



**BRITISH ACADEMY  
OF MANAGEMENT**

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**BAM**  
CONFERENCE

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**3RD-5TH SEPTEMBER**

**ASTON UNIVERSITY BIRMINGHAM UNITED KINGDOM**

This paper is from the BAM2019 Conference Proceedings

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# **Austerity Policies: A Systematic Review of Organisational Responses to Work and Employment Relations**

## **Abstract**

This systematic review on the responses that organisations make to the effect of austerity provides an insight on the various actions that organisations take to ensure the sustenance of their activities in period of austerity. Organisations respond to the effects of austerity in different ways. While some take advantage of the economic environment to increase the workload of employees with little or no engagement with employees, others encourage dialogue by increasing employee and union engagement. There is however no study that examines the effect of employee and union involvement (conceptualised in this study as employee voice). Thus, suggesting the novelty of this study.

## **Keywords**

Austerity policies, employee voice, union engagement, organisation, systematic review

**Word count- 2874**

**Running title: Austerity policies and employee relations in UK and Ireland**

## **Introduction**

The effects of the 2008-2009 financial crisis were severe for the United Kingdom (UK) and Ireland (Lane, 2011, Hodson and Quaglia, 2009). Both countries experienced a significant decline in their real gross domestic product (GDP) which also affected the public finance levels (Stanley, 2016). As it was with other Western states, UK and Ireland had widening fiscal deficits and ballooning sovereign debts. This required an urgent political intervention in order to lessen the pressures of the crisis (Thompson, 2013). In response, the governments of UK and Ireland introduced fiscal consolidation plans which brought about austerity that was characterised by increase in taxes and spending cuts (Stanley, 2016).

The challenges of austerity still persist (Addabbo et al., 2018). Local authorities are struggling to provide social care services, there is decline in wages and high rate of unemployment (Addabbo et al., 2018). Thus, the 2019 BAM theme 'Building and Sustaining High Performance Organisations during Uncertain Times: Challenges and Opportunities' could not have come at a better time. Many scholars have increasingly become interested in the effect of uncertain times by studying how organisations in the public and private sector have responded to spending cuts. For example, how work and employment is transformed (Roche and Teague, 2012), work life balance, the implementation of policies aimed at engendering gender and pay equality (Gregory et al., 2013, Conley, 2012). The authors of this review are not aware of a study that has examined how organisational responses to uncertain times as exemplified by austerity may affect employee relations.

In contributing to the understanding of how organisations have been sustained through the period of uncertainty caused by austerity, this paper presents a systematic review of organisational and employee responses to work and employment relations due to austerity policies. The structure of this paper is presented as follows: first, the paper presents a literature review. Second, the method used to undertake this systematic review is presented. Third, results from the themes from the literature review will be presented. Lastly discussions, limitations and conclusions are presented at the end.

## **Literature review**

The Great Recession materialized as a financial crisis in the USA in 2008/09 after the default of financial giant, Lehman Brothers, generating a seismic wave in realty markets and intensifying the derived mortgage market crisis (Végh, 2014). The high level of loan defaults led to a drop in the value of mortgages supported by securities. Several of these mortgages were traded in EU nations, hence the crisis swiftly migrated to Europe and eventually became a worldwide issue (Parnell et al., 2017). Ireland was declared to be in a recession in the last quarter of 2008, while Britain was authoritatively confirmed to be in a recession in the first quarter of 2009. This occurred after the Office for National Statistics (ONS) declared that the initial estimation of GDP indicated a drop of 1.5% in the fourth quarter of 2008, having dropped by 0.6% in the third quarter (Vaitilingam, 2009).

Beginning in 2009, many EU nations began applying constricting policies, giving reduced significance to social concerns while shouldering the risk of slow economic growth and unemployment (Végh, 2014). The philosophy of austerity gradually developed against the framework of suggestions from authorities who opposed Keynesian finances, and became the central method for several governments for steering their country out of recession (Parnell et

al., 2018). Austerity, here, refers to a system of economic discipline where governments make substantial reductions to public expenditure in order to reduce public debt. Blyth (2013) defines austerity as a method of controlled deflation whereby an economy adapts to the reduction of public spending, prices and income, the aim being to reinstate competitiveness. This approach became the symbol of the time for the UK and Ireland.

