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Liesbeth Adriaenssens, Peggy De Prins, Daniël Vloeberghs*

Work Experience, Work Stress and HRM at the University**

Current research on stress among academic university staff indicates that occupational stress is alarmingly widespread and increasing (Kinman/Jones 2004; Winefield et al. 2003; Bamps 2004; Tytherleigh et al. 2005). Therefore the work environment needs to be examined and more specifically organisational specific characteristics, like HR-practices. In line of Timmerhuis (1998), we believe that management of human resources in the academic sector is very useful and necessary.

The aim of our study is to investigate (1) the well-being (job stress and job dissatisfaction) of academic staff at the University of Antwerp, (2) the specific factors of the work environment who have an impact on employee well-being, and (3) the interaction between HR practices and employee well-being. (4) Finally, suggestions of improvement of the work environment are to be formulated.

In order to meet this purpose, we designed a conceptual model, based on the stress model developed in the Institute for Social Research (ISR) (University of Michigan), and on the HR-model of Peccei (2004). Central to the model is the idea that employee satisfaction and stress are a function of the subjective perception of the work environment which, in turn, is affected by the HR practices that are in place in organisations.

The elements most likely to cause job stress, according to our participants, were workload and time pressures, uncertainty, lack of feedback and social support. Further, it appeared that the HR-related job characteristics cause job dissatisfaction: perceptions on participation, assessment, reward and support have an impact on job satisfaction of the academic staff. Finally, suggestions of improvement of the work environment were mentioned.

Key words: Employee Well-being, Human Resource Management, Universities, Job Stress

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Introduction

Until fairly recently, most of what was known about occupational stress among university academic staff was derived from a limited number of studies, conducted in the USA – like the pioneering study by Gmelch et al. (1984, 1986) and small-scale researches conducted in single institutions (e.g. Daniels/Guppy 1994; Abouserie 1996). Although these studies have yielded interesting and useful findings, relatively few larger-scale investigations of work stress among academic staff in the university context were carried out (Kinman 2001). This shortcoming is now being corrected: large-scale and/or longitudinal researches are being conducted in the UK (Kinman 1998, 2001; Kinman/Jones 2004) as well as in Australia (Gillespie et al. 2001; Winefield et al. 2002, Winefield et al. 2003) and New-Zealand (Boyd/Wylie 1994).

Consequently, there is growing evidence that universities no longer provide the low stress working environments that they once did. These current researches on stress among academic (and general) staff of universities indicate clearly that the phenomenon of occupational stress in universities is alarmingly widespread and increasing (Winefield 2000 in Gillespie et al. 2001) and they've found that academic stress has become a cause for concern (Winefield et al. 2003).

What causes this increase of job stress among academic staff? Political, economic and social changes cause a change in the organizational climate of most institutions of higher education (Doyle/Hind 1998). For example, the move towards mass higher education without a corresponding increase in resources has been another obvious symptom of change. The increased participation has been accompanied by the introduction of market-driven philosophies and growing government interest and intervention in the activities of universities. Demands for greater accountability, efficiency and quality have taxed the resources of the sector (De Jonghe/Vloeberghs 2001: 200, 204). Universities responded to this changing environment with strengthened and often more centralized systems (Kinman/Jones 2003). Consequently, staff had to cope with the imposition of new managerial and funding systems, and with research and quality assessment exercises (Doyle/Hind 1998).

Against this background of changes in the university context, we address the well-being of the academic staff of the University of Antwerp – the existence of job stress, as well as the experienced job dissatisfaction. Stress is a complicated phenomenon and despite ongoing research and academic interest in the concept of stress, there continues to be a lack of consensus regarding its definition. The nature and effects of stress might be best understood by saying that some environmental variables (stressors), when interpreted by the individual (interpretation), may lead to a negative experience of stress. Thus, stressors are objective events and stress is the subjective (in this case negative) experience of the event (Dua 1994: 59). The concept of job dissatisfaction is quite clear: it refers to the dissatisfaction of the employee at work, related to elements of the work environment.

Based on information obtained from focus groups, it is our purpose to get an accurate description of these issues and whether or not they are a real problem among academic staff. We are interested in causes of both elements of employee well-being. Therefore the work environment needs to be examined. We focus on organisational

specific characteristics, more specifically on HR-practices. We believe, in line of Timmerhuis (1998), that management of human resources in the academic sector is very useful and necessary. The quality of academic research and education after all depends on quality of staff and staff performance. Furthermore, HRM-policy can play a role in the improvement of the quality of labour of academic staff and can provide solutions in a changed environment. This means anticipating on situations of high job stress and especially striving for well-being at work. Therefore HR-practices are integrated in our research model, which is based on the line of thinking of Peccei (2004) in HRM research. Central to this framework, is the idea that employee satisfaction and stress are a function of individuals' experiences at work which, in turn, are affected by the HR-practices that are in place in organisations.

Other previous research (Gmelch et al., 1984, 1986; Daniels/Guppy 1994; Oshagbemi 1996; Kinman 1998; Gillespie et al. 2001; Donders et al. 2002; Winefield et al. 2002, 2003; Kinman/Jones 2003 2004; Bamps 2004) as well, indicated that perceptions on promotion policies, pay, recognition and management policies play a vital role in the experience of stress and job (dis)satisfaction. For example, in the Netherlands von der Fuhr and van den Berg (2004: 73) found that job satisfaction of academic staff is explained by whether or not the job is considered to be varied and by the amount of autonomy perceived by the respondents. Furthermore the perception on management plays a role: academic staff who perceive the management of the university as effective and efficient, are more satisfied at their job. Finally, they noticed that feedback, received on performed work enlarges the job satisfaction. Similarly, Winfield et al. (2002: 13) indicated that the predictors of job satisfaction were higher levels of autonomy, procedural fairness and trust in Head of Department. Especially these last two are elements of HR-practices at the university. This relationship between employee wellbeing and HRM is the core element in our research.

