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Editorial introduction: An introduction to employer engagement in the field of HRM. Blending social policy and HRM research in promoting vulnerable groups' labour market participation

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INTRODUCTION

HRM and vulnerable groups

The aim of this special issue, and our challenge to HRM scholars and practitioners, is to bring vulnerable labour market groups into the mainstream of HRM. In doing so, this special issue introduces the relatively novel concept of "employer engagement." We define employer engagement as the active involvement of employers in addressing the societal challenge of promoting the labour market participation of vulnerable groups.

Since its origins in the early 1980s (Paauwe, 2009), the discipline of HRM has focused on the added value of human resources, human capital, and employees. It does so largely with a focus on the HRM of core employees, in terms of high-skill workers, managers, and specialist functions within large multinational companies (Keegan and Boselie, 2006; Lewin, 2011). A focus on the "most valuable employees" is also visible in the emphasis on talent management in strategic HRM theory and practice, with the potential consequence of reproducing distinctions between groups of workers (Lepak and Snell, 2002). Comparatively, HRM in relation to "vulnerable workers" has received modest attention. It has been highlighted in critical management studies (Thompson, 2011) and in publications focusing on specific "vulnerable groups" inside or outside the labour market. Such groups typically include older workers (e.g., Taylor and Walker, 1998), workers in precarious jobs (e.g., Burgess, Connell, and Winterton, 2013), long-term unemployed people (e.g., Deckop, Konrad, Perlmutter, and Freely, 2006), ethnic minorities (e.g., Kamenou and Fearfull, 2006), disabled people and those with long-term health conditions (e.g., Kulkarni, 2016), and groups with other barriers to labour market entry or job retention.

Vulnerable labour market groups represent a large and growing cohort in many countries (OECD, 2013), being adversely impacted by cumulative economic, social, and labour market changes resulting from globalisation and financialisation (Thompson, 2011). Labour market entry is often protracted and difficult for younger workers. At the other end of the age spectrum, increased life expectancy often means working longer and delaying retirement. At

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the same time, workers are increasingly experiencing periods of unemployment or underemployment, as well as interruptions to labour market participation, or reduced work capacity for reasons such as disablement or caring responsibilities. The context of economic recession has also resulted in growing labour market inequalities in terms of wage levels, the "low-pay, no-pay cycle" (periods of short-term, low-paid work followed by periods of joblessness), a rise in the number of zero hours/casualised contracts, and high rates of in-work poverty (Brown and Marsden, 2011; Standing, 2011). This "new reality" for vulnerable workers across the life course poses significant challenges for HRM at the organisational level. These challenges require innovative and interdisciplinary responses and dialogue, and from a societal well-being perspective (Beer, Boselie, and Brewster, 2015), addressing these challenges is in the interest of long-term organisational success.

HRM and social policy

Our starting point for this special issue on "employer engagement" is a focus on active labour market policies (ALMPs). Over the past decades, promoting the employability and labour market participation of groups outside the labour market has increasingly been on the policy agenda of governments in both developed and developing welfare states (e.g., Bonoli, 2013). Policies were introduced that predominantly aim to reduce public expenditure, increase tax receipts, and facilitate "active" citizenship. In the social policy literature, the shift from "passive" policies (with income protection as their main objective) towards "active" labour market policies (aimed at promoting the labour market integration of unemployed and other vulnerable groups) has been analysed extensively (Bonoli, 2013; Hemerijck, 2013; Taylor-Gooby, 2008). Despite their implications for HRM policy and practice, ALMPs have largely been treated as a social and public policy issue, rather than as an HRM policy issue, although there are exceptions (for a U.S. example, see Deckop *et al*., 2006; for a European example, see Devins and Hogarth, 2005). Additionally, although such policies rely on the involvement of employers for their success, little systematic attention has been paid (neither in social policy nor in HRM research) to the role of employers in the recruitment and retention of the people targeted by these policies.

