that HR directors' selection of business school partners was constrained by their multiple identities and career orientations, as well as the conflicting needs of different stakeholders for legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). For the purposes of this paper, we adapt Suchman's (1995, p. 574) definition of legitimacy to mean a perception or taken-for-granted assumption that senior HR rationales and actions 'are desirable, proper or appropriate within a socially constructed system of norms, values and behaviour'.

## **Legitimacy and reputational rankings**

We propose that HR executives' needs for legitimacy will be manifested in their creation of a specific market-based economic order through their language, practices, ideas and values, which, in turn, is reflected in institutionalized reputation rankings (Wedlin, 2011). Thus, for example, Slaughter and Rhodes (2009) have argued that US universities and their business schools are guilty of 'excessive commercialism', which is more or less taken-for-

granted in their missions and how they are perceived and judged. As universities in general and business schools in particular have become more entrepreneurial, their policies and practices are focused less on knowledge as a public good and more on their teaching, research and publications as commodities to be exploited for commercial gain through their impact on reputation rankings (Fotaki & Prasad, 2015).

### **A framework for understanding HR embeddedness and agency**

We bring these ideas together in Figure 1, in which we adapt Thornton et al's (2012) framework, to show how HR rationales might be formed, how they might influence partner selection for executive development, and how they construct and reproduce business school reputation rankings. On the vertical axis in Figure 1 we propose that HR directors' focus of attention on partner selection will be embedded in higher field- and societal-level institutional logics. At the core of their embeddedness is how they make sense of business schools' reputations through the institutionalized rankings and symbolic practices elite schools use to construct legitimacy. In turn, these rankings influence executive education and partner selection by shaping HR and other senior executives' accessibility to information about particular business schools. As Pfeffer (2015) suggested, this results in many HR executives effectively outsourcing their decisions on business school partnering to institutionalized reputation rankings.

At a meso-level, HR's interpretations of field-level reputation rankings are also rooted in societal level logics. For example, Rindova et al (2010), Boyd et al (2010) and Enders (2014) point to business school reputations in the American ranking systems as being

shaped by the number of papers each faculty publishes in academic journals, which, according to Juusola et al (2015) and others, reflects the influence of a dominant market logic. European business schools are also subject to similar performance measures (Hattke et al, 2014). For example, there is increasing evidence that the national research assessment exercises, in countries such as the UK, and the pressure to ‘publish or perish’, in many continental European universities, are creating a division between the small number of internationally elite schools traditionally ranked in the top 100 and the near 16,000 professionally-oriented private and regional schools (Byrne, 2015; Pettigrew et al, 2014; Wedlin, 2011; Wilson & McKiernan, 2011).

Along the horizontal, micro-foundational axis in Figure 1 we propose that partner selection of business schools will be influenced by HR executives’ focus of attention, which is not only constrained by institutional logics but by their personal identities, goals and frames of interpretation. We further propose that HR executives in international firms in particular would (1) use simple heuristics such as the institutionalized reputation rankings of international business schools, stereotypes and anecdotes to categorize business schools as internationally or locally-oriented, (2) choose to identify with the elite group of internationally-oriented schools represented by these rankings so that their personal image is enhanced (or at least not damaged), or to seek personal and/or organizational legitimacy and social status from key stakeholders (Bergh et al, 2010), and (3) make unfavourable comparisons between local and internationally elite schools. Nevertheless, not all senior HR executives will be conformist innovators: a minority may interpret reputational rankings differently in different types of organizations and in different industrial sectors,

thus constructing more idiosyncratic templates of an ideal business school partner. This possibility raises a question concerning the definition of elite international business schools, and leaves room for what Legge (1978) described as deviant innovation among powerful HR professionals, who can challenge the institutionalized rankings and templates of ideal business schools.

Such categorization, identification and comparison may also be influenced by social interaction among HR executives in intra-organizational and external professional networks. This can occur, for example, during corporate HR and senior executive development events in large firms and in virtual and face-to-face meetings of professional networks, such as the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) in the UK and the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) in the USA. Thus, we further propose that collective perceptions and selective enactment by senior HR executives – in conjunction with other senior executives – will shape organizational rationales, decision-making and practices.