Theoretical framework

Central questions

The central aim of this study is to investigate the well-being of academic staff at the University of Antwerp. The first research question derived from this main goal is: "Are job stress and job dissatisfaction indeed problems that occur?". Secondly, we want to know (a) which specific factors in the work environment have an impact on employee well-being, and (b) what is the impact of HR-practices on the work environment and how can we define the interaction between HR-practices and employee well-being.

The third and final question to be answered by this research is 'How can university policy be improved in order to obtain a policy optimisation that effects employee wellbeing in a positive way?.'

In order to meet this purpose, we designed an original conceptual model, based on the classical stress model developed by researchers of the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research (ISR), and on the HRM-model of Peccei (2004).

Theories

The Michigan stress model posits that the objective environment (stressors such as work overload, job insecurity, and role conflict) affects the psychological environment

(perceived stress), which in turn affects both short term responses (strains) and enduring outcomes (French/Kahn 1962 in Christis 1998; Baker et al. 1996).

The classical sources of stress are those identified in all kinds of previous researches on job stress – to mention a few: intrinsic job factors (e.g. poor working conditions, and work overload), role in organizations (e.g. role conflict, role ambiguity), career development (e.g. lack of promotion policies, and job security), poor relationships at work, organizational culture (e.g. politics in organizations and lack of participation in decision-making) (Cooper/Paine 1990), lack of control (Karasek/Theorell 1990), and the combination of work and activities in other life spheres, like the family (Christis 1998).

In previous research in a university context several of these classical stressors were defined as an actual stressor in that context. For example, Winfield et al. (2002: 13) indicated that the strongest predictors of psychological strain were job insecurity, work pressure and lower levels of autonomy. Kinman/Jones (2004: 39-41) found that perceptions of an unmanageable workload were associated with psychological distress and job dissatisfaction, as well as lower levels of control. Furthermore, high levels of job insecurity had a negative impact on the academic staff. Role stressors and work load were the two factors that had an influence on job stress in the study of Daniels/Guppy (1998: 139). In turn, Tytherleigh et al. (2005) found that work overload, work-life balance and lack control to be stressors in higher education institutions. We will examine whether these stressors are also perceived by the academic staff at the University of Antwerp.

Central to Peccei's model is the idea that employee satisfaction and stress are a function of individuals' experiences at work which, in turn, are affected by the HR-practices that are in place in organisations.

As mentioned in the introduction, previous research in an university context indicates that HRM does have an impact on employee wellbeing. Kinman/Jones (2004: 39) mention that the lack of opportunity for personal development was significantly associated with strain. Respondents who perceived less support tended to report lower levels of psychological health and less satisfaction. Tytherleigh et al. (2005) concluded that academic staff was most stressed by work relationships and 'resources and communication' (not being kept informed about what was going on in their organisations), as well as the fact that there were constant changes in their organizations and that pay and benefits were not as good as those of others doing similar jobs. Finally, we mention a few conclusions made by Bamps (2004): wellbeing of staff of higher education institutions is explained mostly by 'problems with changes in the work environment', as well as by the relationship with the direct executive. Both are negatively connected to job satisfaction. Staff involvement on the other hand has a positive impact on employee wellbeing. In turn, Lamboojij et al. (2006) found that cooperation between co-workers and turnover were negatively related to each other, meaning that more cooperation between co-workers goes along with less turnover. These authors link cooperation to HRM by using the 'mutual-investment' model: when the employer signals that he takes care of the wellbeing of his employees, employees will react with more good will, commitment and willingness to cooperate (Tsui et al. 1997 in Lamboojij et al. 2006: 3). For example, Ito and Brotheridge (2005, in Lamboojij et al. 2006: 7) found that supervisory career support leads to reduced turnover intention.

All these researches indicate the necessity of HRM at the university. However, academic staff often perceives HRM to be invasive in their own way of working: the autonomy of academics is surely a positive and crucial element in a stressful environment. Timmerhuis (1998) provides a solution: the “double fit” of HRM – which will be discussed later in this article.

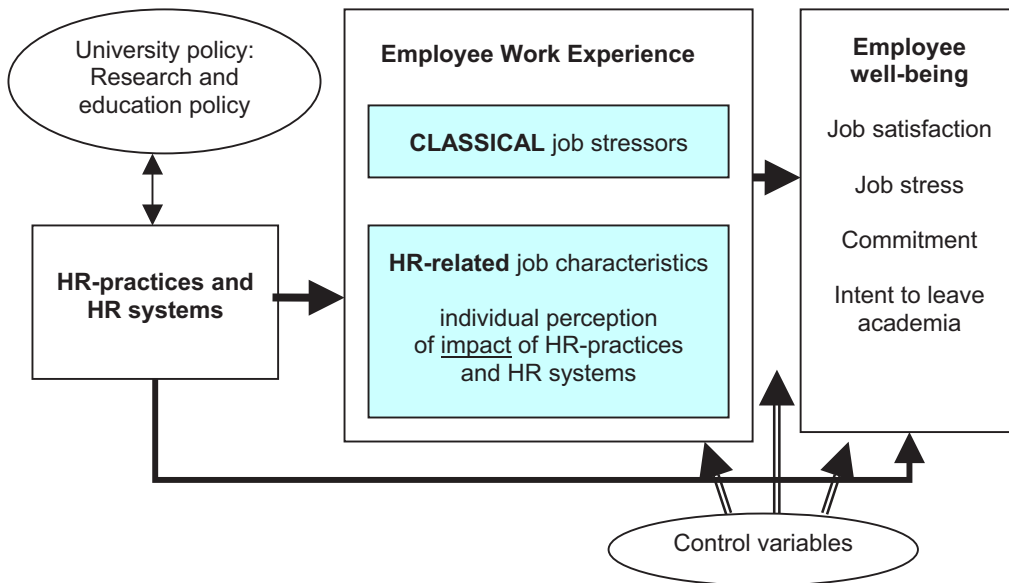
Our own conceptual model

The two theories currently discussed (the Michigan stress model, and Pececi’s model) led to our own conceptual model, with the exception that the stress responses and enduring outcomes from the Michigan stress model aren’t integrated in our research and conceptual model.