In response to the debt (real and perceived) acquired by the preceding Labour administration, the Coalition Government in the UK commenced significant cuts to public expenditure, adopting several austerity procedures in its 'Comprehensive Spending Review', which delineated £81 billion worth of cuts to government units (Parnell et al., 2018). The austerity procedures were accomplished through a number of measures including spending cuts (85% of the total austerity plan) and tax increases (15%). Public expenditure was condensed on a national level, and reduced by about £245 per capita (2.2%) between 2009 and 2011, making the UK's austerity plan one of the largest in Europe (Reeves et al., 2013). As at 2013, over three years after the initiation of austerity measures, public spending had been reduced by about £64 billion (Parnell et al., 2018). Ireland also experienced a combination of spending cuts and tax increases amounting to over 21 per cent of the national income – GNP (FitzGerald, 2015).

The politics of austerity resulted in reductions to social services, exacerbated wage and benefit concessions, and increases in unpaid labour (Fanelli and Brogan, 2014). Collective bargaining rights in the public sector became somewhat restricted amid hardening repressive and disciplinary state machineries. Success, for labour, became about regulating the degree of concessions in their several forms. While flexible economic policies have been significantly constricted since the recession, with little contribution to growth from 2010/11 to 2012/13, the course has gradually begun to reverse in both countries. Yet the pre-recession levels of affluence have not been achieved, and EU nations may not experience a return to normalcy or complete economic recovery for a while (Végh, 2014). The UK's 'Brexit' vote to leave Europe has also been associated with current austerity measures given that it has aided in constructing political isolation and separation of the country from other nations (Bachmann and Sidaway, 2016).

A significant body of research has begun to develop in relation to the measure, pace and structure of the adjustments made to public expenditure (Hastings et al., 2015, Clifford, 2017), exploring the impact these changes have had on the living standards of the population (McKnight et al., 2015). Public management research has largely explored the significance of austerity measures and attempted to clarify the most adequate procedures and tactics for improving public services. However, research has rarely explored the effects of such measures on the job-holders who are ultimately responsible for delivering said public services (Kiefer et al., 2014). This constitutes a vital oversight. This paper aims to investigate the effects of austerity measures on employees. It deals with the issue of 'austerity' and explores what it means for the workforce.

## **Methodology**

### *Article selection criteria*

The articles examined in this systematic review were chosen from the Association of Business School (ABS) ranked journals 3- and 4-star journals. 14 human resource and employment relations journals were examined. The rationale for this was to determine the extent to which human resource and employment relations scholars were engaging in the issue of austerity policies and its impact on work and employment relations. A total of 256 articles were examined in this study.

### *Study design*

This systematic review only used articles that undertook empirical investigations in the final analysis. Empirical investigations using both quantitative and qualitative approach were included among the articles investigated. The examined studies did not include review papers. The reason for this was to ensure that the findings from this investigation were premised on research with direct evidence from employees, organisations and other relevant stakeholders. This suggests that although no field data was collected for this study, the analysis and findings were premised on evidence-based principles.

### *Sources of data and search strategy*

The search strategy used for this study included phrases that were related to austerity. Such terms were classified as the intervention (austerity, stringent financial policies and recession). It also described the outcome (employment relations, employee morale, engagement, enthusiasm and commitment). Context was also an important consideration in the criteria as the study focused on the UK and Ireland. Thus, studies using Ireland, UK, England and United Kingdom were included in the search. See Table 1.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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### *Selection of studies*

In line with the above article selection criteria, first, titles were screened resulting in the exclusion of some papers. Further screening was done based on abstract review. The articles that were left following the abstract review was sourced from a UK University online library data base (Locate). Eight articles were finally chosen for this systematic review following the access to the article text in full. See Figure 1 for article section criteria.