## **Methodology**

To address our research question, we designed a two-stage mixed-methods study, based on an *exploratory sequential design* (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2007). This meant that qualitative data collection and analysis preceded the quantitative stage. Consequently we used a convergence sequential model in which the results from one method were used to help develop the other method, not in the sense of instrument building, but in informing the choice of categories investigated. At the same time, however, data from the first qualitative

stage were used on a par with data from the second quantitative stage for the interpretation phase. Neither strand was given priority in answering the study's research questions, with both playing an equally important role in addressing these questions. Therefore, the point of interface, i.e. the stage of integration in which quantitative and qualitative strands are mixed (Morse and Niehaus, 2009), lay in the interpretation after we analysed both data sets. We drew conclusions and inferences that reflected what we learned by comparing or synthesizing the results from the two strands of the study. This approach determined the structure and the logic of the findings section.

The first qualitative stage involved in-depth interviews with the HR directors of Scotland's twenty largest private sector international companies, drawn from a list provided by the national economic development agency of Scotland. From this group, fifteen HR directors with responsibility for leadership development were interviewed. The interviews were semi-structured (typically taking 1–2 hours) and tape-recorded, and the subsequent transcriptions were verified by the respondents. Questions were informed by our review of the literature on the causes and nature of business school reputations (e.g., Boyd et al, 2010; Rindova et al, 2010). We were interested in how these senior HR executives accounted for their evaluations of business schools' reputations and their decisions to work with particular schools for executive development. Analysis of the interviews took the form of meaning condensation into themes, categorization for items for the follow-up survey, and narrative structuring to help respondents tell their own stories within the confines of a short article (Kvale, 1996). The categories emerging from the interviewees' accounts were used to inform the questionnaire design

Following the interviews, an online survey questionnaire was designed by drawing on emergent themes as well as relevant literature. The sampling frame was a list, provided by the national economic development agency of Scotland, of HR directors/managers from private and public sector employers of more than a thousand people. From this list we excluded the companies in which we conducted interviews to avoid double counting the responses of large international firms. Sixty-eight senior HR professionals responded, representing a response rate of just less than 29%. This low response rate, and the inability of knowing whether the population from which it was drawn was normally distributed around certain properties, prevented us from generalizing our findings to the survey population as a whole. However, it did allow us to gain additional insights into the perceptions of HR directors of smaller organizations not included in the original interviews, which provided a point of comparison. In addition, slightly more than two-thirds of the respondents were based in the public sector (68.5%), which over-represented the 50% of the Scottish working population employed in the public sector. Given this public sector bias, it is not surprising that the respondents were also focused on domestic 'customers', with only one-third claiming to operate in an international market. However, this bias in the survey towards public sector organizations was balanced out by the interviews of HR directors, which were drawn exclusively from large private sector firms, most with an international orientation. In doing so, our survey provided evidence of variations in institutional logics among medium to large-sized employers in Scotland. We recognize that this approach did not take into account the views of potentially influential HR staff in SMEs; however, such firms are less likely to invest in education and partner with business schools.

Because the sub-sample sizes for sectors were small, and the data from the questionnaires was typically ordinal and skewed, we have used mainly median scores to test differences for items that required responses to Likert-type scales. Fisher's Exact Test of the significant difference of proportions has been reported in the tables because the sample is relatively small, with expected cell frequencies of less than five, while Mann-Whitney tests of the differences between medians were used because the data measurements were on an ordinal scale. While we acknowledge that our use of medians and statistical tests used with medians may have led to a loss of granularity in some of our statistical evidence; it is argued by many statisticians that ordinal data cannot yield mean values and so medians see as a better measure of central tendency in our survey (Dugard, Todman & Staines, 2010). Taken together, we are confident that the interviews and survey data provide a reasonably valid picture of the sectors' HR executives' views on senior executive education in Scotland and perceptions of business schools' reputations.

## **Findings**

The question we posed in our study was aimed at understanding how senior HR directors justified their decisions on executive development, particularly their choice of business schools as potential partners. Our data broadly point to the HR executives invoking a strategic rationale as a key legitimating device. However, there was also strong evidence of embedded agency and, indeed, imitative behaviour associated with institutionalized international reputation rankings' influence on HR directors' views of schools and choices

of partners. We deal with this question before returning to the implications for Legge's criticism of HR as conformist innovators in the discussion.