The HR-related job characteristics in our conceptual model refer to perceptions of academic staff on the HR-practices, implemented at the university. More specifically, attention is being given to perception of the academic staff on career options and promotion, assessment, reward, participation and support.

Our model is presented in figure 1.

Figure 1:



Method (focus groups)

Group discussion ensures that priority is given to the respondents’ hierarchy of importance, *their* language and concepts, *their* frameworks for understanding the world. In fact, listening to discussions between participants prevents the researcher from prematurely closing off the generation of meaning in his/ her own search for clarification (Kitzinger 1994: 108).

Participants' selection

The traditionally recommended size of the focus groups ranges from 6 to 12 participants; the ideal size typically falling between 6 and 9 participants. Often the nature of the questions and participants' characteristics yield clues to the ideal size. We decided to invite a maximum of eight participants per group, with a minimum of five.

Holding separate sessions with homogeneous but contrasting groups is believed to produce information in greater depth than would be the case with heterogeneous groups, because it will be easier for participants sharing similar key characteristics to identify with each other's experiences (Knodel 1993: 40). Participants were divided in two categories: the first category containing the assistants and other academic staff,¹ the second category containing participants with a degree of professor. We assume that the experiences and perceptions of both categories could be quite specific and different from each other. We organized five focus groups: three groups with professors, and two with respondents of the other category. Participants were selected to be representative for the population of assistants and other academic staff, and of professors, respectively. During the systematic selection, we took into account following characteristics: 'campus', 'faculty', 'rank', and 'age'. As much as possible, the structure of the ranks in each faculty, the weight of the departments within the faculty, and the number of members of a faculty per campus, were taken into account. We added more women into the selection than there would have been representatively because we want to develop an insight in their specific perception of the university as a work environment.

Focus group protocol

Thus, a focus group is a facilitated group discussion used to collect in-depth information on a particular topic from multiple participants. The group discussions focused on exploring staff experiences and perceptions of the work environment, and on their view of the university policy – more specifically the HRM-policy at the University of Antwerp. Career possibilities, assessment and feedback, reward, support (collegial and practical) and participation in decision-making were subjects of discussion. Very important in our model is the relationship between the perception of the work environment and experience of job dissatisfaction and/or job stress. Both concepts are in turn essential aspects of employee well-being and are therefore thoroughly discussed.

Analyses

A thorough analysis based on repeated examination of the full set of transcripts (notes, summary and the discussion (field notes) of each focus group, transcripts of the complete focus group discussions, and memo's noted by the researcher throughout the analyses), was undertaken, in order to explain and understand the investigated phenomenon from a social scientific perspective (Knodel 1993: 43-44).

¹ All research and teaching employees who receive payment from other financial sources than the budget of the university government: teachers, lecturers, guest professors, researchers, post-doctoral researchers, research managers, voluntary employees, scientific and pedagogic employees and academic employees.

Experience and causes of job stress and job dissatisfaction

As we mentioned when presenting the conceptual model, we focus in the scope of this article on the impact of employee work experience on the well-being of the academic staff. More specifically, we examine the impact of the perception of (potential) job stressors and the perception of HR-related job characteristics on job stress and job (dis)satisfaction.

During the analysis of the qualitative data, two major findings came up: the perception on potential (classical) job stressors seemed to have an impact on the perceived job stress, and the perception on HR-related job characteristics seemed to influence the experience of job (dis)satisfaction. From these findings, we formulated the hypothesis that each experience (the experience of classical job stressors on the one hand, and the perception of HR-related job characteristics on the other) will only have an impact on one of the elements of employee well-being (the first experience on job stress, the second on job dissatisfaction). In this article, we present our data in line of this hypothesis, which will be investigated further in the quantitative phase of the study.

We start by providing an overview of the findings related to the experience of job stress, followed by those related to job dissatisfaction. The perceptions of the assistants and other academic staff on one side, and the professors on the other are discussed separately – this because we assume that their perception and experiences could be quite different.

Job stress and (classical) job stressors

Job stress was defined by our participants (assistants and other academic staff) as something that's always there, and is linked to the process of writing a doctoral thesis: "*Writing a doctoral thesis is always stressful. It has to be finished one day, and that fact in itself is a continuous factor of stress. [...] Actually, it is stress at a long term. [...] It is always there.*" (AB2-2). Respondents mention that "*stress increases, but it has been there from the beginning*" (AB2-2) and that "*the stress is uneven. Especially for people who are standing before the finishing of their doctoral thesis: the stress rises exponentially towards the finishing of a doctoral thesis*" (AB1-4).

When asked how job stress expresses itself, the answers were: "*In restlessness*", "*You cannot turn it off!*" and "*you always feel a bit guilty when you're not working on your doctoral thesis*" (AB2-1, AB2-2).

Some participants with the degree of professor indicate that they do experience job stress, and describe it as a feeling of being overwhelmed. It expresses itself by the need to put off work until a later date, by the feeling you cannot work quickly and thoroughly any more, and the fact that you lie awake at night.

