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Conflicting Expectations in term of Quality Assurance in Teaching and Research

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Abstract

We present some preliminary results of academic consulting about the relevance of academic activities as teaching and research and to their impacts on universities and the benefits to academic world. In recent times attention has moved towards concern for teaching and quality of teaching to meritocracy or links between achievement in higher education and career success. This study is foremost considered a contribution to the growth of knowledge on the linkage between quality management system in Higher Education Institutions and quantity of the teaching and research outcomes. 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).

Keywords: teaching-research nexus; quality management system; quality and quantity; academic career; interviews

1. Introduction

Much research has focused on nexus teaching-research. “The teaching-research nexus was addressed only to a limited extent. It was very rare for institutions to make any mention of their research strategy in their learning and teaching strategy, and the potential conflicts or synergies between research and teaching strategies were generally not addressed. ... Mechanisms through which this nexus might be exploited are not yet articulated. ... Strengthening the nexus is at present an aspiration rather than a plan.” (Gibbs, 2001, p.17)

At the international level, research and research outcomes are a requirement for accounting academic career progression, and an important contributor to the development of knowledge and scholarship (Wright and Chalmers, 2010).

This study aims to assess and compare the quality management system (QMS) current stage from an individual and institutional level perspective across the eight countries members of EUROAC project. It is correlated to the state of the art in partner countries and it takes into account the background information about the socio-political

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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 draws 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 identifies and examines numerous challenges posed by standardization and global approach of quality assurance and their implications for educational restructuring, with special attention being paid to new forms of quality management system covering the relation between teaching and research.

2. Interview methodology

Most of them are face-to-face interviews. Face-to-face interviews produce higher response rates, but this modality is usually costly and often laborious. We also used telephone interviews. This was due to financial reason and the difficulty to cover long distance. 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 management boards of HEIs and members of academic staff in both junior and senior positions which get their perspectives and their views on expectations coming from their professional environment and from society, self perception about their current activity either as teachers or researchers, either as managers or administrators. 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 probed for the understanding and interpretations of academia life, challenges and changes posed by the quality assurance, quality evaluation and quality management system. Due to the large amount of data (489 interviews) in analyzing 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 from the interviewees’ responses that are considered to be more meaningful to the central areas of inquiry. They are: QMS significance; satisfaction with QMS; QMS implementation issues; QMS organizational benefits; quality vs. quantity; research vs. teaching in terms of quality assurance (QA); students’ feedback/students’ implication; standardization/general model vs. flexible approach; structural changes; and cross-institutional assessment tools.

3. Results

3.1. Quality vs. Quantity

The Romanian junior interviewees acutely feel this nexus between quality and quantity of their teaching and research. They claim that there are discrepancies between the quality approach which measures the result of the learning, and quality approach which measures the way knowledge is delivered. Most of them believe that the current form of organization is not favourable and does not encourage to development of an academic career. They dislike that emphasis was placed only on articles published by ISI Web of Knowledge with high impact factor, as the main condition for career advancement.

The Finnish respondents believe that is a conflict between quantity and quality. Looking from another perspective, some interviewees belonging to the university management think that the criteria set for quality assurance are based too much on quantity rather than quality. However, international referred publications are a sign of good quality in research. Thus, in research work there is the inbuilt system of quality management by peer review in publishing scholarly work. Increasing the co-operation with international partners is also a sign of quality in research. Many respondents claim that administrative tasks have increased in the professors’ work. There is also too much teaching. There should be more time for research because there is big pressure to make profit, to have degrees, publications etc.

Regarding this issue, the Austrian interviewees believe that personal performance reviews and interviews are more useful, that evaluations do not consider the context and that the qualitative research is not measurable. Moreover, the formal data entry sheets are filled out under time pressure and unwillingly and they are concerned that even if the raw data are wrong they are used as a basis for analysis. Social science teachers claim that there is a
certain closure towards society. They are dissatisfied that the inter-institutional mobility and time-consuming communication are less highly valued. In the Social Sciences it is hard to count and to standardise.