**Justifying decisions through bounded strategic intentions.** The interviews and survey data point to HR directors claiming innovative action rather than conformance with field and/or organizational level logics when making decisions over executive development. Nevertheless, their decisions also appeared to be constrained by different logics operating at different levels. These decisions invoked a number of rationales used by HR directors to justify their views and actions: willingness of schools to customize provision; the schools' knowledge of the industry sector; the nature of the 'talent management' problem facing firms; the need to get 'value for money'; the need for an international experience; and their ability to earn networking rents from schools.

**Customization.** Customization was a strong theme in interviewees' rationales for selecting potential partners for executive education. Firstly, interviewees frequently criticized the negative attitudes of certain, usually elite, schools that offered a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to executive development and were unable, because of lack of knowledge of the sector, or unwilling to tailor their provision to the needs of firms. However, this customization rationale did not always accord with their actions and decisions when choosing partner schools. Table 1 shows the importance accorded by HR directors to engaging providers willing to customize executive education. Secondly, interviewees raised questions over the ability of schools to provide innovative solutions to executive development. As one HR director of a financial services company commented:

*I like to think that a business school or consultant will come along to us saying that they will be able to create something unique for us through executive development - over and above what our competition can do... That has got to be one of the most important drivers... (HR Director, major financial services company)*

This view was supported by the survey data in Table 2. which shows that HR directors accounted for their decisions by emphasizing the importance of providers offering a value for money, tailored executive education programme that benefited their business strategy.

*Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here*

**The nature of the ‘talent management’ problem.** A second form of bounded strategic intentions raised during the interviews was the extent to which HR directors’ attention was focused on the connections between executive development and talent management. For example, nearly all the interviewees from large international firms alluded to well-developed competence frameworks linked to vision and values statements, and most cited examples of executive development being driven by organizational logics that emphasized improving the firms’ ‘talent pool’. One training and development director of an international brewing company discussed how recent international acquisitions of companies led to the development of a radically different competence framework and performance management system. This new structure emphasized ‘best behaviours’ in people management and the gap between these behaviours and the skills of existing

managers. Tables 3 and 5 show the degree of importance HR directors attached to partners being able to provide customized programmes of executive education, combined with coaching and experiential learning specifically designed to reduce the talent deficit

*Insert Tables 3-5 about here*

HR directors' views of the nature of the talent management problem they faced, was most evident in whether they saw skills shortages as a core and perennial problem for their organizations, and provided a related form of bounded strategic intentions. These accounts were prominent in eight organizations that had established in-house specialist executive development departments. Of those eight, the four belonging to private sector firms were linked with the development of a 'corporate university'. The remaining organizations (a fifth of the total amount) were more likely to appoint a specialist individual to look after executive education and development.

**Cost control.** The influence of a market logic on HR directors' bounded strategic intentions was also evident among their rationales that cited value for money in determining provision. While no interviewee raised costs or value for money as the most important reason for deciding among providers, it typically featured in their 'top two' decision criteria in the survey data (see Tables 2 and 4). It was clear from the interviews that the senior HR professionals saw a need to make a 'business case' to senior line managers, setting out expected added value against costs, because their practices and organizations were deeply embedded in a market logic. This market logic was also apparent from three interviewees

who pointed to their application of sophisticated procurement principles when evaluating 'potential contractors' or business partners for executive education. Furthermore, interviewees emphasized the considerable time they gave to specifying sophisticated decision criteria and evaluating bids from business schools and consultants, sometimes spending lengthy spells overseas to assess potential providers. Table 2 shows the importance that HR directors placed on the ability of a provider to offer value for money ranked in a list of thirteen decision criteria, though this was significantly less of an issue for those working in international organizations and for private sector firms more generally (see also Table 4).