Others try to put job stress into perspective by saying that "*stress is a phenomenon where everybody lives with*" and that "*it isn't different here than in other work settings*" (Z1-1). Others mentioned that they do not experience job stress:

Z2-3: "So, than I have to say that it doesn't bother me at all. I try to do what I can, and I expect the same from my people. And if they do what they can, they cannot do more than that. It is that simple! And as long as we get recognition from somewhere [...] it is sufficient for me."

Those who do experience job stress, mention that it has been rising during the past years.

During this study, we focus on the causes – elements in the work experience of the academic staff – of job stress. In the table, you find an overview of causes of job stress, mentioned by the participants during the focus groups.

Table 1: (Classical) job stressors

| | Assistants and other academic staff | Professors |
|------------------------------------|--|--|
| Work load and time pressure | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - combination of tasks - being asked for information all the time - less staff, working harder | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - combination of tasks - work doesn't get finished - useless administration - insufficient staffing - meetings (time!) |
| Assistance and support | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - writing a dissertation → lack of support - lack of assistance and feedback | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - research management → writing projects, meeting deadlines → responsibility - lack of support for this task |
| Uncertainty | <u>Job</u> uncertainty | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - about assessment and promotion - about the future of the UA |
| Others | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - expectations (of yourself, of others) - how student evaluations are dealt with - no strict deadlines | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - expectations (of others) - bad communication - combination job & private life |

The main stressors identified in this study were: work load and time pressure, expectations, (lack of) support, social aspects of the work environment and uncertainty. As you can notice, these stressors do show a lot of resemblance with the classical stressors mentioned earlier.

Let's take a look at the specific comments on these stressors, given by the respondents. To start with: where do work load and time pressure originate from? Both groups of respondents mentioned the fact that the combination of tasks at the university – different research projects, teaching and service – is the main reason why they experience work and time load.

AB1-5: "I had an enormously high work pressure at that time. And especially, writing all kinds of other projects, without being able to work on my doctoral thesis, knowing that the deadline for my doctoral thesis was very nearby."

Z1-6: "Being obstructed to do what you actually want to do that day. I mean, that's where stress comes from the most: when you sit at your desk in the morning, robbing your hands, because you want to do this or that, and then all kind of stuff comes in between. That's what, according to me, creates the most job stress."

Another factor is the fact that less staff is hired, so the amount of work per head increases. Respondents with a degree of professor mention that "*useless*" administration has to be done, that there isn't sufficient staff, that meetings take up too much time and that the work doesn't get finished:

Z3-6: "The only stress I experience, is the feeling that continuously, no matter what I do – whether I work 'till 12 o'clock p.m. or 3 o'clock a.m. – a list of things to do remains [...]. And that is extremely annoying, that you constantly have the feeling that you're not finished with your work."

In previous studies, similar sources of job stress were identified: workload (Winefield 2002; Donders et al. 2002), quantitative overload (Daniels and Guppy 1994), the combination of research-related and other tasks – more specifically, the degree to which other tasks interfere with one's research (Taris et al. 2001), research or publishing demands (Brown et al., 1986; Dey 1994), the volume of work and the diversity of tasks in the time available (Kinman 1998), increasing workload and number of responsibilities (Gillespie et al. 2001), rushed pace of work, and lack of opportunity for scholarly work, (Kinman/Jones 2003), frequent interruptions at work (Gmelch et al., 1984; Kinman/Jones 2003), overwork and being expected to do too much in too little time (Sharpley et al. 1996), conducting research, time constraints, administration and bureaucracy (Abouserie 1996), administrative tasks (Arnold 1996), too much paperwork (Thorston 1996; Kinman/Jones 2003), meetings who take up too much time (Thorston 1996), and the fact that there is insufficient time to keep abreast of developments in areas of expertise (Gmelch et al., 1984).

A second category of stressors is called '(a lack of) assistance, support'. First of all, in discussion with respondents of the senior academic staff, 'research management' was mentioned as a source of job stress. Research management is, according to the participants involved, "*keeping the research group alive*" – which means: writing projects to obtain funds, helping others to obtain grants and scholarships and making sure that the existing research projects can continue. The deadlines and competition, as well as the social responsibility of keeping 'your' people at work, causes a lot of pressure and – for many respondents – job stress. Furthermore, they refer to the fact that they do not get any support from the university to perform this important task – not financially, not morally, nor by providing some kind of management training. In previous researches, similar stressors were found: pressure to obtain money for research (Gmelch et al. 1984), inadequacy of resources (Daniels/Guppy 1994), conducting high quality research with limited resources (Kinman 1998), lack of funding, resources and support services (Gillespie et al. 2001).

Among the respondents of the group of assistants and other academic staff, the lack of support (especially in writing a doctoral thesis) is a severe issue, which leads to a lot of job stress: "*So, actually you have zero feedback and that was actually stressing. Because then you totally don't know any more whether you're doing a good job. So, I believe that assessment is a very important factor to avoid such stress.*" (AB2-3). Sharpley et al. (1996) mention 'lack of regular feedback about how well I am doing my job' as a potential cause of job stress.

Uncertainty can lead to job stress as well. Our respondents provide us with more information about this stressor: the assistants and other academic staff mention 'job uncertainty' as potential stressor – the competition for a job at the university is tough, and the career options at the university are limited. The participating professors mention uncertainty about assessment and promotion, and about the future of the university as stressor. Other studies mention review and promotion process concerns (Dey 1994; Arnold 1996), job insecurity (Gillespie et al. 2001; Winefield 2002), 'lack of promotion opportunities' and 'uncertainty about how amalgamations will influence me' (Sharpley et al. 1996) as potential stressors.

