WORK WITH QUALITY FOR A QUALITY WORK IN HIGHER EDUCATION: ACADEMICS’ PERCEPTIONS

D. Dias

Universidade Europeia (PORTUGAL)
CIPES - Center for Research in Higher Education Policies (PORTUGAL)

Abstract

The relationship between quality assurance and staff management in higher education institutions is the focus of this paper. Academics’ perception of drivers and barriers to quality assessment was analysed and the contribution of internal quality systems to a more effective human capital management is highlighted.

Through an online survey, this study assesses not only the academics’ perceptions of the implementation of quality assurance system in higher education institutions, but also their insights of impacts of that in human resources management.

According to the results, academics seem to consider that when they work as active players in the quality assurance processes, they tend to impact it positively, although they can still recognize that, in given situations, they act as barriers. Both internationalization and processes were identified as having a positive impact on quality. However, academics complain about the high bureaucracy involved in quality assessment, the lack of time to deal with its demands and, the deviation of their focus from the most important issues of academic life - teaching and research. The lack of financial and infrastructural resources was seen as real inhibitors of quality, such as the dismastment and continuous change of guidelines and government policies, as well as vested interests.

Keywords: Quality; Academics; HRM in Higher Education Institutions; Perceptions, Quality Assurance.

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper presents an analysis of the perceptions of academics on the quality assurance system, more specifically, the barriers and drivers. Hence, all efforts to compare higher education institution with for profit institutions could be ineffective and also pointless.

On the other hand, studies in human resources management emphasise employers’ perspectives by underrating employees’ perceptions. Indeed, Legge [1] argues that “when reading accounts of human resources management practice in United Kingdom and North America it is noticeable the extent to which the data are (literally) the voices of management”. Along the same lines, Guest [2] claims that “from its conception, human resource management reflected management agenda to the neglect of workers’ concerns”, and suggests that employees’ perceptions concerning human resources management practices should be examined as well. Academics are a crucial dimension of the teaching and learning process and should be treated accordingly. In fact, all higher education learning outcomes affect and are affected by human resources. In fact, it is widely accepted that academics scientific and pedagogic qualifications contribute to study program quality in particular, and to HEI quality in general [3].

Thus, present study tries to explore the relationship between quality assurance and staff management in higher education institutions. To do so, academics’ perception of drivers and barriers to quality assessment will be analysed and discussed. Another aim of this research study is to highlight the way the internal quality systems contribute to a more effective human capital management.

2 METHODOLOGY

To explore Portuguese academics’ perceptions concerning higher education quality assessment, an online survey was used. The data collection tool was designed not only to assess perceptions of the implementation of quality assurance system in their own higher education institutions, but also to access their perceptions of the real impacts in terms of human resources management. Although this survey was integrated within the scope of a broader project, the data that were analysed for this paper
represent just a part of the complete data, and emerged from three questions about the drivers and barriers to quality assurance, as follows:

- **Question 1.** Regarding your organisational unit, please tell us which factors have contributed most for internal quality?
- **Question 2.** Regarding your organisational unit, please tell us which factors have mostly inhibited internal quality?
- **Question 3.** Regarding your organisational unit, please explain how the internal quality systems contribute to a more effective human resources management?

The three questions in the questionnaire were asked so academics would freely identify the factors that, according to them, contribute or inhibit quality assurance regarding the organic unit in their own higher education institution, and their respective impact in terms of human resources management. Via this questionnaire, we intended to identify and analyse the richness, complexity and meanings implicit in the data. The option for a qualitative based methodology allowed us to analyse the different nuances of the discourse of the academics, leading to a reflection about the perceptions of Portuguese academics on higher education quality assessment and its impact in their perception of human resources management. This methodological option was made on the grounds of a research paradigm that views language as a carrier of meanings and as a representation of reality. Hence, content analysis privileges the semantic approach over a syntactic one.

Data analysis was performed via content analysis, using MaxQDA10. This statistical analysis software allowed us to codify documents, and to analyse and explore such codification. The choice of this tool was based on its versatility and flexibility to encompass the methodological orientation adopted for this research. Moreover, this software assumes a critical role in the efficiency of data treatment, favouring the management and comparison of a considerable amount of non-structured data.

### 3 RESULTS

A total of 1782 academics answered the online survey, from both public and private universities and polytechnics, which represent 5 per cent of all academics in Portuguese higher education. From this complete data set, 1,322 respondents had valid answers to one of the three open questions and were considered in further analyses.