This lack of scientific attention also reflects the emphasis ALMPs put on the supply side, that is, on attempts to prepare target groups for the labour market by increasing their employability and making them "job-ready." Demand-oriented policies have never been fully absent; they exist, for example, in the form of anti-discrimination and quota regulations for disabled people, wage subsidies for the unemployed, and training subsidies for specific sectors. However, only more recently, public initiatives to strengthen the role of employers in promoting the participation of vulnerable labour market groups have been given more prominence. Among others, this has been the case in the United States (Taylor, Carnochan, Pascual, and Austin, 2016), the UK (Ingold and Stuart, 2015), Denmark (Bredgaard, 2017), and the Netherlands (Borghouts-van de Pas and Freese, 2017; Van der Aa and Van Berkel, 2014). One reason for this is the growing recognition that, in order for ALMPs to be effective, employers' involvement is critical. Additionally, governments increasingly rely on "other societal actors" to realise public objectives and values, particularly in the context of economic austerity and increasing government retreat from the provision of services and income protection schemes (e.g., Gilbert, 2002). This necessitates a larger role for employing organisations and, in particular, for the development of HRM policies to address social issues that have previously been externalised to the sphere of public policy. Gradually, scholars have given the role of employers and HRM policies in the ALMP context more attention (Martin and Swank, 2012; Salognon, 2007;

Spoonley, 2008). But as mentioned before, to date, these issues have hardly featured in HRM journals, nor have they been theoretically situated within the HRM literature.

Employer engagement

In this special issue, we introduce the concept of "employer engagement." In the academic literature, earlier conceptualisations of employer engagement are mainly to be found in comparative institutional analyses of employer representation in the design and delivery of public employment programmes (Martin and Swank, 2004). The term has a longer history in policy literature, where it has tended to be used somewhat interchangeably with the terms "employer participation" and "employer involvement" in relation to various government employment and skills initiatives. Notably in the UK, employer engagement has become strongly associated with ALMP evaluations, to describe the degree of interest taken by employers in a particular government policy, programme, or agency (cf. Bellis, Sigala, and Dewson, 2011). In this vein, Ingold and Stuart (2015) have suggested that employer engagement should be understood as enacted not only by employers but also by labour market intermediary agencies, that is, the public or private agencies through which government programmes are typically delivered and employers are engaged. More recently, employer engagement has been conceptualised according to the different roles played by employers depending on varying strategic orientations and conditions. For example, employers may be either "clients" or "co-producers" of public employment programmes (Van der Aa and Van Berkel, 2014). Their form of involvement may vary according to the firm's competitive and HRM strategies (Bredgaard and Halkjær, 2016; McGurk, 2014). Employers have also been categorised according to their attitude towards engagement and their actual engagement behaviour (Bredgaard, 2017). Although, until now, the concept of employer engagement in the context of ALMP seems to be used by European academics mainly, the underlying notion of employers' involvement in this type of policies is also an issue in the United States (Deckop *et al*., 2006; Holzer, Stoll, and Wissoker, 2004; Taylor *et al*., 2016), Australia (see the contribution of Moore *et al*. in this special issue), and Canada (e.g., Westmorland and Williams, 2002).

This special issue problematises further the various manifestations of employer engagement and the conditions under which these may change, defining employer engagement as the active involvement of employers in addressing the societal challenge of promoting the labour market participation of vulnerable groups.

Employer engagement and extant HRM literature

There are some clear links between employer engagement and extant HRM literature. In terms of what motivates employers to engage (or to avoid engagement) with ALMPs and/or to develop HRM policies and practices that support the labour market participation of vulnerable groups, employer engagement can be linked to the literature on the institutional pressures on HRM (Boon, Paauwe, Boselie, and Den Hartog, 2009). According to this theoretical perspective, firms need to respond to government rules and regulations in order to realise social legitimacy (Boxall and Purcell, 2011). However, they can decide how to do so and may develop resistance, conformist, or innovative strategies in order to cope with such pressures (Paauwe and Boselie, 2003). Firms of different organisational forms and across sectors are confronted with a variety of institutional pressures aimed at making HRM decisions more supportive of the labour market participation of vulnerable groups (see, e.g., Didry, 2013; Van der Aa and Van Berkel, 2014). Institutional pressures do not only ensue