Donders et al. (2002) report that a higher score on promotion possibilities correlates with more well-being at work. In our model, well-being consists of two major

components: job stress and job (dis)satisfaction. We notice that career options and promotion opportunities aren't exactly classical job stressors, and would better be classified as HR related job characteristics. That means that the perception on promotion at the university does not fit with the formulated hypothesis: it was defined as a source of job stress, while we expected it to have an impact on job dissatisfaction. This issue will be discussed later.

Finally, all kinds of other stressors were mentioned by our participants. First of all, it is important to notice that the difficult combination of the job and private life is a stressor only mentioned by the professors.

Z3-2: "Eventually, you find a compromise between your job and your close family, but then, the time is up! Then there's no time left for yourself, let alone, for your friends or to go out. The time has just run out. [...]"

Kinman/Jones (2003) as well, found that compromised personal priorities, and the fact that 'the job interferes with personal life' are potential stressors for academic staff.

Assistants and other academic staff state that job stress can be caused by the fact that sometimes meetings have to be attended, which take up time that cannot be used for other, more important tasks. Another source of job stress for this category of academic staff is the fact that there aren't any strict deadlines when you're working in an academic environment. Both groups of respondents mention problems with communication as potential stressor, as well as expectations of yourself and of others about the quality (and quantity) of your work.

The hypothesis we formulated – based on the qualitative data – states that HR-practices do not influence the development of job stress, and only have an impact on the experience of job dissatisfaction. In previous studies, however, a few HR-related job characteristics were mentioned as potential stressors: inadequate salary, slow career advancement (Gmelch et al., 1984), poor management practice, insufficient recognition and reward (Gillespie et al. 2001), low levels of autonomy (Winefield 2002), a feeling that the 'organization does not care for its staff' (Daniels/Guppy 1994), lack of input in decision-making, and lack of opportunity for training and development (Kinman/Jones 2003). Therefore, our hypothesis needs to be further investigated in the second phase of this research – a survey. In this article, we present our preliminary findings on HR-related job characteristics and job dissatisfaction.

Job dissatisfaction and HR-related job characteristics

Job satisfaction is an important subject because of its relevance to the physical and mental well-being of employees.

Kinman (2001: 483) wrote: 'Whilst professionals might perceive high levels of occupational stress and express dissatisfaction with many aspects of their jobs, there is evidence to suggest that they may still feel generally satisfied at work, providing certain intrinsic needs are met.' Our research on university (academic) staff tends to support this statement. It appears that, on average, academic staff is enthusiastic about their work and obtain a significant degree of satisfaction, enthusiasm and challenge from their work.

However, we focus in this paper on factors in the work environment that lead to job dissatisfaction. In the focus groups, five HR-practices were dealt with: promotion,

assessment, reward, participation and support. In the table, we find a detailed overview of specific elements concerning these HR-practices that cause job dissatisfaction among our respondents. As we can see, almost all these concepts have issues that can lead to job dissatisfaction.

Table 2: HR-related job characteristics and job dissatisfaction

| <i>HR-related job characteristics</i> | | <i>Specific cause of job dissatisfaction, mentioned by:</i> | |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------|---|--|
| | | <i>Assistants and other academic staff</i> | <i>Professors</i> |
| Participation | | / | Top unreachable and not aware of the needs of the academic staff |
| Assessment | | - lack of assessment and feedback - unclear criteria of assessment | - lack of discretion about evaluations - insufficient attention for all qualities |
| Assistance & support | Social support | Insufficient assistance and support | |
| | Financial support | / | Need of external financial sources |
| | | General functioning of the financial department - lack of clarity about statutes - completion of projects | / |
| | | General functioning of central services - don't work as they should - too many people work there: lack of clarity | / |
| | Practical support | Administration: - administrative obligations - problems with forms | Administration: Being asked for information all the time |
| | | - you cannot find anything on the website - Provision of services from the ICT-department not as it should | / |
| Reward | | Wage discrimination | / |
| Promotion | | / | / |

First of all, participation in the university policy is regarded as insufficient – especially at the university level: respondents mention that the university top doesn't know what is needed within the departments and faculties. However, respondents generally indicate being satisfied with the degree of participation at department or faculty level. Contradictory, Kinman/Jones (2004) concluded that the majority of respondents are dissatisfied with the level of control they have over decision making.

Especially the senior academics criticize the fact that only representatives are allowed to be seated in the faculty council of certain, not all, faculties. This is new in those faculties since the amalgamation of the University of Antwerp.

Further, it was mentioned the fact that participation and academic freedom are closely related. Some clarification of this remark is necessary: respondents believe that, in order to have sufficient academic freedom, they need to participate in decision and

policy making at all university levels, since the institutional levels at the university shape their personal work environment. Academic freedom – freedom to choose your own topic of research, and priorities of research – and flexibility – freedom to plan your own time during the day, the week – are considered to be positive elements in the work environment, and a reason why people choose to work at a university.

Secondly, assessment of academic staff was mentioned as a factor that causes job dissatisfaction – more specifically the fact that junior academic staff indicate that they do not get any assessment, evaluations or feedback.

AB1-3: “The flexibility which is mentioned earlier, is like a knife that cuts with two sides, I think – because one person needs a lot more guidance, and yes, the other is very satisfied being able to do what he wants, being able to research or teach what he wants.”

AB2-3: “So actually, I think there’s too little assessment about what I am doing. The assessment I get, I get from my promoter – who hasn’t really got plenty of time to look at my work.”

Another factor that leads to job dissatisfaction is the lack of clarity about criteria of assessment. Throughout the group discussions, the importance of criteria of assessment was made clear by practically all participants. First of all, the tension between evaluation based on teaching or on research skills was discussed. Then, the criteria on which research should be assessed, are discussed. Moreover, participants mention the importance of clear defined criteria of assessment, which are to be communicated as such to the employees. Finally, participants ask to take the specialities of the different faculties into account when evaluating academic staff.