The sample ranged in age from 20 to 70, with 32.9 per cent in the 30-39 age group, 32.8 per cent in the 40-49 age group, 24.9 per cent in the 50-59 age group, 5.3 per cent in the 60-70 age group, and 4.1 per cent in the 20-29 age group. In our sample, 57.6 per cent were male and 42.4 per cent female. Also, 57.5 per cent of the academics identified their higher education institution as a university and 42.5 per cent identified it as a polytechnic institute. In relation to higher education institution sector, 90 per cent of the respondents belong to the public sector. Although these distributions represent our sample, only the first two areas are also representative of the wider demographic of Portuguese academics, since the private sector is significantly under-represented in our sample (30 per cent of the Portuguese academics work in the private sector). Regarding scientific field, 30.9 per cent of our sample are in the field of social sciences, 24.5 per cent are in engineering and technologies, 14.7 per cent in medical sciences and health, 12.7 per cent in humanities, 10.8 per cent in natural and exact sciences, and 6.4 per cent are in the scientific field of agriculture. All the professional categories of academics are represented for both the university and the polytechnic sectors. The professional categories in the university sector are assistant professor (26 per cent), associate professor (15 per cent), assistant (24 per cent) and full professor (6 per cent). The professional categories in the polytechnic sector are adjunct professor (23 per cent), assistant (14 per cent), and coordinator professor (4 per cent). The distribution of the respondents' academic degree reflects most PhD holders (56.8 per cent).

Almost 75 per cent of the respondents (1,153) claim never to have had any involvement in quality management activities, and only 25 per cent acknowledge that they have contributed in some way to that institutional task.

In content analysis, a total of 4856 text segments were coded. Several themes and categories emerged from the content analysis, creating three main dimensions: drivers of quality assurance; barriers to quality assurance; and their impact in faculty's perceptions of effectiveness of human resources management. In all three dimensions, the following themes emerged from the content
analysis: (i) traits and values of the academics; (ii) academic actors; (iii) governance/management; (iv) internationalisation; (v) processes; (vi) financial resources; and (vii) State.

The results show an average of approximately four factors mentioned by each respondent, as well as a very similar number of references to factors that inhibit quality (2505) and to factors that contribute for quality (2351). The same happens to the academics’ perceptions about the impact of quality assessment internal systems on a more effective human resources management.

The following analysis is presented according to the different themes that emerged from content analysis, taking into account the frequency of coded segments of text.

3.1 Traits and values of academia

In the content analysis process, a set of text segments related to traits and values of the academia became clear (4.9 per cent of all text segments coded), mostly with a negative connotation (77 per cent of text segments). On the one hand, the existence of a culture of work ethic, and values like rigor and exigency, are the unique category that is mainly identified as a facilitator of quality and to a more effective human resources management. On the other hand, academics identified a few traits and values of the academia as inhibitors of quality; a total of 43 references were made to vested interests, with several passages to cronyism and endogamy, “personal interests” and “lobbies”. In addition, 32 references were made to resistances to change, directly expressed or implicitly, such as: “old habits”, “entrenched practices”, “conservatism”, “institutional atavism” and “refusal to accept new paradigms in teaching”.

3.2 Academic actors

The results show that academics perceive that academic actors play an important role in quality (33.8 per cent of references). The human resources emerged from this analysis as a crucial factor to university governance and, consequently, to human resources management policies. Several categories emerged, such as interrelationship, academics, students, researchers, institutional representatives and staff.

Academics featured most highly in this analysis. In fact, their motivation (437 references) and qualifications/skills (525 references) are the most frequently coded categories. Regarding motivation, text segments like “commitment of the teaching staff”, “individual effort of each academic”, “academics involvement” were common (371 references as a quality facilitator), as opposed to the “lack of motivation” and “lack of commitment” (66 references as a quality inhibitor). The references to qualification and skills were mostly made as a factor that contributes positively to quality (378 references), rather than as an inhibitor (147 references).

The importance of the academic actors’ interrelationship was stressed 165 times as a factor that can contribute either positively or negatively (97 versus 68 references, respectively), with a special emphasis in the relation between academics and students. The academic and scientific freedom was also considered a relevant factor, with 16 references (6 as an inhibitor versus 10 as a contributor to quality).