The Swiss interviewees (seniors and juniors) feel that meritocracy and quality are the most important criteria for career. While in research the visibility and funds are the most important criteria, in teaching the current activity is assessed by students but this is taken into account only marginally. Some interviewees raise the question how the outputs of academic work can be measured. An academic career is based on scientific production (meritocracy), visibility (be in the right sector, i.e. life sciences now) and capability to integrate oneself in a managerial structure within the university: teach, communicate, foster relations with your management.

The Croatian senior respondents claim that the career progress in most research fields is typically based on the number of published work; they see the quantity and not their quality, as a dominant criterion for advancement to a higher position. They find these advancement criteria inadequate and they believe that these criteria need to be changed. An important number of seniors perceive the disproportion between teachers and students number as a main problem. Either the number of teachers should increase, or, which is more realistic and socially adequate, enrolment quotas should decrease. As a result, it would increase the general quality at colleges and universities.

Most of the German respondents expressed divergent opinions about accountability and peer reviewed publications. Some of the senior and junior respondents claim that there is no accountability or there are some problems with the accountability reporting requirements while other respondents perceive the mandatory accountability report as positive and that the accountability requirements of the Department are manageable.

Also, the Irish interviewees experiment the students’ quantitative issue with reference to number of students, their rate of retention, number of graduates and their average grades and the quantitative attitude related to performance in research. In this respect, there are opinions expressed by juniors who want more emphasis on quality versus quantity of publications. The senior respondents seem to have the same opinions. At individual level, the main issue is the lack of resources, which means there is a limited amount of money for going to conferences and giving papers and publishing. That being said, there is a drive in the direction of trying to encourage research and applying for funding.

The Polish junior interviewees express the most opinions on this subject because they acutely feel these pressures. The quantitative approach is visible in the university management strategy. The main expectation of the university management is to publish papers in highly respected academic peer-review journals. Some of the interviewees say that in social sciences there is a strong theoretical orientation which overlooks their work as academic whose research produce applicable knowledge, but they do not count when it comes to academic degrees. Another example refers to teaching and research. In the past expectations were dominated by teaching. Solid teaching was required by the university, with great focus on quality. Today, the university management wants academics to complete academic degrees as soon as possible but at the same time overloads them with a number of teaching hours.

3.2. Research vs. teaching in terms of QA

The Romanian interviewees perceive both the practical side and the immaterial side of quality in teaching and research. The majority of them believe that an academic career is based on research excellence and a high level of quality in teaching activity. They believe that an academic career is based first of all on research excellence and on much individual work, patience and perseverance. Unfortunately, high performance in teaching and research activities is required without any financial support though. Regarding the teaching activity, there were many changes in the university curriculum contents and in methodology and in scientific research activity too by new approaches. The research criterion is the one that prevails and affects the quality of teaching duties. For junior positions (assistant and lecturer) competitions are no longer given (due to a smaller number of students being enrolled) and this affects the quality of practical activities because they are done by PhD students. If there is a solid background in research, the teaching profession offers the opportunity to share knowledge and build or form human resources. This is the way to gain visibility or notoriety in national and/or international environment. The junior interviewees quickly lined up to these new requirements: today the unique way in which academics’ careers may develop is the research outcome. The quality of the teaching activity is neglected. They express the necessity to participate in international projects, work in national and international scientific teams and publish the scientific
articles in the International Data Base journals. In terms of publishing activity, they think things are reversed: more researcher than teacher.