Z1-1: “I would like to ask that more attention be given to the specialty of each group, of each faculty. It is quite a source of frustration, within the faculty of [...], where we feel that we are being assessed with criteria that actually come from the positive sciences, and that too little attention is being given to the specialty of our education and research situation. To us, one parameter for all the groups seems to be difficult, especially of course when this parameter comes from another research group, being the sciences.”

Insufficient support and assistance was identified as a third source of job dissatisfaction at the university. Support was divided into three subcategories: social support, practical support and financial support.

Especially junior academic staff mentioned not receiving enough support and feedback on their work. This was an issue in the development of job stress as well, and has been discussed previously in this article.

Most participants were satisfied with the support they received from the administrative staff at departmental level, but most of the respondents were dissatisfied with the general functioning of the central support services, like the financial department and the administrative department. All kinds of remarks were made about this issue (cf. table 2).

Finally, senior academic staff members criticize the fact that financial support has to be found outside the university. This causes some extra pressure on the academic staff, especially on the professors. Remember that research management was identified as a factor that causes job stress.

The final HR-practice discussed in the focus groups was the reward system. According to our participants, some elements of the reward policy at the university cause

dissatisfaction. Several assistants and other academic staff, mention wage discrimination as a source of dissatisfaction. What they refer to, is the fact that a lot of the junior academics are being paid by different grants – which have different consequences for pay and reward, and even on the social security of the people in question.

Senior academic staff however refer to the importance of the academic freedom as a characteristic of the university as work environment, and indicate that this is more important, then having a high salary. To them, reward isn't a very important issue when discussing the employee wellbeing at the university.

During the group discussions, a lot of information about perceptions of academic staff on promotion options and career policy at the university was obtained implicitly. We already identified them as potential job stressors. However, we assume that the critics on this policy mentioned in the conversations could be factors in the development of job dissatisfaction as well – although they weren't explicitly linked to job dissatisfaction by our respondents.

Many respondents mention the fact that there is a lack of strategy and vision on career and promotion at the university. No consistent policy is developed, according to the participants, and that leads to uncertainty.

AB1-4: "There isn't actually a structure for that kind of ... tenure and promotion, there's actually no structure for it, no stencil. And that leads to all kinds of problems, of course.

And so you see that actually very capable people have to leave the university, while others get chances which perhaps they shouldn't have gotten."

Moreover, there aren't many career options at the university and there are only a limited number of job openings, what causes an increase of competition and rivalry among colleagues – a cause of job dissatisfaction. Implicitly, the lack of clarity about career possibilities does seem to be a cause of job dissatisfaction.

Respondents from senior academic staff, indicate that the chance to get a promotion or have a career at the university depends on luck and coincidence, and on the agreements about the financial budget for promotion at the upper policy level of the university government.

Oshagbemi (1996) found that on promotion, the factors most frequently listed as problematic include the criteria for promotion, the bias in favour of quantity instead of quality of publications, the relative neglect of teaching and administrative responsibilities when considering promotion, and lack of clearly stated promotion policies. Winefield and Jarrett (2001) found that generally, academics are most satisfied about autonomy and least satisfied about promotion possibilities and the way the university is managed. Winefield et al. (2002) conclude that most academics were dissatisfied with following aspects of their work: hours of work, chance of promotion, rate of pay and university management.

Besides the HR-related causes of job dissatisfaction, a few other causes were identified. Professors mention the difficult combination of private life and their job at the university both as a cause of job dissatisfaction, and – as we have seen before – as a stressor. Apparently, it depends on the person's character whether this leads to job stress or to dissatisfaction. One of the respondents mentioned workload as a source of job dissatisfaction; many others considered it to be a stressor: "*The frustration is that*

every day you get a longer list of tasks you still have to do, than the list you arrived with in the morning" (Z3-2). Another respondent indicates that the fact that the university exists of several different university grounds, spread over the city of Antwerp, is a factor of dissatisfaction, because of the time wasted with travelling.

Exceptions

Based on the qualitative data, we came to the hypothesis that classical job stressors cause job stress and that HR-related job characteristics have an impact on job satisfaction. We did find a few exceptions.

First of all, promotion and career policy is an HR-related job characteristic, which – according to our assumptions – should have had an impact on job satisfaction. However, our respondents identified it as a job stressor and indicated only implicitly that issues concerning promotion and career policy could lead to job dissatisfaction.

Secondly, senior academic staff members mention the difficult combination of private life and their job at the university, as well as workload, as a source of both job stress and job dissatisfaction. Probably, it will depend on personal characteristics whether this perception leads to job stress or to job dissatisfaction. These remarks will be further investigated, in the second phase of our research.

Finally, social support is a concept both mentioned in the context of job stress and job dissatisfaction. Respondents identified several kinds of social support: (1) social, collegial contacts and (2) cooperation and feedback on professional basis. Both elements appear to have an impact on whether or not job stress occurs, but only the lack of professional feedback and assistance was mentioned as a cause of job dissatisfaction.

It was mentioned that social relations have changed: (mostly senior) participants indicate that social support has decreased the past years, and rivalry among colleagues has increased.

In previous research on wellbeing at the university, different opinions come across our attention: Brown et al. (1986) mention interpersonal relationships as a potential stressor and in the study of Abouerie (1996), respondents indicate that relationships with colleagues can lead to job stress. Gmelch et al. (1984) on the other hand, stated that a non-competitive, collegiate culture provides a protective and supportive framework which acts as a buffer in potentially stressful situations. Similarly, our respondents from the group of the assistants and other academic staff consider social contacts to be a positive element in this context: having social contacts with colleagues can buffer the development of job stress. Many respondents mention having good contacts with colleagues.