**Internationalization.** Finally, the interviews also provided evidence of bounded strategic intentions in the ways HR directors invoked internationalization as a rationale for choosing elite, internationally-ranked schools. The following three examples illustrate this point. In one example a financial services company headquartered in Scotland had created its own purpose-built business school in partnership with two major elite US business schools, and regularly flew over 'celebrity' academics for relevant topics:

*(The company) is now a global organization (they had acquired a number of US banks and others in Europe). It needs to ensure that it has the best senior execs to work internationally... Executive education must have a global perspective, including best practice from other countries... The Scottish business schools are too UK-centric... (Interview, Learning and Development specialist, Financial Services Company)*

Another example comes from a large brewing company that had begun to create and project its identity as an international rather than a domestic business. In this context the interviewees from the firm felt they needed a major European school as a partner to help them make the claimed transformation plausible among competitors. Consequently, the company had considered relocating its executive development function to a location in continental Europe so that it would be seen as less ethnocentric in its talent management practices. They had also taken significant steps to develop a geocentric recruitment and development strategy for 'high potentials'.

Perhaps the best example of an internationalization rationale, however, was a 'life-cycle' account provided by the HR director of a multinational energy company:

*In many ways, developments in executive education mirror the life cycle of the company. We began life as a regionally based public sector utility when all of our executive development was either conducted in-house or externally with the help of (a local Scottish business school)... Following privatization, we became a major national player; we did some deals with major English schools... After our acquisition of (a US-based energy utility), there was a need for a more international outlook. (The company) outgrew the (local schools), which were standing still while the company was moving forward. We looked to do deals with US schools and began looking at Harvard, Kellogg and Wharton... (Interview, HR director, Energy Company)*

The survey also provided evidence of HR directors' rationale for internationalizing executives as a key driver of senior executive education. Not surprisingly, given the public sector bias of survey responses, internationalization was a less important rationale for HR directors who completed the survey, which is evident from relevant questions in Tables 1–4. However, for almost a third of respondents, mainly those in the private sector, international operations were a key element of their business; consequently they stressed the international perspective as an important element in shaping their executive education demands. Though the relevant items in Tables 1–4 do not show median figures relating to an international dimension to be among the most important factors, there is a significant difference in these medians between public and private sector organizations and between international and non-international organizations, which provides evidence of a variation in field-level logics

### **HR rationales, institutional legitimacy and the influence of rankings**

Conformist innovation refers to HR managers' unproblematic compliance with a bounded economic agenda when making decisions, driven by a desire to enhance their image and short term career prospects. The interviews and questionnaire data suggest that HR executives, acting on behalf of their organizations, entered into relationships with the elite international business schools to seek legitimacy and/or social status for themselves and their organizations (Bergh et al, 2010), consequently confirming the power of rankings (Wedlin, 2011) and, thus, conformist innovation. Our interview data pointed to the overall reputation of the school for high quality education as an important criterion for some of the

large private sector firms. Interviewees from these firms used the published rankings to learn about the prominence of particular schools as part of their sifting exercise for potential partners. Moreover, the interview accounts can be interpreted as HR directors renting the brand reputations of the elite schools to enhance their personal identities and to establish their own and their organizations' legitimacy. For them, attending courses in Harvard, Wharton, IMD or INSEAD was a way of signalling superior status, which marked out HR professionals from 'lesser' managers.

Interestingly, our data showed that HR directors predominantly chose elite schools as business partners, despite claiming strategic customization as an important reason for selection (see Tables 2 and 3) and expressing dissatisfaction, during interviews, over the unwillingness of elite schools to customize their provision. This suggests to us that HR directors prioritized their needs for legitimacy and social status over strategic rationales, and again reveals the power of institutionalized rankings in shaping their perceptions and choices. Tables 2 and 3 show the relatively high importance placed on quality in assessing business schools for executive education. Those organizations in the process of internationalizing were able to signal this aspiration by 'only doing business with the best for their best executives'. While nearly two-thirds of respondents to the survey used Scottish business schools for middle management education, it was clear from the interviews that partnering with an elite school was an important status-enhancing strategy.

We also noted that HR executives were able to reduce the risk of damaging their personal reputations by predominantly engaging with trusted brands, which, like many other

stakeholders, are shaped by the rankings system (Naidoo & Pringle, 2004). This point was evidenced by the relative importance they attached to the providers' reputation for high quality executive education, leading edge provision and an international outlook (see Tables 3–6). As two HR directors explained:

*We evaluate providers on the basis of international reputation, thought leadership and innovative approaches to learning. Ranking among other business schools is really important... We need particular kinds of people from these schools with business experience... someone who has worked with FTSE 100 companies...*  
(Interview, Learning and Development specialist, financial services company)

*We assess business schools on the basis of their reputation with others and the reputation of their faculty: do they have the kit and can they embed it into the organization?* (Interview, HR Director of a large national financial services company)

The focus on the quality of staff was reinforced by the criteria used to assess providers of senior executive education, as is evident in both our qualitative and quantitative data. Nearly all interviewees stressed the importance of teaching quality, willingness to interact with executives, and staff credibility gained from working with large international organizations. Table 4 shows that the quality of staff actually used to deliver programmes was by far the most important reason cited.