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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## **Results**

Results from the search of databases mentioned earlier provided 256 articles that were considered potentially viable. In line with the article selection criteria, eight articles were identified that had empirically investigated the implications of austerity for work and employment relations in the UK and Ireland. The range of dates were 2003 for the earliest and 2017 for the most recent. The studies had different study designs, participants and settings and used a wide range of approach including qualitative, quantitative and mixed method. See Table 2 for summary of the selected articles.

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### **Discussions on key findings**

This systematic review provides some findings that are significant. There is a possibility that it may be among the first of such systematic reviews to examine the extent to which scholars have paid attention to the implications of austerity policies on work and employment relations in the UK and Ireland. The studies included in this review were conducted at different periods from 2003 to 2017 and consistently suggested that austerity policies had severe consequences on work and employment relations. Some of the themes derived from this review are as follows:

#### *Increased influence of HR managers*

Findings from this review showed that during the period of austerity, organisations depended more on the expertise of human resource managers to manage work and employment relation (Roche and Teague, 2014).

#### *Consultation with union representatives*

Some unionised organisations increased the participation of union representatives in the decisions on work and employment relations (Roche and Teague, 2014). This ensured that there were no disruptions in the business activities as the union leaders were able to explain the situation of the organisation to their members (Schmidt et al., 2018). Other organisations took advantage of the negative economic outlook to suppress employees voice and union activities (Conley and Page, 2016, Cook et al., 2016). Interestingly, there is no study that has examined the effect of employee voice as represented by union engagement and participation in decision making on the relationship between austerity policies and employee relations.

#### *Management focus on efficiency.*

Organisations resorted to efficiency measures by freezing pay, cutting jobs and increasing the workload of employees (Carter et al., 2013, Bach and Stroleny, 2013). Other reduced the pay scale for new employees and changed the structure of entitlements and pensions (Roche and Teague, 2014). Human resource managers were tasks to providing employees with the skills that will enable them multi-task with their increased workload (Cunningham, 2016). Policies relating to gender, equality and diversity lost their immediacy (Conley and Page, 2016).

#### *Adoption of work life balance*

An interesting finding from the study of Lewis et al. (2017) showed that work life balance was implemented as a tool to enhance efficiency and reduce the stress of austerity. The organisations investigated suggested two views of work life balance. First, that it may be used to reduce cost with the implementation of flexible working hours and the reduction of working hours. Employees were only required to come to work only if it was necessary. In this view, it was the responsibility of management to model flexible working around employee jobs. The second view suggested that employees had the responsibility to schedule their jobs in a flexible way to enable them operate optimally irrespective of the cuts.

#### *Survival mentality behaviour*

Studies show that although employees were unhappy with the policies introduced by their organisations to cut austerity, employees were afraid to speak out for fear of losing their jobs (Cook et al., 2016). This was because of the reduced confidence in the unions and apparent lack of alternatives due to the uncertainties caused by austerity. There was lack of trust between employees at all levels and employees who survived redundancy sought to protect their jobs and showed no support for those who were made redundant (Sahdev, 2003).

#### *Deterioration in employee well-being*

As employees experienced dissatisfaction, their well-being deteriorated (Heyes et al., 2017). This was because of the increased workload and low or stagnated pay (Sahdev, 2003). Additionally, the low job security meant employees were working at odd and longer hours for fear of losing their jobs, thus not able to experience work life balance (Cook et al., 2016).

### **Limitations of the study**

This systematic review study is not without limitations. From the review, it was found that research investigating the implication of austerity policies on work and employment relations may be limited. Although the search strategy of the study included phrases such as austerity, stringent financial policies, recession, employment relations, employee morale, engagement, commitment and enthusiasm, there may still be a possibility that some relevant papers may have been omitted. Also, the articles were selected from human resource and employment relations journal with 3- and 4-star ranking in the ABS data base. There are chances that relevant studies in other journals may have been left out. There is also the challenge of generalisability. However, this challenge does not undermine the potential contribution of this study. This is because the articles included in this study have utilised a variety of methods and have included participants from a wide variety of stakeholders.