Suggested improvements of university policy

One of the added values of this qualitative phase of the research is the fact that our respondents were given the chance to suggest how to improve elements of the university work environment that are perceived as problematic, leading to job stress and/or to job dissatisfaction. First of all, we take a look at suggestions to change factors that cause job stress. Secondly, we give an overview of suggestions made to improve HR-related job characteristics.

Improvement of factors with an impact on job stress

Table 3: Suggestions for improvement of issues concerning job stress

| | Assistants and other academic staff | | Professors | |
|------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|
| | Cause of job stress | Solution | Cause of job stress | Solution |
| Work load and time pressure | <i>Combination of tasks</i> | Honest division of teaching tasks | - <i>combination of tasks</i> - <i>work doesn't get finished</i> | Choose your priorities Choose your priorities |
| | | | - <i>useless administration</i> | - collect data on a central level - less emphasis on administrative services |
| Assistance and support | <i>Writing a dissertation</i> → <i>lack of support</i> | Regular feedback of doctoral commission – oral and personal evaluation → to know whether you're doing alright → obligation for both parties | <i>Research management</i> → <i>writing projects, meeting deadlines</i> → <i>responsibility</i> | More staff and means, and financial support |
| | <i>Lack of assistance and feedback</i> | More support to guide staff | <i>lack of support in research management</i> | Coaching of promoters |
| Uncertainty | <u><i>Job uncertainty</i></u> | Vision and planning Strategy Planning of staff Clarification of statutes | <i>About assessment and promotion</i> | - objective criteria - objective criteria= problem: how possible? - finding a balance |

Two conclusions can be based on this table.

First of all, we notice that many of the solutions presented by our respondents can be defined as being HR-related. For example, to diminish job stress related to uncertainty about the job (assistants and other academic staff) and about career and promotion possibilities (professors), assistants and other academic staff emphasize the need for a concrete vision on academic staff, in line with the general strategy of the university, as well as a clear staff planning. The participating professors pleaded for more objective criteria to assess their work, and indicated at the same time that this is very difficult to implement: a human way of assessing people is necessary but simultaneously the question arises which criteria should be used. Respondents indicate that they wish to be assessed based on their own speciality, and on criteria that take this specialty into account: “*I don't think it is necessary that different faculties use the same criteria of assessment. But, each faculty should have criteria to base promotion on [...]. We cannot compare our work with your work, because it has different criteria.*” (Z3-6).

According to our respondents, some kind of coaching could be organised for promoters of research or a doctoral thesis: academics aren't trained to be managers, and some skills could be taught and trained. And finally, a more honest division of tasks among all assistants was suggested.

An important observation is the fact that these suggested improvements could be made by using HR-practices. Timmerhuis (1998) for example, wrote that HR-applications in a university context are often seen as problematic: given the nature of scientific work, the functioning of employees cannot be directed and isn't wanted either. Except by hiring good employees and providing a good work environment (high autonomy, good facilities, means and so on), the development of competences of employees in scientific organisations can only be mildly directed. A scientist is capable of doing his/her job or isn't. This way of managing is called the classical organisation and regulating system in scientific organisations.

Now, the idea exist that a certain similarity and uniformity between the HR-policy on one side and the scientific company on the other, is preferable. The HR-policy should fit within scientific companies. Besides doing justice to the own nature of scientific work and the individual character of the employees, the HR-policy should provide the possibility to have an influence on the (functioning of the) employees as well, in order to be able to realize the organizational goals. HR-policy in scientific companies demands a "double fit" (Timmerhuis 1998: 8): (1) It has to take into account the specific nature of academic work and (2) make sure that academic staff can be guided and stimulated in order to meet the (growing) expectations of performance of universities and their employees.

Another issue Timmerhuis (1998) discusses, is the fields of tension within scientific companies. One of these fields of tension is the one between autonomy and interdependency, the togetherness within the organization. This brings us to a second observation, based on table 3.

We notice a difference between perceptions of respondents with a degree of professor, and those of the assistants and other academic staff. Professors seem to search for a solution for causes of job stress within themselves: they mention the need of 'self discipline' in order to decrease job stress or to prevent its development and they state that academics have to choose their own priorities in order to reduce their work load.

At the beginning of the focus groups, professors emphasized the importance of autonomy, academic freedom and flexibility at the university, and in relation to stressors these respondents indirectly refer to the autonomy of the professor again.

Assistants on the other hand feel the need for more interdependency within the university, and more specifically among colleagues. They mention social and other kinds of support and assistance as a solution to stressors, and they want to be comforted by others. For example, the doctoral commission was discussed in detail as a way to organise this feedback. Concerning the university policy, assistants and other academic staff ask for a more clear vision and strategy on staff planning.

A solution for both sides of the medallion of 'social support' can be found in Timmerhuis' (1998) article, where she proposes a new concept: the "nestled, self regulation" (geneste zelfsturing). It refers to independent units who function within the bigger whole (the nest) of the organisation. It means that the units are able to function autonomically but a coordinating perspective (that only defines the most necessary items) is present. This collective direction-providing strategic framework needs to be defined but within this framework all lower units are free to make their own choices. The "nestled, self regula-

tion”, provides a good work environment were the mentioned causes of job stress are addressed, while providing support and assistance for the junior academic staff and taking into account the importance of autonomy of the (senior) academic staff.

Improvement of factors with an impact on job dissatisfaction

When discussing the HR-practices at the university, the respondents were asked to suggest improvements. Their responses are presented in table 4.