Other data from the survey emphasized the value of reputation rankings and branding as a key factor influencing the purchasing behaviour of the largest organizations, whether they were from the private or public sector. Only one-third of organizations responded that they made *no* use of highly ranked English, European or US schools. Nearly 38% of respondents used highly-ranked English schools, such as Cranfield, Ashridge and London Business School, while 19% used highly-ranked European schools, such as INSEAD and IMD, and 19% used elite American schools, such as Harvard, Wharton, Thunderbird and Kellogg. In contrast, Table 7 shows that the local Scottish-based schools suffered from either a lack of reputation for quality and prominence among our HR executives, or having few individuals with the required levels of expertise and credibility to deliver senior executive development.

However, the HR executives in our study also justified their choice of partners and views on schools in terms of 'learning from benchmarks' or from good practice, as evidenced by the relative importance of this factor in making decisions on executive education provision (see Table 2). This was emphasized by the high quantity of citations indicating reputation with other clients or referrals from associates as the second most important reason for assessing external or internal providers of senior executive education, which supports the notion of endorsement as a key driver of reputations. In addition, the data also pointed to local networking behaviour as being important among HR directors, especially in the public sector, for discussing the merits of leadership and senior executive development education. Nevertheless, evidence from the survey shows that a substantial proportion of public sector organizations bought into well-known brands because it helped them claim legitimacy for

their organizations. This evidence, coupled with data that nearly 40% of respondent organizations lacked knowledge on Scottish business schools' capacity to provide executive education, suggests that HR directors failed to engage in a rational search process beyond examining reputation ratings or learning from networking with other HR directors. In short, this finding partly confirms Pfeffer's (2015) contention that firms outsource their choice of business schools for executive education to the reputation rankings. However, the findings may also show that local business schools had failed to promote their services to these firms.

In addition, there was evidence that HR directors were typically unfamiliar with the local business schools. One director said: *'quite frankly, we don't have them knocking on our door every day, we don't really know who they are'*. However, even if schools had addressed this lack of brand image, they may not have been successful in persuading HR executives to partner with them, as location of providers and idiosyncratic explanations also featured in interviewees' accounts of local business schools. For example, another HR director reflected:

*It wouldn't really matter anyway (if the Scottish Schools were more active); which of our executives wants to come to Scotland for development when they can go to more exotic locations. I mean Harvard, Lausanne or Glasgow, which would you choose?*

Nonetheless, it should be noted that the survey item that came closest to tapping the influence of mimicry – expectation of senior executives to work with well-known providers – did not rank highly in the factors influencing decisions about senior executive education (see Table 4).

The survey data in Table 7 also highlighted HR directors' lack of systematic engagement with Scottish schools for executive education beyond MBA programmes and similar courses. One of the HR directors from a leading financial services organization summed up the feelings of others by claiming '*we don't really know who they are*', reinforcing the view of local Scottish schools as provincial. This attitude may be a factor in the rising number of organizations currently claiming *not* to have used Scottish business schools for executive education – which has increased from 13% to 21%.

Our data also point to the accounts of HR directors in all three organizational segments as using the notion of, what Wedlin (2007) refers to as, an ideal template of internationally elite business schools gained through current and past usage patterns. There was strong evidence, especially from the interview data but also from the questionnaire responses in Table 6, of elite Scottish-based organizations seeking to deal with elite US, European and English schools to develop their top executives. These elite organizations consisted of a small number of large indigenous private sector firms with considerable overseas presence in the financial services, food and beverages industries, and electronics and energy sectors. Table 6 also shows that HR directors in public sector organizations and 'non-international' organizations made use of highly-ranked international American schools and European

schools, although public sector organizations were likely to 'shop' in local markets for senior executive education. Table 7 shows an overall declining pattern of engagement with Scottish regional university business schools for lower level executive development, including a fall in sponsoring managers on part-time executive MBA and masters programmes. However, in line with our predictions concerning variation in institutional logics, public sector organizations were more likely to have partnered with selected Scottish schools to deliver customized, in-house programmes, providing evidence of their local market orientation.