### **Conclusions**

Findings from this study suggest that irrespective of the actions taken to encourage employee engagement, the resultant effect of austerity policies are negative for employees. Although the review is limited in scope, the contribution it makes to existing studies is novel. The study shows that there is a lack of literature that addresses the implication of employees' voice as represented by employee direct participation and union engagement using the framework of this study.

Evidence from the analysis of studies included in this review highlight the various actions taken by organisations (especially in the public sector) to cope in uncertain times especially during austerity. The study showed whiles austerity may be a challenge to organisations in general, their responses in terms of policy direction differed. For example, some organisations resorted to increasing employee voice as represented by direct employee participation and through their union representatives, others did not (Roche and Teague, 2014, Cook et al., 2016).

Irrespective of the policy on employee participation in decision making, the results showed that employees had a negative view of the organisation (Cook et al., 2016, Sahdev, 2003). Consequently, this review highlights a gap that needs to be explored further and presents a conceptual framework in See Figure 2 to support the gap. The authors of this review are not aware of any existing study that has conceptualised employee voice in terms of union involvement and direct participation of workers. Additionally, no existing study has investigated the effect that employee voice may have on the relationship between organisational policies in times of austerity and employee relations.

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Insert Figure 2 about here

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Although the current conservative government has declared an end to austerity by promising more funding to social services (Iacobucci, 2018), the reality still remains with in increased zero hour contracts (Barry, 2018), increasing workload of employees in the emergency services (Crawford et al., 2018) and lack of urgent actions to reduce the inequality in pay (Wheatley et al., 2018).

Haven already stated that the systematic review carried out by this study is limited in scope, it has provided a foundation for further studies by identifying a gap in literature that has significant contributions to existing studies with practical implications for practice. The next line of action for this research will be to empirically examine the moderating role of employee voice on the relationship between austerity policies and employee relations.

In conclusion, this study suggests that there may be a negative relationship between organisational policies in times of austerity and employee relations. This negative impact may be less severe for organisations that recognise employee voice than those who do not recognise employee voice in decision making during times of uncertainty. As the reliance on the expertise of human resource managers increases due to the uncertainties of austerity, findings from ongoing empirical study will make both contributions to theory and have significant implications for human resource managers.



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## Appendix

Table 1: Search Strategy

<b>Search strategy- ABS Ranked 3- and 4-star Journals on HRM and Employment studies</b>	
Keywords	Austerity, stringent financial policies Recession Employment relations Employee morale, engagement, commitment, enthusiasm
Outcome	Organisation response Employee response
Context	UK, United Kingdom, England Ireland

Table 2- Summary of findings

<b>Austerity policies: A systematic review of organisational and employee responses to work and employment relations</b>						
<b>S/N</b>	<b>Study</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Study approach</b>	<b>Setting/participants</b>	<b>Organisational response</b>	<b>Employee response</b>
1	Roche and Teague (2014)	To investigate HR response to the effect of recession. Commercial and employment effect of recession	Mixed method approach using focus groups, survey questionnaire and case studies	The study was conducted in public and private sector organisations in Ireland. 30 HR managers participated in the focus group. 444 HR managers participated in the survey. 20 cases were investigated using secondary data published in newspapers and reports. Organisations included in this study had 50 or more employees.	Organisations depended more on HR managers for their expertise. HR managers resorted to pay cuts and freeze for all employees, introduction of lower pay scales for new staff, reduced overtime and changing pension arrangement for staff. Unionised firms solicited the inputs of union leaders in the decisions on work and employment practices. Voluntary and involuntary redundancies were practiced by some of the organisations.	Did not investigate employees' responses
2	Cook et al. (2016)	The study examined HRM practices that were implemented during recession that positively affected short term financial value metrics	Mixed method approach using semi-structured interviews and secondary data comprising of company financial records	Study was conducted in a large-scale retail organisation in the UK. 52 participants in outlets across 6 regions. Participants were drawn from all levels of the workforce (including 1 store director, 7 personnel managers, 9-line managers, 11 union representatives and 24 shop floor workers)	Recruitment activities reduced. Employees were stretched to work at odd hours. Hard line HR policies were put in place with little or no input/support from employees and union representatives. Jobs were enlarged with more intensity without corresponding increase in staff.	Employees accept jobs and tasks that are outside of comfort for fear of losing their jobs. Employees showed negative emotions and wide discontentment for policies but accepted them.
3	Bach and Stroleny (2013)	The study highlighted the consequences of the recession for employment relations in the UK and Ireland	Analysis was done using secondary data sources of public sector organisations	The organisations analysed in the study were drawn from the civil service, defence, education and health in UK and Ireland	Organisations in the various sectors sought to become more efficient in the face of austerity by freezing pay, and reducing employment.	Did not investigate employees' responses

