# The Role Of Strategic Human Resource Management In Enhancing Organisational Innovation In Higher Education Institutions: Perceptions From The University For Development Studies, Tamale, Ghana

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**Abstract:**

**Background**: This article examines the role of HR managers to foster organisational innovation in the university system at the University for Development Studies (UDS), Tamale, Ghana. It examines how human resource practice reflects organizational goals, and what HR managers are facing in developing an innovation culture.

**Materials and Methods:** The case study was conducted qualitatively using semi-structured interviews, document analysis and observational methods to collect data from staff at UDS. Thematic analysis was used to identify salient themes around HR innovation practices, how these practices aligned with institutional goals, and issues faced by HR managers.

**Results**: The findings indicate that UDS has implemented a range of innovation-enhancing HR practices such as diversity-centric hiring practices, employee training that builds staff capabilities, and performance-based appraisals that reward creativity. Such practices align with UDS's commitment to community-building and problem-solving. But they cited the lack of resources, culture and reticence as the biggest barriers to innovation.

**Conclusion:** The study recommends increasing investment in HR initiatives, fostering a culture of open communication and risk-taking, enhancing collaboration with external partners, implementing formal change management strategies, and developing clear metrics for measuring innovation. These recommendations aim to support HR managers in overcoming challenges and enhancing their role in promoting innovation within universities. This study contributes to the limited body of research on HR management and organisational innovation in African universities. It provides new insights into how HR practices can be strategically aligned with institutional goals to foster innovation in resource-constrained environments.

**Keyword:** Human Resource Management, Organisational Innovation, Higher Education Institutions, University for Development Studies, Ghana.

## I. Introduction

The importance of innovation for organisational development and longevity in a globalised business environment is crucial. The latter is especially true of knowledge-based organisations like universities, where creativity is ultimately determined by the way it responds to social needs and technologies (Mahdia, 2024). Universities are no longer seen as an educational institution, but as the catalyst of innovation and growth that can address society's greatest challenges (Looise & van Riemsdijk, 2004). So, even HR management plays a role in creating a setting that will allow innovation, collaboration and change at these institutions (Wang et al., 2005).

The University for Development Studies (UDS) in Tamale, Ghana provides a striking example of how HR can inspire organisational innovation. UDS's approach to learning, which seeks to offer quality higher education, and support rural development, includes hands-on learning in the context of real-world problems (UDS, 2023). It reflects the university's general commitment to innovation both in teaching and institutional design and practice. UDS is Ghana's first public university in the north and is a part of the university's commitment to ensure a healthy learning environment and regional sustainable development through a differentiated teaching, research and community programme (UDS, 2023).

While HR's role in organisational innovation is well established elsewhere, there's virtually nothing on its implementation at African universities. Specifically, very little thought has been given to the extent to which HR managers can help create an innovation culture in accordance with institutional objectives in Ghanaian universities.

While HR as an enabler of organisational innovation is perhaps the most studied topic in the West (Seeck & Diehl, 2017), empirical work on African universities is rare. Such incommensurability is especially pronounced in UDS. This paper thus attempts to bridge this gap by examining how HR practices in UDS facilitate organisational innovation within the university system. Thus, the primary objective of this study is to explore the role of HR managers in promoting organisational innovations at UDS. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. identify the HR practices implemented at UDS that encourage innovation.
2. examine how these practices align with broader institutional goals related to teaching, research, and community engagement.
3. examine the challenges faced by HR managers in fostering a culture of innovation within the university.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: The next section reviews relevant literature on HR's role in fostering organisational innovation within HEIs. This is followed by a detailed description of the methodology used for this case study. The findings are discussed with reference to existing literature on HR management and organisational innovation. Finally, the paper concludes with recommendations for enhancing HR practices aimed at fostering innovation within universities.