from laws that directly compel employers to behave as compliant "corporate citizens." Although employers are regulated to comply with minimum standards, they are also increasingly considered as potential (and voluntary) partners or policy "co-producers" by (supra-)national, regional, or local governments and by agencies involved in implementing ALMPs. Governments can attempt to "entice" employers to become engaged in promoting the labour market participation of vulnerable groups. They may do so, for example, by appealing to private business interests such as increased profits. This would be in line with studies that have argued that vulnerable labour market groups may represent untapped resources that can contribute to organisational success (Ehnert and Harry, 2012; Lengnick-Hall, Gaunt, and Kulkarni, 2008). In addition, governments and government agencies may use "carrots" to entice employers, such as wage subsidies, subsidies for training or coaching, or free HRM services (e.g., in relation to hiring and selection). Such enticement strategies are likely to be more effective when governments and government agencies deploy them based on insight into employers' motivations, preferences, and needs.

Employer engagement in ALMPs may also be motivated by corporate social responsibility concerns. ALMPs aimed at increasing the labour market participation of vulnerable groups can support organisations' own strategies towards building more "diverse" or "inclusive" workplaces. This dovetails with current debates in HRM around increasing workforce diversity (Kulik, 2014), as well as emerging debates around more "inclusive HRM" (Borghouts-van de Pas and Freese, 2017; Offerman and Basford, 2014). For example, in the context of the increasing pressure placed on people with disabilities to reintegrate into the labour market, HRM literature provides valuable insight into how organisations and HRM can be made more inclusive to support the employment of this group (e.g., Kulkarni, 2016; Kulkarni and Lengnick-Hall, 2011). Recruiting and retaining vulnerable groups also link with what has been referred to as the "social" pillar of "sustainable HRM" (Kramar, 2014). In the context of vulnerable labour market groups, the social dimension of the "triple bottom line" has internal and external elements. For employees from vulnerable groups, HRM policies and practices that support income security, well-being, and work-life balance are critical and contribute to broader societal well-being. With regard to external-facing elements, organisations may (in line with their social responsibility strategy) reorient their recruitment to better reflect their customers, or recruit from local communities in which they are based. This way, they provide employment opportunities for disadvantaged groups, as well as support the local economy. In particular sectors (such as retail), social responsibility can also enhance a company's brand and customer loyalty.

Although the institutional context can set the "rules of engagement" for employers, institutional pressures require modification, "translation," or "enactment" (Van Gestel and Nyberg, 2009) at the organisational level into HRM policies and practice. Studies have highlighted that employers' attitudes towards candidates from vulnerable labour market groups tend to be negative, particularly with regard to their perceived (soft) skills, productivity, employability, and work ethic (Devins and Hogarth, 2005; Kitching, 2006). Such studies also emphasise that the employment of vulnerable workers may require adjustments to recruitment and selection practices (Salognon, 2007). But the critical role of HRM in supporting the employment of these groups concerns not only how recruitment and selection processes can (positively or adversely) affect them. It also includes how policies and practice around job design and adjustments (e.g., "job carving"), education and training, job coaching, and work-life balance policies can support retention, work motivation, employee well-being, and future career progression (Deckop *et al*., 2006). In SHRM terms, an "inclusive talent management approach" opens up the scope for focusing not only on organisational effectiveness but also on the talents within each individual employee. Finally, consideration of the organisational level

raises questions concerning the role of HRM practitioners and line managers, linking to current debates around the HRM value chain (cf. Boselie, 2014).

There is also an important potential role for the various agencies responsible for delivering ALMPs. These include the public employment service and other organisations from the public, private, and third sectors. They operate as "intermediaries" between employers and public policies such as ALMPs although studies have pointed out that employers' lack of trust in these intermediaries may constitute a barrier to successful cooperation (Larsen and Vesan, 2012). These agencies can treat employers as "customers" or "clients" (similarly to private recruitment or temporary help agencies) by offering access to an alternative recruitment channel and a larger (and more diverse) pool of labour. Additionally, agencies can provide services that are potentially valuable in reducing costs for employers, such as the provision of free recruitment services (including sifting) or pre-employment training for new workers. This can appeal to business interests by reducing the transaction costs of recruitment and selection—which can be particularly advantageous for small companies without resources such as HRM departments—and can also support companies' social responsibility strategies. In this way, agencies have a potential role to play in modifying companies' HRM policies and practice, in order to facilitate the labour market inclusion of vulnerable groups.