Table 4: Suggestions for improvement of issues concerning job dissatisfaction

| HR-related job characteristics | Assistants and other academic staff | | Professors | |
|--------------------------------|--|---|---|--|
| | Cause of dissatisfaction | Improvement | Cause of dissatisfaction | Improvement |
| Assessment | <i>Unclear criteria of assessment</i> | - Need for previously determined criteria - Importance of other competences → 'performance interview' | <i>Insufficient attention for all qualities of the academic staff</i> | → mentioned before |
| Assistance and support | <i>Administration: problems with forms</i> | Website | <i>Administration: Being asked for information all the time</i> | Less emphasis on administrative services, and more on the academic tasks |
| | / | | <i>Need of external financial sources</i> | More financial support from the university |
| Reward | <i>Wage discrimination</i> | Clarity and more information about statutes + fair and equal statutes | / | |
| Participation | <i>Representation</i> | Meetings to inform others – before faculty council | <i>Representation</i> | Written reports |

First of all, we discuss the issues concerning assessment of academic staff. Almost all respondents confirmed the importance of criteria of assessment, and most of them consider the lack of clarity about these criteria as a cause of job dissatisfaction. Assistants, other academic staff as well as professors suggest that previously determined criteria, and ‘taking other competences into account’ can lead to a decrease of job dissatisfaction, and – as seen before – a decrease of job stress caused by uncertainty about promotion possibilities (especially mentioned by professors).

In one of the focus groups with assistants and other academic staff, the performance interview was mentioned as a way to address all kinds of problems and remarks about the work environment, and as a way to receive support and feedback about your functioning and your work at the university.

Further, suggestions for improvement of assistance by the central services of the university were made. More financial support from the university is one of them. This was mentioned before as a suggestion to diminish the job stress caused by the social responsibility that comes with research management. Another suggestion was to put “less emphasis on the central services, which actually should mainly support the academic staff in performing their academic tasks” (Z3-1).

About reward system at the university, we can be short: since wage discrimination is the only factor mentioned as a cause of job dissatisfaction, an improvement is simply to provide more information about the different statutes used at the university and their consequences on pay and social security, and to make sure that all employees are treated fairly and equally.

Another element that leads to job dissatisfaction, according to our respondents, is the fact that working with representation (within certain faculties) for the faculty council led to dissatisfaction and to a discrepancy between the perception that participation at the university is important and the reality: respondents do not feel represented or (especially assistants) aren't aware of the possibilities of participation. An improvement would be, according to several respondents from the group of assistants and other academic staff, that representatives organise meetings before the faculty council to discuss the agenda. Another possibility is to send the report of the faculty or department council to all members of academic staff. One of the professors suggested switching back to a written rapport in stead of an e-mail, because "*then you would read it, since it is lying there on your desk*" (Z1-1).

Improvement of other factors with an impact on job dissatisfaction

Some 'other' causes of dissatisfaction were mentioned by professors in our focus groups, to name one: the rise of rivalry among colleagues. A few possibilities to address this issue were mentioned: more information and clarity about promotion and career possibilities could, according to our respondents, lead to a decrease of rivalry. Furthermore, it was suggested that creating more alternatives for employees with a doctoral degree would limit the competition for a certain job at the university. For example, doing research on policies for the government, teaching and working at a college associated with the university, or working at spin off companies. Finally, several professors indicated that providing a bigger budget for promotion of professors would obviously lead to a decrease of rivalry since more people would get the chance to get a promotion. All these suggestions can be seen as possible HR-practices: without using this terminology, our respondents suggest similar solutions as Timmerhuis (1998).

Conclusion

In this study, we started from three central research questions. First of all, we wanted to have an insight in the wellbeing of the academic staff at this university. We found that, despite the high amount of stress and stressors at the university, academic staff is generally very satisfied by working at the university. The typical characteristics of working at the university, the intrinsic aspects of their work, such as conducting research, the academic way of approaching a problem, working with young people and educating new generations of students, the international aspect – going on conferences and working together with foreign academics – and especially the academic freedom and flexibility, were all mentioned as positive elements in the work environment, reasons why the respondents love working at the university. However, job stress and stressors in the work environment need to be addressed, as well causes of job dissatisfaction.

Therefore, we tried to identify these causes of job stress and job dissatisfaction – this was the second aim of this research. We divide the question in two parts, in order to be able to get a thorough insight in the role of HR-practices in employee wellbeing. We came up with two conclusions concerning this research question: (a) The elements most likely to cause job stress, according to our participants, were workload and time pressures, lack of feedback and uncertainty. These stressors are – what we call – classical stressors: as illustrated, all kinds of previous researches indicate that these factors cause job stress. We did find a few exceptions, among which ‘social support’ took a prominent place. (b) It appears to be that the other aspects of the work environment, namely the HR-practices, are the elements that can cause job dissatisfaction. As we illustrated in this article, perceptions on participation, assessment, reward and support seem to have an impact on job satisfaction of the academic staff. Similarly, Kinman/Jones (2004) concluded that academics are less satisfied with the more extrinsic aspects of their work such as pay, opportunities for promotion and working hours.

Finally, we captivated the suggestions of improvement in the work environment made by the respondents themselves. We noticed that many of the suggested improvements were HR-related, although respondents do not explicitly refer to HRM as a solution. Several examples of these HR-related improvements were mentioned in this article. The resemblance with the theory of Timmerhuis (1998), was very clear: HR-practices within the academic sector are needed in order to meet personal and organisational goals, but they need to fit with the specific character of academic work. Secondly, we found a difference between both categories of respondents: professors often search for solutions within themselves: self discipline and self regulation is very important for them. Assistants on the other hand, emphasize the need for more interdependency among colleagues and they especially ask for more guidance and support.

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