*Insert Tables 6 & 7 about here*

## **Discussion**

Our main motivation for conducting this study was to investigate HR rationales when choosing business school partners and, in so doing, revisit one of the best-known criticisms of HR professionals as being 'conformist innovators' (Legge, 1978). We did this by asking the question – How do senior HR executives behave when justifying their decisions to partner with particular business schools for executive development? In the following paragraphs, we evaluate our findings and their theoretical and practical implications for the HR function.

The theoretical framing in Figure 1 drew on institutional logics as a method of analysis to produce a process framework linking HR rationales and reputation rankings of business schools. Firstly, we suggested that the focus of attention of HR directors would be

constrained by the availability and accessibility of information regarding field-level, institutionalized business school reputation rankings, which, in turn, are embedded in societal-level market and professional logics. These rankings, we argued, would be enacted by HR directors, who, given their desires to secure legitimacy and social status for themselves and their organizations, would tend to reproduce the extant division between internationally elite and other types of schools outside of the elite. Secondly, HR directors are not merely passive respondents to social forces beyond their control but enjoy a degree of agency to act strategically in deciding how to approach senior executive development and their partners in this project. This is consistent with much of the managerial literature on decision-making and rational management literature on strategies designed to enhance legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). Nevertheless, even at this micro-foundational level, HR directors strategic intentions are further bounded by their organizational and professional identities to reflect the market-oriented goals and frame of reference of their employers and their desired self-image, both internally and externally (Marchington, 2015), and to enhance their social interaction with HR colleagues and senior executives. The net effect of these constraints, we argue, would be to produce behaviour consistent with Legge's (1979) description of HR executives as conformist innovators in their choice of partners, which leads to prioritizing legitimacy and mimicry over the need to be strategically differentiated from others (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008).

### **The impact of dominant logics on HR rationales**

The interviews and survey data suggested that reputational rankings at the field-level are embedded in a societal-level market logic. We found that HR directors' constrained focus

of attention and agency resulted in, what we have called, bounded strategic intentions by drawing on four ostensibly strategic rationales – customization, talent management, cost control and internationalization. The interview data suggested, superficially at least, that strategically differentiated rationales, in the form of customization and internationalization, were used extensively as the reasoning for undertaking senior executive education. Customization and internationalization also shaped the HR directors' views of business schools' reputations and competence. Moreover, we also found interviewees frequently referring to elite international schools' negative attitude towards customizing their executive education programmes to meet the needs of potential clients.

However, we contend that the market-oriented aspiration of HR directors to portray their own organizations as legitimate international players was evidence of motivation to engage in conformist innovation. Therefore, the need for customization was trumped by favouring internationally elite schools as partners. Moreover, it also led them to rationalize their views of Scottish schools as 'provincial'. This analysis is consistent with Suchman's (1995: 587) *conformist strategy* for gaining legitimacy, whereby managers who seek legitimacy for themselves and their organization 'simply position themselves within a pre-existing institutional regime'. In doing so, they comply with existing field and societal logics by shaping their organization's identity in a more 'desirable, proper, and appropriate' manner, which is also consistent with their desired identities.

An international rationale is also consistent with those views, expressed in the interviews, on seeking only to 'do business with the best' schools. We also interpret this data as

indicating the influence of societal-level market logic and HR executives' aspirations for professional legitimation (Suchman, 1995; Wedlin, 2007) through aligning with market-driven views on competence. The source of HR rationales and legitimacy is rooted in their association with the elite schools. Moreover, our interpretation of the interview data was that many of the HR directors sought networking rents by capitalizing on their associations with 'celebrity professionals' and 'celebrity schools', since this enhanced their internal personal reputations and external reputations among local HR professional networks. Such associations with prominent individuals and schools were likely to earn them internal legitimacy with their peers and senior executives because they saw it as a risk avoidance strategy – 'no-one ever got fired for buying an IBM'. This last point is supported by the survey data, which highlighted the influence of business school reputation rankings on choices (see Table 2).