The role of, and relationship between, different business strategies and models, the various types and combinations of institutional pressures (voluntary and coercive), and the range of actors/agencies involved are likely to have a differential impact on employers' motivations to engage in ALMPs.

THE ARTICLES

The four articles in this special issue explore differing dimensions of employer engagement in policies that aim to increase the labour market participation of vulnerable labour market groups. The first article in this special issue, *The social legitimacy of disability inclusive human resource practices: The case of a large retail organisation* by Katherine Moore, Paula McDonald, and Jennifer Bartlett, focuses on how organisations legitimise HRM practices aimed at promoting employment opportunities for people with disabilities. The article draws on a qualitative study of the response of a retail organisation in Australia to "welfare-to-work" reforms aimed at increasing the labour market participation of people with disabilities. The study explores how the organisation sought legitimacy from both the external institutional environment and within the organisation. The article identifies various mechanisms for external social legitimacy, such as building relationships with agencies providing employment services and public reporting. It also highlights tensions in creating institutional fit as a consequence of aligning the social legitimacy and efficiency concerns of the organisation. On the basis of the study, the authors argue that the emphasis on financial incentives in government policies to promote the labour market inclusion of people with disabilities may be less effective than anticipated. They suggest that future research could explore how organisations work together to shape the institutional environment and that further research on how organisations—and in particular HRM practitioners—attempt to gain social legitimacy in response to policy reforms could incorporate the experiences of people with disability.

The second article by Jo Ingold and Danat Valizade takes an internationally comparative approach by reporting a study in two European countries considered pioneers of ALMPs: the UK and Denmark. The article, *Employers' recruitment of disadvantaged groups: Exploring the effect of active labour market programme agencies as labour market intermediaries*, analyses the role of ALMPs in employers' recruitment of various disadvantaged groups: short-term unemployed,

long-term unemployed, single parents, disabled people, and young people. In their study, the authors test the effect of ALMPs against the impact of organisational factors, specifically firm size and selection criteria. The study found that the effect of ALMPs on recruiting disadvantaged groups was rather marginal. In interpreting these results and the failure of ALMPs to mitigate the barriers that organisational factors impose on hiring disadvantaged groups, Ingold and Valizade point to the role that labour market intermediaries adopt in their involvement in organisations' HRM policies. They argue that these intermediaries mainly act as information providers: They provide information about jobseekers to organisations and about vacancies to people looking for a job. Although this role may help to bring disadvantaged jobseekers to the attention of employers, it may be insufficient for the intermediaries to be successful in intervening in organisations' routine recruitment processes. The authors recommend further research into the more extensive involvement of ALMP agencies in organisations' recruitment and selection practices—the so-called "matchmaker" role—including whether this role is more successful in counteracting organisational factors that impede the hiring of disadvantaged jobseekers.

In the third article, Melanie Simms contributes to the academic literature on how organisations respond to institutional pressures, specifically government social policies. Her article, *Understanding employer engagement in youth labour market policy in the UK*, does so in two ways. First, Simms looks for explanations of why employers do or do not become engaged in these policies. In her study, these policies refer to voluntary initiatives promoting apprenticeships for young people. The study identifies two logics that employers use in explaining engagement decisions: on the one hand, HRM logics that relate to the development of staff, planning for future staffing, and skill needs; on the other hand, corporate social responsibility (CSR) logics that relate to organisations' role in wider society. Comparing "engaged" with "less engaged" organisations, the author concludes that engaged organisations acknowledge both the HRM and CSR case for becoming involved in the UK government's apprenticeships initiative, and each logic reinforces the other. Less engaged organisations fail to see an HRM and/or CSR case for becoming involved in the initiative. The second contribution of the article is that it provides evidence that employers not only respond to institutional pressures but also act to influence and shape the institutional context, thus revealing a more dynamic view of how organisations and the institutional context in which they operate interact. The same HRM and CSR logics are at work in the ways in which organisations try to exert influence on the wider institutional context, so policymakers need to acknowledge employers as important actors in this context.