All Finnish interviewees agree that the scientific research and research-based teaching are the main functions of a university. It is, therefore, clear that assessing the quality of research is a crucially important concern in the management of universities. The respondents largely agreed that the quality indicators in research are the quality of journals where articles are published and the citations per publication rate. The equal importance presents the cooperation in international research projects. According to some respondents quality of teaching has been paid attention to but quality in teaching still is harder to define. Quality management in teaching is done mostly by student feedback. The quality of teaching is more problematic because student feedback and learning outcomes should be mirrored into students’ own input. QMS has certain weaknesses as clear instructions or quality assurance concerning single courses is missing; individual teachers are responsible of courses and their contents, and individuality in teaching is very much emphasised. Also, shared assessment criteria are missing. The teaching does not have a similar peer quality control as research does.

The Austrian interviewees perceive themselves both as teachers and researchers. However, the most of seniors feel that in the last two or three years they have been viewed more and more as a teacher by their professional environment; thus, good quality of teaching is expected. Society also views academics mostly as teachers. At the same time, the growing number of students has led to emphasis on teaching. Austrian juniors believe that the scientific environment expects new international publications, good seminars in continuing education, linking science and consulting, initiating useful learning processes for students and seminar participants, expertise in project management and leadership, initiating critical reflexion processes in communities. Also, juniors consider that evaluation is important in the analysis of learning processes, while criteria that are only represented in numbers are problematic.

According to the Swiss respondents, the University structures are shifting towards the academic type but their roles and positions are organized according to research funds. However, the respondents have the freedom to organize their own teaching and research activities. There are many possibilities to orient the topics of the research. In teaching there are some limitations, although it is possible to implement changes in curricula. The department executive management can influence the course of action, e.g. taking responsibility in teaching modules. The interviewees notice the need to quantify the quality of research.

The Croatian junior 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 the academic environment. However, the juniors pay attention to the quality of teaching. The first requirement is to produce scientific articles of high quality and to engage in high quality teaching work. However, nobody reviews the quality of teaching work and the institution does nothing to measure the quality/success and does not reward teaching accomplishments. All these activities result in newly established strict criteria to promotion and in high expectations the institution has from university teachers. Interviewees would like the teaching process to be discussed more frequently.

Mainly, the German junior respondents express opinions on the issue of teaching vs. research. The teaching is perceived as a more and more school-like system as there is less freedom for the juniors in research because they depend on the project situation. Moreover, the teaching evaluation is described as ambivalent. On the one hand, it has the doctrine on the whole improved and on the other hand, there are the employees who want to improve teaching, under pressure.

For Irish interviewees both teaching and research quality are important. Thus, there is a greater emphasis on quality assurance with regard to courses, to student interactions, there is more and more emphasis placed on the students’ viewpoint of the actual programme. The application form for promotions has a separate component on research in terms of quantity and quality of projects, funding and publications. Thus, research is seen by the university as a very important aspect of an academics job and by academics as a promotion opportunity.

The Polish manager interviewees perceive the university management demands for evaluations of academic activity in three aspects (research, teaching, administration). The process has not been completed yet but it would radically change the way academic careers have been perceived in this institution for years. It means the lack of research outcomes will no longer be acceptable. Today, the research requires more time involvement than teaching; however it is unimaginable that teaching and research are being separated at certain universities. Although teaching is important for the university because it provides funding, the quality of teaching is not important at all. For the
university, funding quantity of students not quality of education is an essential factor. In contrast, research performance is not explicitly required and paid but the management pays special attention to research outcomes and development of academic professional career. In other words, academics are paid for teaching but they are expected to deliver research outcomes. What really counts for the university management on both central and departmental level is publications in respected and highly ranked academic journals.

4. Discussion

Neary et al. (2003) stated that it is widely accepted that “...poor governance structures and inappropriate incentives...still characterize so many European Universities” (p. 1240). Despite the extended studies focused on evaluating the quality of research, very little effort has been devoted to organizing teaching and research within universities. However, both high quality teaching and high quality research are main objectives for the universities themselves. Nexus high quality teaching-high quality research is a really challenge and a source of conflicts within universities and between academics.