When referring to students (207 references), academics mostly reported their “quality”, “motivation” and “previous preparation”, the latter being most referenced as an inhibitor to quality. Researchers, institutional representatives and staff showed significantly fewer references, and were usually referred to along with other actors in terms of quality, motivation and qualification. In comparison, the references to institutional representatives were considerably more personalised, and were especially pointed as an inhibitor to quality: “management with little management skills”, “mediocrity of the management bodies”, “leadership without scientific and pedagogical quality”, with some direct references to directors, rectors, and course coordinators.

3.3 Governance/Management

Governance and management in higher education institutions is a very complex task, according to Capano [4]. This very particular type of organisation has a very singular internal dynamic, creating various problems in institutional governance, which is very often under governmental guidance. The same author states that universities have been considered to be a typical example of “loose-coupling organisation”.

8104
Concerning the amount of references to governance and management (27.03 per cent), human resources policies gathered 734 references, mostly as an inhibitor to quality (83 per cent). As a negative factor, academics often referred to policies regarding career progress and opportunities for qualification upgrade, lack of penalties and rewards (mostly associated to academics), or general lack of human resources strategic management. Also as an inhibitor to quality, 34 references were made to the devaluation of the teaching activity, with 20 of them emphasising the “devalue of teaching work compared to research work”. Also, a significant number of academics referred to the workload and teaching hours (161 references) as an inhibitor to quality: ‘overload of teaching hours’, and ‘several disciplines being lectured by the same teacher in the same semester’. The imposing of non-academic (mostly administrative) and bureaucratic tasks with ‘negative pedagogical implications’ were also often referred (99 coded segments).

From the 279 coded segments in this theme, especially regarding issues like consistent management, cohesive policies, guidance, and services, 190 reported a negative impact on quality. The category concerning quality management comprised a total of 242 coded segments, from which only 96 were considered as a positive contribution to quality. The remaining 146 coded segments identified management as an inhibitor of quality, not only because of the bureaucracy involved (40 coded segments), but also given the inadequacy of the existent model or its applicability. Finally, information and communication, in terms of availability and clarity, resulted in 32 coded segments as a negative factor in quality, and only 16 as a positive contributor.

3.4 Internationalization

From the 53 coded segments (1.1 per cent of all) regarding the theme internationalization, the great majority (79 per cent) was considered as having a positive impact (42 references) in quality, with references to the mobility of students and teachers, and benefits in research and pedagogical practices. The negative references to the theme regarded mainly the lack of mobility due to financial reasons. Therefore, internationalization emerged as having a real positive impact according to the perception of academics about the efficiency of human resources management.

Internationalisation has gained a significant role in higher education institutions, especially after the implementation of the Bologna Process, in a tremendous effort to reply to globalization. As stated by Knight [5] ‘internationalization is changing the world of higher education, and globalization is changing the world of internationalization’. These changes can be explained by the interests of the international community and by the efforts to maintain economic attractiveness. Furthermore, internationalization is pointed as being the last stand for humanistic ideas against the economic focus present on globalization matters.

3.5 Processes

Findings in the theme reported to processes (1025 coded segments, which represents 21.26 per cent of all) reveal that academics view processes mostly as having a positive impact in quality (62 per cent). Teaching and learning issues generated 451 codifications (56 per cent as a positive factor). The impact of research and innovation was also greatly considered, with 380 coded segments, most of them (67.9 per cent) valuing the category as a contributor to quality.

The existence of external relations (179 coded segments) was greatly considered as a positive factor in quality, with several references to relations in the community (47 references), links to the labour market (20 references), reputation and image (31 references), and cooperation with other institutions or organisations (25 references). The coded segments for the same category as a negative factor, mostly refer to the lack of external relations, some of which caused by geographical constrains (46 references).

3.6 Financial resources

The theme concerning resources was mostly viewed by academics as an inhibitor of quality (73.9 per cent), in which the lack of financial resources and conditions related to infrastructures (e.g., classrooms, laboratories, library) weighed considerably as an inhibitor of quality. Banddevica and Ligotne [3] claim that the available resources significantly affect the study program quality, seeing that they are linked to environment and process, reason why the two disrupt program implementation. Indeed, the resources that were at the disposal of for students and teaching staff affected their productivity and effectiveness, decreasing their quality. One other matter to bear in mind is that this
variable cannot be controlled by these actors; therefore, it is common nowadays to observe teaching staff attempting to do the best they can with the little resources available.

3.7 State

The references to State (which should be understood as state in general, body of law, government, and the external accreditation entity) were almost all negative (58 of 59 coded segments). The inadequacy and constant mutation of regulations and government policies were the most cited references, with 49 codifications. In fact, all the coded segments related to this theme were related to a pessimistic view of the impact of State on human resources management policies.