Cost control is a different form of legitimating logic to which the HR function is particularly sensitive, as it is normally treated as a 'cost-to-be-cut' rather than a profit centre or source of innovative ideas. Thus, the HR function, probably more than most functions in business, is prone to seeking legitimacy with the key profit-oriented functions (such as production, marketing, accounting and finance) by embracing a value-for-money, cost control logic, sometimes to the detriment of its wealth creation/innovation agenda.

### **HR executives' rationales**

To what extent did HR directors in our study make similar decisions on executive education and hold common views on business schools? The references to legitimacy-seeking and

imitative behaviour in the interviews, and the relative importance accorded to benchmarking in making decisions on executive education, can be interpreted as a form of searching for a legitimate collective identity ('who we think we are' and 'who we want to be') and image ('how others see us') (Albert & Whetten, 1985). In addition, the importance placed on reputation endorsement by other clients or referrals from associates supported the notion of legitimacy as a key driver of reputations, and also provided support for this legitimacy-seeking behaviour. Such behaviour is often enhanced by extensive local networking among professionals, which, as we have noted, was particularly evident among HR directors in the public sector organizations.

Nevertheless, as previously noted, much of the criticism of neo-institutionalism has focused not only on the downgrading of managers' abilities to change the system in which they are embedded but also on the belief that one dominant institutional logic binds managerial actors together. More recent theorizing by Fligstein and McAdam (2011) and Thornton et al (2012) has tended to contradict this over-socialized view of managers. They emphasized the effects of multiple logics, fragmented and competitive organizational fields, on managers' so-called 'dynamic constructivism' and potential to become 'institutional entrepreneurs' (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2009) in changing organizations, fields and even societies. Thus, we can interpret the interview data in terms of HR directors expressing different and, at times, incompatible logics as a response to logic multiplicity in their organizations, different forms of socialization, and internal and external social interactions (Besharov & Smith, 2014). Perhaps even more significantly, evidence from the survey data showed differences between private and public sector HR directors' views on the need to

develop an international outlook and how this influenced their choice of schools. This was especially evident among ‘international’ private sector firms already operating (or seeking to operate) in international markets, who sought to partner with international elite schools; whereas, public sector directors placed little emphasis on the ‘international outlook or experience of the school’. It is also notable that a market logic, as expressed by the importance of value for money, was rated more highly by public sector organizations than private sector organizations when making such evaluations.

Our analysis also points to HR executives seeing business schools as belonging to a ‘broadly settled’ field (Fligstein and McAdam, 2011; Rasche et al, 2014) of international elite schools that largely conform to the ideal top-tier American business schools, and an estimated 16,000 regional schools with little hope of gaining elite status, which is a situation widely taken-for-granted and rarely questioned (Jussola et al, 2015; Wedlin, 2007). Such taken-for-granted-ness is evident among many of the influential HR actors in our study, which is seen as one of the most powerful and subtle forms of legitimacy among different audiences (Suchman, 1995). Our interpretations of these data point to the HR directors in the interviews being conditioned by a dominant field logic, symbolized by the extant reputational ordering of business schools nationally and internationally. Although the survey data suggested that public sector HR directors had different views and partnered with regional schools, our interpretation of the data is that theirs was a pragmatic or passive choice, based on cost considerations, rather than an active or innovative one, based on a desire to reject the reputation rankings in choosing partners. The power and subtlety of these reputational rankings resides in their unchallengeable nature and the likelihood that

alternatives to established rankings are almost unthinkable (Suchman, 1995). Thus, in line with the predictions of DiMaggio and Powell (1983), our impressions were that HR directors held a taken-for-granted view of business school reputations and rankings, which was mainly influenced by legitimacy-seeking behaviour aligned with their common professional backgrounds and local networking activities.

### **HR as conformist innovators**

Our study, then, suggests that little has changed since Legge (1978) criticized HR executives for being conformist innovators. In many respects her critique is redolent of the constrained agency theme in current neo-institutionalist literature. Yet this neo-institutionalist literature does not seem to have penetrated too deeply into the largely normative tradition of research on HR professionals, which is dominated by highly agentic leadership and strategic management (Godard, 2014).

