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SCIENTIFIC REPUTATION AND "THE GOLDEN STANDARDS": QUALITY MANAGEMENT SYSTEM IMPACT AND THE TEACHING-RESEARCH NEXUS

Abstract

In the academic environment the reputation is linked to research performance. However, the questions "what reputation actually is, how it is formed and which are the best ways to measure it?" still remain and they raise tension and confusion between academics. The evaluation methods tend to over emphasise research and fail to address the quality of teaching, mostly because measuring teaching quality is complex and difficult. Teaching matters in higher education institutions (HEIs) and the quality management system must be committed to capturing all the dimensions that affect quality teaching.

Introduction

Today, higher education institutions focus on the investigation and analysis of the concepts underlying the notion of teaching and research and their connexions to Quality Management System (Jenkins, 2000; Woodhouse, 2001; Jenkins and Healey, 2005; Trowler and Wareham, 2007). As a feature of the recent year, HEIs have placed a greater degree of importance on reputation (prestige) than on improvements in academic performance. Many institutions have implemented various ways to measure and analyze performance and value.

The subject of this paper is a small part of a comprehensive research project 'The Academic Profession in Europe: responses to societal challenges' (Euroac/2010). The scientific results discussed here are part of an extensive report aimed to assess and compare the QMS current stage (significance, implementation issues, organizational benefits, research *vs*. teaching, students' implication, standardization, cross-institutional assessment and satisfaction) from an individual and institutional level. This study is correlated to the state-of-the-art in partner countries and it taking into accounts the background information about the socio-political context in each country and how the individuals perceive the quality assurance system and the effect of the implementation of quality management systems at individual and institutional level. It explores the effect of the quality assurance and quality management system on the academia in HEIs across the eight countries which are members of the Euroac project. It is drawn on a series of face-to-face interviews with senior university managers, academic staff (both junior and senior), and other Hepro staff spanning both the 'hard' and 'soft' sciences.

The present study provides the academic staff's perception on the nexus teaching –research from the QMS point of view and shows their priorities compared to the priorities of their HEIs. It details how university quality assurance imposes, influences and changes the performance criteria in teaching and research in all their dimensions and complexity. This proves the importance of the QMS and how research outcomes and ranking matters affect universities.

Interview Methodology

The analysis is based on data gathered to accomplish a cross study on the influence of the European governance in the countries involved in the EuroHESC project Euroac – The Academic Profession in Europe: responses to societal challenges (Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Ireland, Romania, and Croatia as Principal Investigators and Finland and Poland as Associated Partners). In our analyse we focused on the themes cover quality assurance and quality management system. The data are based on the results from interviews which were conducted in Romania between February and May 2011.

Face-to-face interviews produce higher response rates, but this modality is usually costly and often laborious. The determinants of response rates for face-to-face surveys are: the length of the questionnaire, the topic of the survey, and other design properties.

During the data collection action, we interviewed members of the management boards of HEIs and members of the academic staff in both junior and senior positions and we asked them about their perspectives and their views on expectations coming from their professional environment and from society, about their self perception about their current activity either as teachers or researchers either as managers or administrators. Also, the interviewees are asked to give their perspective on governance (the perception on the structures they are working in, changes, level of influence and their degree of control over their work and time, pressure and obligations), academic career (the pathways of academic careers, characteristics and job satisfaction) and professionalisation (re-configuration of job tasks, who ask for professionalization and its influence on academic work). Three members of the project team, namely Austria, Finland and Romania are deeply focused on the governance theme and the Romanian team is in charge of analysing the impact of the quality management system on academic work.

Following this work division in the interviews, we wanted to check the understanding and the interpretations of academia life, challenges and changes posed by the quality assurance, quality evaluation and quality management system. We used purposeful sampling for both the interviews and document analysis (another reported survey, research papers in the field and legislative frame), in order to find more information.

Due to the large amount of data (more than 489 interviews) in analysing data, we used the "meaning condensation" technique. This technique condenses the data from interviews into "main themes" and it allows us to combine the essential themes into descriptive statements. The main themes are direct statements extracted according to the interviewees' responses that are considered to be more meaningful to the central areas of inquiry.

Sampling of Interviewees and Interview Procedure

Overall, the Euroac team interviewed 489 as following: Romanian team 69, Austrian team 60, Croatian 60, Germany 60, Irish 60, Polish 60, Finland 59 and Switzerland 61. These are members of the academic staff covering all the academic position, managers in HEIs as we are trying to keep balance in gender issue. Also, Hepros were interviewed.

For the Romanian team, more than half of the interviews for academic staff were conducted in their respective offices being face-to-face interviews. The rest of the interviews were conducted on the telephone. This was due to financial reason and the difficulty to cover long distance. The length of all interviews spanned between thirty minutes and one hour and twenty minutes. Prior to the interviews, we made appointments and explained to the interviewees the purpose of the interviews in the wide context of the Euroac project. There were some unexpected events when some interviewees could not meet the schedule for interviews because of unforeseen reasons.

All interviews were conducted in a structured way following the interview schedule and all the interview proceedings were recorded on tape.

Finally, all interviews were carefully transcribed in order to ensure that interviewees' ideas are recorded to constitute raw data. Then, in order to allow the team of the project the access the data, the interviews were carefully translated in English.