In the final article, Paul Sissons and Anne Green make the case for broadening the scope of studies of employer engagement in promoting the labour market participation of vulnerable groups. Whereas extant research mainly focuses on issues of recruitment and selection, Sissons and Green argue in favour of including issues of retention and progression. The article, *More than a match? Assessing the HRM challenge of engaging employers to support retention and progression*, also points at policy developments in this context: Countries such as the UK have started to place greater emphasis on the sustainability of the employment of vulnerable jobseekers. This shifting policy focus creates different sets of expectations around employer engagement and organisations' HRM activities. The usual focus on pre-employment and employment entry needs to be expanded to include retention and progression. In addition, the authors highlight that "traditional" employer engagement initiatives have focused on sectors where entry barriers are low but that also provide jobs with limited career opportunities. Furthermore, employer engagement in ALMPs is concentrated on short-term needs rather than

long-term commitment, the latter being an important precondition for engagement in issues of retention and progression. At the same time, the authors stress that broadening the scope of employer engagement raises issues for the development of ALMPs across countries, as well as for the agencies delivering and implementing these policies. The authors suggest that employer engagement in ALMPs permits the "opening up" of HRM in order to analyse multidimensional aspects, including how profits and employee well-being can be better balanced.

Together, the four articles in this special issue provide unique and novel insights from both theoretical and empirical (including comparative) perspectives into organisational responses to institutional pressures for employer engagement, the antecedents of employer engagement, and the challenges for policy development and practice in respect of both ALMPs and HRM for vulnerable groups.

FUTURE RESEARCH

This special issue aims to contribute to our knowledge and understanding of the role of employers and of HRM policy and practice in the recruitment and retention of vulnerable labour market groups. Although still a "niche" in HRM research, this research topic can derive inspiration and valuable insights from extant academic literature in a variety of (sub) disciplines, as we argued in the first part of this article. This includes various strands in HRM research, the social and public policy literature, and research in the areas of occupational and vocational rehabilitation. Therefore, we view this as an area for exciting and new systematic multidisciplinary exploration and analysis, with the potential for important theoretical implications for HRM scholarship and for scholarship in other research fields.

Being a novel concept, employer engagement needs further elaboration and refinement in terms of its definition and its operationalisation in order to make it a useful concept in future research. Various scholars writing about employer engagement in the context of ALMPs have pointed at the lack of clarity of the concept. Ingold and Stuart (2015), for example, point out that "employer engagement" can refer to employers as well as to actions and strategies of stakeholders that aim to "engage" employers. Bredgaard (2017) argues that it is necessary to distinguish between motives for engagement, attitudes towards engagement, and actual behaviour reflecting engagement. Of course, this then raises the issue of what types of attitudes and behaviour are considered relevant when studying employer engagement. Interestingly, the debate about defining and operationalising employer engagement has some clear parallels in debates about the definition and measurement of employee engagement (Macey and Schneider, 2008; Saks and Gruman, 2014) that therefore may provide inspiration.

As the articles in the special issue make clear, various questions can be raised about the ways in which employer engagement can be encouraged (or discouraged), its impact on HRM policies and practices, and its effects on recruiting and retaining vulnerable workers. In trying to summarise these questions, an analogy can be drawn with Appelbaum, Bailey, Berg, and Kalleberg's (2000) well-known AMO-model for explaining employees' performance. Firstly, in order to become engaged in promoting the (sustainable) labour market participation of vulnerable groups, employers need to be motivated. The articles in this special issue point at the variety of motivations (or "logics") and their mutual relations that may be at stake, including economic, HRM, "business case," CSR, and social legitimacy motives (also see Bredgaard and Halkjær, 2016). In addition, employers' motives are likely to vary, not only in different countries and within different institutional settings and "varieties of capitalism" but also between, among others, different branches of industry. Secondly, employers and HRM