We react negatively to the 'hyper-muscular' agentic view of actors in social systems because, for the most part, these systems are historically laden with taken-for-granted institutions. Nevertheless, we do believe that senior HR professionals have some degree of freedom to transform their organizations and the institutions in which they are embedded (Lawrence, et al, 2013). For example, Paradeise et al (2014), Jussola et al (2015) and Kendal (2015) have shown how business schools can resist convergence towards an ideal template of an elite American business school model by positioning themselves differently

through the kinds of governance structures, educational practices and research traditions they employ. Thus, HR directors can and do become *deviant innovators*. However, our data show that the default position of the HR directors in our study, regardless of sector, was to conform and enact an ideal elite business school template (Wedlin, 2007), despite invoking strategic rationales that emphasized difference. They did this in the following three ways. Firstly, the HR directors in the international firms we interviewed conformed to their international environment in a pragmatic manner. Therefore, in responding to the question: What would make me and my organization look more 'desirable, proper and appropriate' to key internal and external audiences? their reply, if not always in words but evidenced by actions, was partnering with 'elite international schools'. Secondly, their response to the question of which schools to align with was to seek to partner with 'only the best', most respected schools as part of their mission. Thirdly, HR directors achieved a form of cognitive legitimacy by conforming to, and enacting, established standards and the prevailing heuristics associated with formal reputation rankings of schools.

In many respects, this finding should come as no surprise as senior HR professionals are increasingly rewarded for helping achieve narrow definitions of organizational performance (Guest & King, 2004; Marchington, 2015). Legge's criticism of conformist innovation was mainly directed at this aspect of HR professionals' work, which resulted in failure to take into account longer-term negative consequences for their organizations and the communities they serve. Although the divisions between elite international schools and others can be seen as a natural outcome of markets at work, arguably they are potentially damaging to those schools that lack the advantages of high reputational ranking but want to

engage with elite international organizations. One important potential consequence of this 'market failure' is that regional economies with no elite business schools may miss out on important 'spillover' or 'trickle down' effects (Operti & Carbanuci, 2014). This has important implications for executive education in regional economies. Consequently, we suggest that a process akin to the 'innovation paradox' (Devilla & Epstein, 2014) is likely to apply in the case of the relationship between HR decision-making and executive education. This paradox suggests that institutional change through innovative executive development is unlikely to come from elite business schools, since their vested interests, power and influence rely on maintaining the status quo. Thus, these schools may have the skills (and opportunities) to create innovations in executive development but are unlikely to have the will to do so. Instead, it could be argued that innovative techniques and ideas on how to create sustainable and ethical leaders are likely to come from those schools outside of the top tier, which have the will to innovate as long as they have some access to the skills and opportunities to do so (Kendall, 2015). Accordingly, we suggest that HR professionals' failure to recognize this key finding of innovation research could damage their reputations and those of their employers as they will be seen as conformist innovators, not to mention deviant ones. Furthermore, it is the internal 'customers' of HR and the organizations they work with in their supply chain that ultimately determine their reputations. Thus if HR executives do not consider these audiences, they may pay a significant reputational price personally and organizationally (Bednar, Geoffrey Love & Kraatz, 2015).

## **Conclusions**

In this paper we have explored how senior HR practitioners rationalize their decisions, which, we have argued, is a good test of how far the profession has travelled since Legge (1978) criticized them for being conformist innovators. We have done so in the context of rationales for the decisions to partner with business schools for senior executive education. Our data point in the direction of embedded agency among these HR directors who, for the most part, fit well with the stereotype of conformist innovators. While offering ostensibly strategic rationales for their choice of and views on business schools, in practice they prioritize reputation rankings and, in doing so, reinforce them. In short, little has changed in almost five decades of the function's aspirations to lead change in their organizations, reflecting Marchington's (2015) criticism of HR as perhaps 'too busy looking up (to hierarchy) to see where it is going longer term'. We also believe our institutional logics framework provides a more credible explanation of why and how conformist innovation becomes the default position of HR professionals in other spheres of decision-making, rather than accounts that focus on a lack of skills and/or power among HR professionals. While acknowledging the limitations of the relatively small sample of HR directors in our study and the potential for generalization, we believe our framework provides a rigorous basis for further research into how HR make decisions in practice.

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