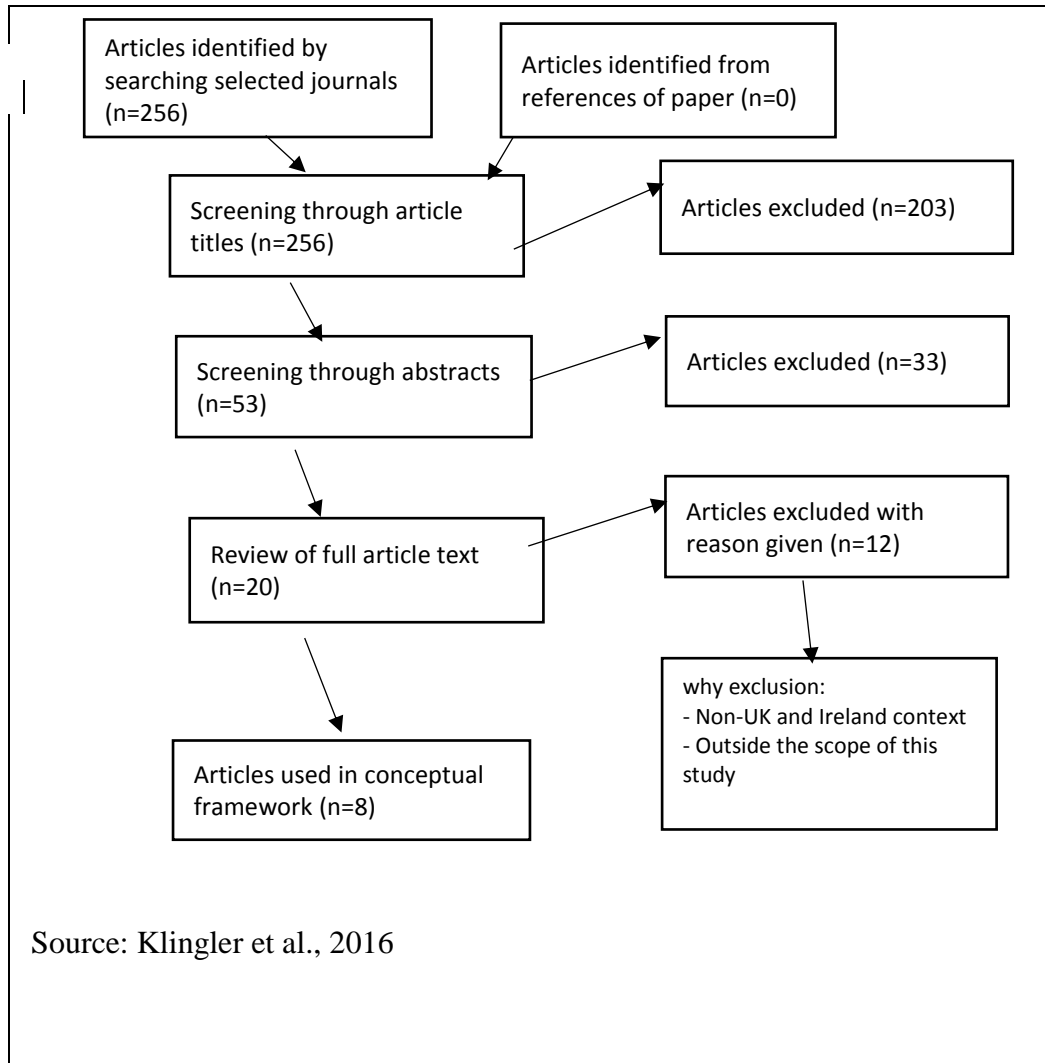
**Austerity policies: A systematic review of organisational and employee response to work and employment relations**