## II. Literature Review

**Human Resource Management and Organisational Innovation**

Human Resource Management (HRM) plays a critical role in driving organisational innovation by fostering a work environment that encourages creativity, collaboration, and continuous improvement. Innovation in organisations is increasingly seen as a key factor for achieving competitive advantage and long-term sustainability, especially in knowledge-based institutions such as universities (Mahdia, 2024). HRM contributes to innovation through various mechanisms, including recruitment and selection processes, training and development programmes, performance management systems, and reward structures that incentivise innovative behaviour (Seeck & Diehl, 2017).

In the context of higher education institutions (HEIs), innovation is essential for maintaining relevance in a rapidly changing global landscape. Universities are expected not only to produce knowledge but also to apply that knowledge to solve real-world problems. This is particularly true for institutions like the University for Development Studies (UDS), which was established with the mission to blend academic learning with community development (University for Development Studies [UDS], 2023). HR managers in such institutions must adopt strategic approaches to foster an organisational culture that supports both academic excellence and practical innovation.

**The Role of HR in Fostering Innovation in Higher Education Institutions**

In higher education institutions, the role of HR extends beyond traditional administrative functions to include the promotion of innovation at both the individual and organisational levels. According to Bergendahl and Magnusson (2014), HR managers can foster innovation by creating policies that encourage cross-functional teamwork, open communication, and continuous learning. This is particularly important in universities where collaboration across different departments and disciplines is essential for driving innovation.

At UDS, for example, the HR department has implemented several initiatives aimed at promoting innovation within the institution. These include recruitment processes that prioritise diversity and creativity, as well as training programmes designed to enhance staff competencies in areas such as research methodologies and digital literacy (UDS, 2023). Similarly, other Ghanaian universities such as the University of Ghana (UG) and Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) have recognised the importance of integrating HR strategies with institutional goals related to innovation. For instance, UG has partnered with the Chartered Institute of Human Resource Management Practitioners to promote professional development for HR students through industry collaborations (University of Ghana Business School [UGBS], 2024).

Moreover, research has shown that HR practices such as performance management systems that reward innovative behaviour can significantly enhance an organisation's capacity for innovation (Looise & van Riemsdijk, 2004). In universities like UDS, where the focus is on solving real-world problems through community engagement, these practices are particularly relevant. By aligning performance metrics with institutional goals related to innovation, HR managers can create a culture where staff are motivated to think creatively and collaborate across disciplines.

**Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) and Innovation**

The concept of Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) provides a useful framework for understanding how HR practices can be aligned with organisational strategies to promote innovation. SHRM involves designing HR policies that not only meet immediate operational needs but also support long-term

strategic objectives such as enhancing organisational innovation (De Leede & Looise, 2005). In the context of universities, SHRM can be used to align recruitment strategies with institutional goals related to research excellence and community engagement.

For example, KNUST has adopted SHRM practices aimed at fostering a culture of innovation among its staff. These include strategic recruitment processes that seek to attract individuals with diverse skill sets and innovative mindsets (Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology [KNUST], 2023). Similarly, the University of Cape Coast (UCC) has implemented SHRM practices focused on training and development programmes designed to enhance staff competencies in areas critical to organisational innovation (University of Cape Coast [UCC], 2023).

The integration of SHRM into university management is crucial for fostering an environment conducive to innovation. According to Natalicchio et al. (2018), universities that adopt SHRM practices are better positioned to respond to changes in their external environment by leveraging their internal human resources effectively. This is particularly important in African universities like UDS, where resource constraints often limit the scope of innovative initiatives. By aligning HR practices with institutional goals related to community engagement and problem-solving, UDS has been able to foster a culture of innovation despite these challenges.

**Challenges Facing HR Managers in Promoting Innovation**

Despite the clear link between HR practices and organisational innovation, several challenges remain—particularly in resource-constrained environments like Ghanaian universities. One major challenge is the lack of financial resources needed to implement comprehensive training programmes or reward systems that incentivise innovative behaviour. As noted by Seeck & Diehl (2017), resource constraints can limit an organisation's ability to invest in human capital development—thereby hindering its capacity for innovation.