Estermann and Nokkala [6] referred to a critical factor of governance: the higher education institution autonomy. In fact, this specific factor is clearly affected by governmental policies in various levels, such as staff appointment, wage matters, or academic decisions. In public higher education institutions, State evaluates the use of public resources versus the achieved objectives, creating an assessment and control process. Such restrictions, changing with the also mutable government policies, and affected by social and economic issues, contributed to the State’s negative connotation in Portuguese academics’ consideration.

4 CONCLUSIONS

According to our results, academics tend to recognize a set of factors either as drivers or as barriers to quality assurance. In fact, only 0.7 and 1.3 of the respondents referred explicitly to the nonexistence of factors that inhibit or facilitate quality, respectively.

Thus, governance/management is the principal factor identified as a barrier to quality, followed by academic actors, financial resources, and processes. On the contrary, academic actors appeared to be the major contributors to quality, followed by processes and by governance/management.

In fact, academics seem to consider that when they work as active players in the quality assurance processes, they tend to impact it very positively, although they can still recognize that, in certain situations, they may act as barriers. Despite this, Newton [7] argues that academics seem to be relegated, within quality assurance, to a role of mere ‘passive recipients’, stressing the need to prevent seeing them as ‘mutely’ accepting the process and its demands. In accordance, our findings point out that academics tend to perceive their intervention as not only necessary, but also as very valuable in this context. According to our results, academic staff tend to view governance/management as having a significant weight in quality, even though the great majority of the respondents concluded that, in their institution, it acted as a negative factor.

Both the theme internationalization and processes were identified as having a positive impact on quality. The first with several references to the mobility of students and teachers, with consequent benefits to research and pedagogical practices. Regarding processes, academics view teaching and learning, and also, research and innovation as the factors that greatly contribute to quality, only seconded to teachers' motivation, qualifications and skills. However, as showed in others studies [8], academics complain about the high bureaucracy involved in quality assessment, the lack of time to deal with its requirements and, inherently, the diversion of their attention from the more important aspects of academic life - teaching and research.

On the contrary, the themes resources, traits and values of the academia, and State were mostly viewed by academics as barriers to quality. In fact, the lack of financial and infrastructural resources was seen as real inhibitors of quality, such as the inadequacy and constant alteration of regulations and government policies, as well as vested interests.

In future research, it is important to understand if these perceptions differ according to academics’ characteristics, such as gender, scientific affiliation, and experience in quality assurance activities. In fact, several studies [9] recognized differences on academics’ perceptions on quality assurance according to such features.

Our results point the real need to invest in an efficient management of the staff. Hence, human resource management should be continuously monitored in light of what are the current and future needs in the short, medium and long term in terms of knowledge and experience to manage such resources so they meet the identified requests. Motivation, for instance, should stop being a mere theoretical contemplation to become a concrete action to enable academic managers to stimulate
academia to put into practice necessary action, in addition to putting their best efforts to better attain the proposed goals.

When developing processes in human resource management, institutions must keep in mind that there are processes in which all resources in the organisation (e.g., employees, financial capital, scientific production, technologies) are involved, and where the appropriate use of effective and efficient communication positively influences the achievement of work objectives.

In a world in constant change, with increasing competitive levels, people are a critical and decisive factor in the development of organisations. Staff management should be seen as an essential element within the organisation, promoting tools for personal growth, increasing academics' self-esteem, and fostering mechanisms for assertive communication. A shift of focus is in order, from considering people as mere resources to considering people as the principal assets of an organisation. It is crucial to promote human potential because today's success of organisations depends on maximizing the potential, talent and capabilities of people and teamwork. To achieve the above, university managers must undertake the appropriate processes for recruitment, stimulation systems, and systems performance evaluation. If the internal systems of quality assessment are seen as positive issues within an institution, the perception of academia regarding human resources management will also be positive. In fact, at the base of this lies substantial cooperation, a sense of belonging and of social responsibility of each and every member of the higher education institution. This collaborative participation is the result of the integration of different factors including the motivation, as well as the professional and personal satisfaction, that each actor, by participating, feels is fulfilling the mission of the organisation.

The human resource management for organisational development in academia is a process for change aimed at achieving greater institutional efficiency, which is a prerequisite in today's world. In these changing times in which values are evolving rapidly and resources become scarce, it is increasingly necessary to understand what influences the performance of people at work, particularly the academia as a crucial promoter of institutional quality.

REFERENCES