Generally, HEIs define quality assurance through the maintenance of the highest possible standards, both in teaching and learning and in research, which are appropriate to institutions’ agreed role and mission. The universities are held responsible for quality assurance in respect of institutions’ academic activities. They are mainly (i) focusing attention on teaching and learning; (ii) assist institutions in their efforts to improve teaching and learning quality; and (iii) enable the institutions to discharge their obligation to be accountable for quality.

Today, a major challenge in higher education is to demonstrate relevance and educational quality as response to stakeholders’ expectations and in the name of “accountability”. QA processes tend to reinforce gaps between administration and academic interests in higher education, forcing focus onto administrative processes to the exclusion of quality-outcome interests [Cowdroy et all, 2002].

Because universities count teaching and research as part of their core social mission, then evaluating the performance of any university system imposes answering how universities manage to combine high quality teaching and high quality research. The academic culture of universities is generally focused strongly toward research. Most of academics have pursued good teaching as a goal in their academic careers and has combined that goal and activity with extensive research. But most of the respondents believe that their efforts not only to teach well but also to give significant time and attention to undergraduate students and their learning and lives would not count very much in their academic careers as such. Ball and Butler (2004) show a marked tendency within universities to adopt business-like methods to improve their quality ratings and reporting strategies basically through research outcomes.

As our research study shows, in many education systems, academics benefit from a large discretion in the allocation of their working time, resulting in very different occupation profiles for academics. Accordingly the actual splitting of their time among the various tasks, there is an individual conflict between teaching and research faced by academics and an institutional conflict between academics and institution which request performance in both dimensions. A possible solution is promoting specialization, i.e. some academics being teaching professors and others full time researchers. However this is a partial solution because research and teaching are not equally valuable for career advancement.

A somewhat astonishing and alarming conclusion is the idea that teaching is valuable inside a given university but it has little value outside. Research has a high visibility outside university, so it is beneficial associated to the research output and no beneficial associated with teaching. For academics, a higher teaching quality is valuable only because it increases the total research budget. This assumption can be justified by the fact that teaching quality, unlike research quality, is difficult to assess. Moreover, if research quality is comparable across academics in the same field, the assessment of teaching quality is often institution specific, hence less comparable. The only way that the university designs a measure of teaching quality comes from students’ evaluations.

Another important issue focusing on the tensions between teaching and research is the implications of the distinction between pure, applied research (Jensen and Thursby, 2001) and product of social sciences on performance assessment. These tensions suggest that academic assessment is perhaps practiced in different forms and for different reasons. Accounting research is often conceived as applied research in that the focus of study is made up of technologies and technical practices used. Much research has focused on quality on research based on quantitative evaluation. An obvious conclusion is that junior researchers are focused on building an academic career through capitalize on their expertise by publication in high ranked journal and not through sound teaching expertise.
5. Final Remarks and Conclusions

Universities are asked to perform well in teaching and research activities but research is highly valued by the academic community. The high value accorded to research was in evidence in institutional and departmental policies, practices and strategies. However, the value-orientations of academics vary, and can be related to institutional, departmental and disciplinary cultures. There may be a tension between the values of academics and the departmental or institutional culture. Discussions about the impact of research on professional practice and society’s expectation must include education in the equation. It is required to carefully analyse the role of academics in research, and to embed the value of academic research with matters such as academic career choices, professional development and education systems.

Finally, we provide some overall observations:
(i) Research has a higher value than teaching among academic staff.
(ii) The values attributed to the research and teaching have shifted over time.
(iii) Teaching activities are more likely to be tightly managed than research activities, although the evidence suggests that research is the dominant cause of variations in workloads in most departments.
(iv) Many respondents claimed that their teaching and research are synergistic. It is raised the question if the synergies between research and teaching were managed or promoted at departmental or institutional level.
(v) Tacitly is accepting a teaching/research dichotomy.
(vi) It is rewarding quantity rather than quality in research.

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