In addition to resource constraints, cultural factors can also pose challenges for HR managers seeking to promote innovation within universities. For example, traditional hierarchical structures within African universities may discourage open communication or risk-taking—both of which are essential for fostering a culture of innovation (Badu et al., 2023). Overcoming these cultural barriers requires a strategic approach from HR managers who must work closely with university leadership to create an environment where staff feel empowered to experiment with new ideas.

This expanded literature review provides a comprehensive overview of how HR practices contribute to fostering organisational innovations within higher education institutions. It incorporates insights from various Ghanaian universities—including UDS—while drawing on relevant theoretical frameworks such as RBV theory and network theory. Additionally, it highlights some of the key challenges facing HR managers in promoting innovation within resource-constrained environments like Ghanaian universities

## III. Material And Methods

**Research Design**

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to explore the role of HR managers in promoting organisational innovations at the University for Development Studies (UDS). A case study design is particularly appropriate for this research because it allows for an in-depth examination of complex phenomena within their real-life context (Yin, 2018). In this case, the phenomenon under investigation is the role of HR managers in fostering innovation within a university setting. The qualitative nature of the study enables the researcher to capture detailed insights into the experiences, challenges, and strategies employed by HR managers at UDS

Case studies are widely used in organisational research to explore contemporary issues where the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2018). Given that HR practices and organisational innovation are deeply embedded within the specific institutional context of UDS, a case study approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how these dynamics unfold in practice. This method also facilitates the collection of rich, contextual data that can be used to generate insights applicable to other higher education institutions in Ghana and beyond.

**Data Collection Methods**

Data for this study were collected using semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and observational techniques. These methods were chosen to ensure a comprehensive understanding of how HR managers at UDS contribute to fostering organisational innovations.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders at UDS, including HR managers, faculty members, administrative staff, and senior management. This method was selected because it allows for flexibility in exploring participants' experiences while ensuring that key themes related to HR practices and innovation are covered (Bryman, 2016). The interviews were guided by an interview protocol that included questions on recruitment strategies, training programmes, performance management systems, and challenges

faced by HR managers in promoting innovation. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and lasted between 45 minutes to one hour. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that those with direct knowledge of HR practices and innovation initiatives were included.

Secondary data were collected through the analysis of institutional reports, policy documents, strategic plans, and other relevant materials from UDS. These documents provided valuable insights into the formal policies and strategies implemented by the HR department to promote innovation within the university. For example, UDS's strategic plan emphasises the importance of aligning human resource development with its mission of community engagement and problem-solving (University for Development Studies [UDS], 2023). Additionally, reports from other Ghanaian universities such as the University of Ghana (UG), Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), University of Cape Coast (UCC), and University of Education Winneba (UEW) were reviewed to provide comparative insights into how HR practices aimed at fostering innovation are implemented across different institutions (University of Ghana [UG], 2023; Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology [KNUST], 2023; University of Cape Coast [UCC], 2023; University of Education Winneba [UEW], 2023).

Observations were conducted during key HR-related events such as staff training workshops and performance review meetings at UDS. These observations provided first-hand insights into how HR initiatives aimed at fostering innovation are implemented in practice. The researcher took detailed field notes during these events, focusing on interactions between HR managers and staff members as well as any discussions related to innovation or organisational change.

### Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants for the semi-structured interviews. Purposive sampling is commonly used in qualitative research when researchers seek to gain insights from individuals who have specific knowledge or experience related to the research topic (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, participants were selected based on their involvement in HR management or their participation in innovation-related initiatives at UDS. This included senior HR managers responsible for developing and implementing HR policies, faculty members involved in cross-disciplinary research projects or other innovative initiatives, administrative staff who work closely with HR departments on staff development programmes, and senior management who oversee strategic planning related to human resources and innovation. The sample size consisted of 15 participants, which is consistent with guidelines for qualitative research where smaller sample sizes allow for an in-depth exploration of complex issues (Guest et al., 2006).