<b>S/N</b>	<b>Study</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Study approach</b>	<b>Setting/participants</b>	<b>Organisational response</b>	<b>Employee response</b>
4	Sahdev (2003)	The study investigated how employees who were left after downsizing responded to changes in the organisation	A case study of four organisations in the UK was the basis for data collection. Data was collected using multiple sources included, interviews, focussed groups and examination of internal documents	The four organisations included in the study covered various sectors including banking, manufacturing, utility and a local council. Participants were drawn from employees at all levels including directors, senior managers, managers and employees	Common trends to summarise the response of organisations include restructuring, redundancy, and change in culture and business transformation programmes. The trigger for downsizing for the government organisation was austerity and policy changes, while the private sector organisations downsized for reasons such as changes in technology, competitors, fall in profit and cost	lack of trust at all levels, increased workload, job in security, low morale, survivor envy, lack of psychological contract, sense of pride for survivors, low commitment
5	Lewis et al. (2017)	The study investigated how work life balance was practised in the public sector after the financial crisis	Qualitative approach was used by means of interviews	26 HR managers and directors of 12 local councils that had responsibilities for coordinating services such as housing, transport, NHS and emergency services	The study reported that WLB was embedded in the organisations such that it was widely accepted irrespective of the financial pressures. A further strand of finding showed that WLB was utilised as a tool for managing financial pressures. Organisations also considered WLB as construct that should be the responsibility of the individual employees	Although some of the participants noted the neglect of employees needs and reactions to the application of WLB, it was not covered in this study

**Austerity policies: A systematic review of organisational and employee response to work and employment relations**

<b>S/N</b>	<b>Study</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Study approach</b>	<b>Setting/participants</b>	<b>Organisational response</b>	<b>Employee response</b>
6	Cunningham (2016)	The study examined how non-profit organisations implemented employment policies aimed at personalising social services during the period of austerity	The study was approached qualitatively using semi-structured interviews	24 respondents from non-profit organisations in Scotland took part in the study. The respondents were CEO, HR managers and senior operational managers	Personalisation policy during austerity resulted in cuts in the services provided to service users, with employees spending less time with clients with the aim of reaching more clients. Training was provided to employees to enable multitasking, redeployment opportunities were limited, increased zero contract and employment of relief staff	Did not investigate employees' responses, but acknowledged the need to investigate the effects that employment relations policies during austerity may have on employees' attitude and behaviour
7	Conley and Page (2016)	The study examined how local councils in the UK implemented the gender equality duty during the times of austerity	Qualitative approach was used by means of interviews	Employees from 5 local councils drawn from various regions from the north and south of England took part in the study. They include senior officers, equality teams, HR managers, trade unions and elected members responsible for equality	The need to transform business operations to fit with funding constraint made gender equality duty (GED) lost its immediacy. There was a shift in the focus of equality from employees to service delivery. There was little or no input from the unions on the GED policy. GED was not a consideration for pay negotiation	There was no mention of the effect that the non-implementation of the GED policy had on the attitude and behaviour of employees
8	Heyes et al. (2017)	The study examined how underemployment as exacerbated by the great recession influenced workers well-being	Quantitative approach was used by means of 2006 and 2012 UK skills and employment survey	7787 people in 2006 and 3200 people in 2012 took part in the survey. Participants were people who were in paid employment in UK	The study did not examine organisations response to underemployment	Data collected at different times show that the workers dissatisfaction with their jobs and opportunities increased substantially during the period 2006 to 2012. Workers well-being deteriorated due to unsatisfactory workload

**Figure 1- Article selection criteria**



Source: Klingler et al., 2016

**Figure 2- Propose conceptual framework for future studies**