practitioners require abilities to become engaged. Even when they are willing, they may not know what HRM policies and practices are needed to promote the productive and social inclusion of vulnerable groups in their organisation. HRM practitioners are often not familiar with vulnerable groups and the specific HRM needs that they may have (e.g., Deckop *et al*., 2006). This may prevent a positive attitude towards engagement from resulting in actual engagement or, if it does, from resulting in successful and sustainable placements of people from vulnerable groups in organisations. Thus, employer engagement is not only a matter of motivation, even though this has had considerable attention in the literature on employers' responses to ALMP. It is also a matter of leveraging, or having access to, expertise about effective and successful recruitment and retention strategies. Finally, perceived opportunities are relevant in employer engagement decisions. These refer to organisational opportunities (such as the nature of work and structure of jobs in organisations), market, and labour market opportunities. They also refer to opportunities provided through, among others, social policies and labour market intermediaries (Devins and Hogarth, 2005; Westmorland and Williams, 2002). In the context of ALMP, this includes the policy instruments that governments develop to support and incentivise employers, such as wage subsidies, measures that reduce risks for employers in hiring vulnerable groups, support in hiring and selecting employees from vulnerable groups, support in coaching employees from vulnerable groups (e.g., job coaches; see Storey, 2003), and advice on job design and "inclusive HRM." How these factors affect employer engagement and how they are interrelated are interesting topics for future research.

Within SHRM, "hard" and firm-oriented approaches pay little attention to either inclusiveness or to the multiple stakeholders that are important dimensions of employer engagement. Future research could focus on how external stakeholders can influence the AMO factors in ways that are conducive to promoting employer engagement. First of all, of course, there is the "public domain" of government policies and the services provided by labour market intermediaries and other public or private agencies delivering ALMPs. As was mentioned in the first part of this article, the (combination of) policy instruments—including "enforcing" and "enticing" instruments (Vedung, 1998)—that governments and agencies use, are an interesting area of future research. This concerns especially the impact that policy instruments have on employers' willingness, abilities, and opportunities to become engaged in promoting the labour market participation of vulnerable groups. This is an issue that all articles in this special issue touch upon (see, e.g., Ingold and Valizade's discussion of the roles of intermediaries). Whereas this type of research has, to date, mainly focused on "hard law" (such as quota or anti-discrimination legislation), looking at a broader set of policy instruments and ALMP delivery practices, and the effects they have on employers and HRM policies and practice, pre-eminently is a research area where HRM and social policy researchers could collaborate.

Apart from governments and ALMP agencies, other stakeholders play a role in affecting employers' motivations, abilities, and opportunities to become engaged as well. Employers' associations, trade unions, and regional or local networks of employers have until now received little attention in this context (Martin and Swank, 2012) but may be effective promotors of employer engagement. On the one hand, compared to public agents and agencies, these stakeholders may meet less resistance and lack of trust among employers. On the other hand, they may act as policy mediators: not only by "downloading" government policies to organisations but also by "uploading" employers' experiences and needs to public policy makers (see Simms' article in this special issue).

Against the background of this general framework of employers' motivations, abilities, and opportunities and the role of stakeholders in influencing these (proposed) antecedents of employer engagement, a variety of more specific research questions can be formulated. What is

the "value proposition" for employer engagement: How important is the public-value versus the economic perspective? What institutional, organisational, and industry characteristics impact on the success of employer engagement initiatives and firms' propensities to adopt HRM policies and practices that support the recruitment and retention of vulnerable groups? How do different configurations of public actors (governments and public agencies) and social partners (employer associations and networks and trade unions) affect employer engagement and HRM decisions that support the recruitment and retention of vulnerable groups? As this phenomenon takes place in various "welfare state regimes" and "varieties of capitalism" (see, e.g., Schröder, 2013), how can we comparatively and meaningfully research this area?

We hope that this special issue will inspire researchers in the HRM community to investigate these and other research questions in the area of employer engagement. In addition, we hope that it will contribute to bridging the gaps between the various (sub)disciplines that investigate employers' roles and responsibilities in promoting the labour market participation of vulnerable groups.

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