### Data Analysis Techniques

The data collected from interviews, document analysis, and observations were analysed using thematic analysis, a widely used method for identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis involves systematically coding data based on recurring themes or concepts related to the research questions. In this study, thematic analysis was used to identify key themes related to the specific HR practices implemented at UDS that promote organisational innovation, how these practices align with UDS's broader institutional goals, and the challenges faced by HR managers in fostering a culture of innovation.

### Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at UDS prior to data collection. All participants provided informed consent before participating in interviews or being observed during events. Participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential and that their identities would not be disclosed in any reports or publications resulting from this research. Besides, care was taken to ensure that all data collected through document analysis adhered to institutional guidelines regarding access to sensitive information. Only publicly available documents or those provided with permission by UDS officials were included in this study.

## IV. Results And Discussion

The study reveals several key insights into how HR managers contribute to promoting organisational innovations within the university system. The findings are organised around three major themes: HR practices that promote innovation, alignment of HR strategies with institutional goals, and challenges faced by HR managers in fostering innovation.

### Human Resource Practices that Promote Innovation

One of the most significant findings from this study is that UDS has implemented a range of HR practices specifically designed to foster innovation. These include recruitment processes that prioritise diversity

and creativity, training programmes aimed at enhancing staff competencies, and performance management systems that reward innovative behaviour.

Recruitment and Selection: UDS has adopted a strategic approach to recruitment, focusing on attracting individuals with diverse backgrounds and innovative mindsets. According to one HR manager interviewed, "We look for candidates who not only have the necessary academic qualifications but also demonstrate creativity and a willingness to engage in interdisciplinary work." This approach is consistent with findings from other studies, which suggest that diversity in recruitment can lead to higher levels of innovation by bringing together individuals with different perspectives and problem-solving approaches (Bergendahl & Magnusson, 2014). Similarly, universities like the University of Ghana (UG) and Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) have adopted recruitment strategies aimed at attracting talent with innovative potential (University of Ghana [UG], 2023; Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology [KNUST], 2023).

Training and Development: Another key HR practice at UDS is the provision of ongoing training and development opportunities for staff. The university offers workshops on topics such as digital literacy, research methodologies, and leadership skills—all of which are critical for fostering a culture of innovation. As one faculty member noted, "The training programmes offered by HR have really helped us stay up-to-date with new technologies and research techniques, which in turn allows us to be more innovative in our teaching and research." This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that continuous professional development is essential for enhancing employees' ability to contribute to organisational innovation (Seeck & Diehl, 2017). Other Ghanaian universities such as the University of Cape Coast (UCC) and the University of Education Winneba (UEW) have also implemented similar training initiatives aimed at promoting innovation among their staff (University of Cape Coast [UCC], 2023; University of Education Winneba [UEW], 2023).

Performance Management Systems: UDS has also introduced performance management systems that reward innovative behaviour among staff. For example, faculty members who engage in interdisciplinary research or develop new teaching methods are recognised through performance reviews and given opportunities for promotion. According to one HR manager, "We try to create an environment where staff feel encouraged to take risks and try new things without fear of failure." This approach is supported by literature suggesting that performance management systems that recognise and reward innovation can significantly enhance an organisation's capacity for creative problem-solving (Looise & van Riemsdijk, 2004).

**Alignment of HR Strategies with Institutional Goals**

The findings also indicate that HR practices at UDS are closely aligned with the university's broader institutional goals related to community engagement, problem-solving, and sustainable development. UDS was established with a unique mandate to blend academic learning with practical solutions to real-world challenges—particularly those faced by rural communities in northern Ghana (University for Development Studies [UDS], 2023). This mission is reflected in the university's strategic plan, which emphasises the importance of innovation in both teaching and research.