Discussions and Conclusion

Martin and Stella (2007: 45) refer to two pillars of quality in education, namely "the golden standards" and "the fitness for purpose". The first approach states that it is possible to identify certain qualitative key aspects of HE quality. The second approach assumes that a wide variety in types and objectives of HEIs makes it almost impossible to establish quantifiable criteria or standards. However, during the last years the necessity to cope with quantitative data in order to compare the performance among individuals, departments and institutions leads to introduce a quality rating mechanism related to performance in research (peer review as qualitative judgement and the number of publications in highly ranked journals as quantitative judgement). At the same time, they fail to introduce similar quantifiable criteria to assess teaching.

The main problem of the QMS is that its main focus is to measure research activities and research outcomes and not teaching quality. The interviewees view the publications as a measure of academic quality and prestige and this forced the academia to change their focus from teaching to research in order to succeed in academic environment. However, most of the interviewees disagree and blame that their HEIs aim to rank as high positions in international rankings or to improve their position in the rankings instead of focusing on their main missions. In this context, in the respondents' view the indicators measuring teaching quality are strongly questionable, far more than the ones measuring research. The respondents' consider that the assessment mechanism works better, is more accountable and objective in research than in teaching. The teaching quality evaluation is a complex process and, at the same time it is subject to unavoidable subjectivity. The main drawback consists of the lack of mechanisms to track the effects of teaching evaluation on education quality improvement in a university and proves that it is adequate making managerial decisions based on evaluation results.

Another important issue comes from social sciences and it states that it is necessary to enlarge the indicators for assessment including books, which are immensely important for social sciences and the arts and human sciences. Also the respondents outlined the necessity to realize the cross-institutional assessment

(ranking/rating, benchmarking, quality assessment) as useful tools to identify those proper actions for developing institutional policies.

From the political authorities and institutional leaders' point of view, the massification of higher education makes it much more visible and also changes the managerial vision and academic autonomy. This has resulted in strong demands to make universities more effective and more accountable. Research has experienced a similar growth. Research, scientific values and high pressure for research outcomes affect the academic staff's notions about what research and academic activity is all about.

A large number of respondents perceive a clear difference in academic prestige between a teacher and a research professor. Our study reveals huge divergences between the identity of many of the academic staff respondents and their role. Even so, the majority of the respondents claim that they are both teachers and researchers; in reality, their academic role has been rerouted to a more research based one. "Teaching" at HEIs is more than providing a learning environment. Trowler and Wareham (2007) highlight as negative or as drawbacks (termed as "dysfunction") when referring to "teachers doing research" is that time and energy of the academic staff have been devoted to research that sacrifices teachers' involvement in teaching and are replaced by teaching assistants (commonly, post-graduate students). This raises conflict among the students that become reluctant to receive lower level of expertise, feeling neglected by the academic staff and the department.

Nowadays, the academic identity and status are closely related to research and scholarly activities. The reputation and successful career path encourage and almost impose a sound engagement in research and publication work. This is necessarily equivalent to a narrower but more performance and quality audit-driven definition of research focused on obtaining grants and publishing in peer-reviewed outlets. Institutional responses to national and international trends in higher education have led to a strong emphasis on research performance monitoring. Some of the respondents perceive the elements of conventional academic practice, such as personal tutoring and assessment, as being time-consuming activities. They need to be released to pursue work that is considered more 'productive' as publication and grant-getting targets.

The respondents feel that it is getting harder and harder to perform all the elements of academic practice and find themselves under increasing work pressure and lack of time for personal life.

A general impression that emerges from this analysis is that in order to make the higher education system more competitive, universities have been under tremendous pressure from governments and the internal and external stakeholders to restructure and reinvent the education systems. According to Carnoy (2000: 50), education reforms within the context of globalisation can be characterised as finance driven reforms emphasising decentralisation, privatisation and better performance.

The growing impact of globalisation in the higher education system has forced many countries to reinvent their governance strategies in education for coping with the rapid social and economic changes. Regarding the impact of the standardization demands and the new holistic assessment criteria of the academic staff's activity on the university management vision and strategy, most of the academia believes that

the government and the university management have to react to external pressures generated by globalization.

Following the new vision and strategy imposed to quality management system in HE, many changes are implemented allowing the governments to shift to the roles of regulator, enabler and facilitator instead of those of provider and funder. The academic staffs are forced to make them visible to their co-operators outside the university and they need to focus on quantified research outcomes such as publications in prestigious journals.

Because there is great emphasis on 'efficiency and quality' in higher education, universities now encounter a lot more challenges, and are being subjected to an unprecedented level of external scrutiny. The growing concern for 'value for money' and 'public accountability' lead all providers of higher education to accommodate increasing demands from the local community, as well as changing expectations of students, parents and employers. Nowadays, the governments are facing increasing financial constraints and in order to create more higher education opportunities, modern universities have started to change their model of governance by adopting the model based on scientific performance using the international classification criteria and standards. But it is essential that these classifications do not become an objective in itself for a university but rather they may be a consequence of its mode of organization. In the opinion of many respondents a dangerous tendency is that universities lose sight of something essential in the evaluation of teachers, namely the teaching performance; the evaluation criteria currently rely more on research, reflected in publications in recognized international research journals, so-called ISI publications.

The most critical issues related to the QMS implementation include: procedure development, lack of financial resources and information, and the development of work guidelines, while improved responsibility and *organizational performance*, were perceived by the respondents as the key QMS benefits. QMS is a coordinated aggregate of interrelated and interactive activities that determine quality policy and objectives as well as provides the teacher and also the research activities with guidance and rules in their goal attainment. The implementation of quality management systems enables HEIs to define and manage processes that ensure delivery of services that meet internal and external stakeholders' needs and expectations.

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