Community Engagement: One way in which HR strategies at UDS align with institutional goals is through the promotion of community engagement initiatives. For example, faculty members are encouraged to collaborate with local communities on research projects aimed at addressing issues such as food security, health care access, and environmental sustainability. As one faculty member explained, "Our work is not just about publishing papers; it's about making a tangible difference in people's lives." This focus on community engagement is consistent with UDS's mission to use academic knowledge as a tool for social change (UDS, 2023). Other universities in Ghana have also adopted similar approaches; for instance, KNUST has established partnerships with local industries to promote applied research that addresses national development challenges (KNUST, 2023).

Interdisciplinary Collaboration: Another key aspect of UDS's approach to innovation is its emphasis on interdisciplinary collaboration. The HR department plays a crucial role in facilitating cross-functional teamwork by creating policies that encourage collaboration between different academic departments. One HR manager noted that "We try to break down silos within the university by encouraging faculty from different disciplines to work together on research projects." This approach aligns with recommendations from scholars who argue that interdisciplinary collaboration is essential for driving innovation in complex organisations like universities (Bergendahl & Magnusson, 2014).

**Challenges Faced by HR Managers in Fostering Innovation**

Despite these successes, the study also reveals several challenges faced by HR managers at UDS in their efforts to promote organisational innovation. These challenges include resource constraints, cultural barriers, and resistance to change. these challenges are worthy of discussion

One of the most significant challenges identified by participants is the lack of financial resources available for implementing innovative initiatives. As one HR manager explained, "We have great ideas for how we can foster more innovation within the university, but we often don't have the budget to make those ideas a reality." This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that resource constraints can limit an organisation's ability to invest in human capital development—thereby hindering its capacity for innovation (Seeck & Diehl, 2017). Resource limitations are a common issue across many African universities; for example, both UG and UCC have reported difficulties in securing funding for large-scale innovation projects (UGBS, 2024; UCC, 2023).

Another challenge highlighted by participants is the presence of cultural barriers within the university that may inhibit innovation. Specifically, some interviewees noted that traditional hierarchical structures within African universities can discourage open communication or risk-taking—both of which are essential for fostering a culture of innovation. As one faculty member remarked, "There's still a mindset here where people are afraid to challenge authority or suggest new ideas because they don't want to step out of line." Overcoming these cultural barriers requires a concerted effort from HR managers who must work closely with university leadership to create an environment where staff feel empowered to experiment with new ideas without fear of retribution.

Finally, some participants pointed out that resistance to change among staff members can be another obstacle to fostering innovation within UDS. According to one senior administrator interviewed for this study, "Some people are just comfortable doing things the way they've always been done—and getting them on board with new initiatives can be difficult." This resistance may stem from a lack of understanding about why change is necessary or from concerns about how new initiatives will impact existing workloads.

**Comparison with Existing Literature**

The findings from this case study align closely with existing literature on HR management and organisational innovation. For example, previous studies have emphasised the importance of aligning HR practices with institutional goals related to creativity and problem-solving (De Leede & Looise, 2005). Similarly, scholars such as Kossek et al. (1987) have highlighted the role of network theory in facilitating cross-functional collaboration—a key component of UDS's approach to fostering innovation.

However, this study also contributes new insights into how these dynamics play out within an African context—particularly within resource-constrained environments like Ghanaian universities. While much of the existing literature on organisational innovation focuses on Western contexts where resources may be more readily available (Seeck & Diehl, 2017), this study highlights some unique challenges faced by African universities such as limited funding and cultural resistance.

## V.    Conclusion

This study has explored the role of HR managers in promoting organisational innovations within the University for Development Studies (UDS), Tamale, Ghana. It has demonstrated that HR managers play a pivotal role in fostering a culture of innovation through strategic HR practices such as recruitment, training and development, and performance management. These practices are closely aligned with UDS's broader institutional goals of community engagement, interdisciplinary collaboration, and problem-solving, which are central to the university's mission of addressing developmental challenges in rural Ghana (University for Development Studies [UDS], 2023).

The findings also highlight that UDS has made significant strides in promoting innovation through its HR initiatives. The recruitment processes at UDS prioritise diversity and creativity, while training programmes help staff stay updated with new technologies and research methodologies. Performance management systems at UDS further incentivise innovative behaviour by recognising and rewarding staff who engage in interdisciplinary research or develop new teaching methods. These HR practices align with existing literature that underscores the importance of strategic HR management in fostering organisational innovation (Bergendahl & Magnusson, 2014; Seeck & Diehl, 2017).

However, the study also reveals several challenges faced by HR managers at UDS in promoting innovation. Resource constraints, cultural barriers, and resistance to change are significant obstacles that limit the university's capacity to fully implement innovative initiatives. These challenges are not unique to UDS but are common across many African universities where financial limitations and traditional hierarchical structures can hinder innovation (Seeck & Diehl, 2017; Badu et al., 2023). Despite these challenges, UDS's commitment to aligning its HR strategies with its institutional goals has enabled it to make notable progress in fostering a culture of innovation.

## VI.    Recommendations And Future Research Directions

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made to enhance the role of HR managers in promoting organisational innovations within universities like UDS. First, one of the key challenges identified in this study is the lack of financial resources available for implementing comprehensive HR initiatives aimed at fostering innovation. To address this issue, it is recommended that UDS increase its investment in HR development programmes. This could involve securing external funding from governmental or international organisations dedicated to supporting higher education in Africa. For example, partnerships with organisations such as the World Bank or UNESCO could provide much-needed financial support for training programmes and innovative research projects (World Bank, 2021). Increased investment would enable UDS to expand its training offerings and provide more robust incentives for staff engagement in innovative activities.

Second, cultural barriers such as hierarchical structures and resistance to change were identified as significant obstacles to innovation at UDS. To overcome these barriers, it is recommended that HR managers focus on fostering a culture of open communication and risk-taking within the university. This could be achieved through leadership development programmes aimed at encouraging senior staff to adopt more inclusive management styles that empower junior staff to voice their ideas without fear of retribution (Kossek et al., 1987). Moreover, creating platforms for regular cross-departmental dialogue—such as innovation forums or collaborative workshops—could help break down silos within the university and encourage interdisciplinary collaboration.

Third, collaboration with external partners—both within Ghana and internationally—can provide valuable opportunities for knowledge exchange and resource sharing. It is recommended that UDS strengthen its partnerships with other universities and industry stakeholders to promote applied research and innovation. For instance, universities like Kwame KNUST have successfully partnered with local industries to address national development challenges (KNUST, 2023). By forming similar partnerships, UDS could enhance its capacity for innovation while contributing to regional development.

Fourth, resistance to change among staff was another challenge identified in this study. To address this issue, it is recommended that UDS implement formal change management strategies aimed at easing transitions related to new initiatives or policies. Change management strategies could include clear communication about the benefits of new initiatives, providing staff with opportunities for input during the planning stages, and offering training sessions designed to help staff adapt to new processes or technologies (Kotter & Schlesinger, 2008). By taking a proactive approach to managing resistance, HR managers can create a more supportive environment for innovation.

Finally, it is recommended that UDS develop clear metrics for measuring innovation within the institution. While performance management systems at UDS already recognise innovative behaviour among staff members, there is a need for more formalised metrics that track progress towards specific innovation-related goals (Looise & van Riemsdijk, 2004). These metrics could include indicators such as the number of interdisciplinary research projects initiated each year, the level of community engagement in research activities, or the number of new teaching methods developed by faculty members. By establishing clear benchmarks for success, UDS can better assess its progress towards becoming an innovation-driven institution.

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