

Investing in The Quality of Teaching in Higher Education: Why and How?

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ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions (HEI) operate in a market oriented environment, since they compete for the best students and faculty. Universities have adopted various strategies to attract students and faculty. Many higher education institutions claim that they offer excellent education. However, only few institutions have so far been developing a strategy on how to prepare their teaching faculty to provide excellent teaching.

This paper discusses current trends in higher education related to quality in teaching. The paper focuses on the vision and mission of HEI and their impact on career paths of faculty members. The paper shows how strategic human resource development of faculty can improve quality in teaching. The paper finally discusses the influence of didactical training as human resource development measures on faculty retention as well as student satisfaction.

Keywords:

INTRODUCTION

University management is required to see the big picture in a globalized and competitive educational environment. Among the challenges which university face are student expectations and faculty demands. After all, it is the human beings who matter most: students and faculty as well as staff. Students regard themselves more and more as "customers", especially in countries where the level of tuition has increased significantly. Attracting the best students is only possible if the university has excellent faculty who provides outstanding quality of teaching and who care for the students. In this context, retention of excellent faculty is of very high importance.

This paper discusses university strategies and methods of HR development, in particular didactical training of faculty members. The paper shows that measures of strategic quality improvement of teaching will only be successful if several conditions are given: First of all, these measures have to be consistent with the overall mission and vision of the university, secondly, there has to be commitment from the top management of universities and, finally, there has to be a consistent reward system for such faculty members who participate in these HR development measures.

UNIVERSITY STRATEGIES

Many universities promise a lot. According to their written vision and mission which are usually published on their webpage, they claim to provide the best education, outstanding research, life long learning, knowledge transfer to the society, employability of their graduates, career services, special conditions for their faculty and additional benefits. While some universities which have sufficient resources may be able to keep all those promises, many institutions wrongfully raise these claims and, thus, mislead students, faculty and all other stakeholders. If the image of a university is not consistent with the university identity, the stakeholders will find out sooner or later and turn their backs on the university. Therefore, each university has to make sure that the HEI **brand image** (i.e. the outside view on the university) matches the **brand identity** (i.e. the inside view). Several researchers have recently elaborated on the issue of brand management of universities and pointed out that the success of each higher education institution depends on whether their outward image and their inward identity are identical (see, e.g. Boos/Grubendorfer, Mey 2013).

Each university has a **philosophy** which is shaped primarily by three components: the environment, the objectives of the institution and the resources. In this regard, the university is comparable to each other organization and the university management should follow the principles of management of organizations in general (Drucker). Such universities which promise excellent education to their students produce expectations which the universities have to fulfil. If it is the (main) objective of a university to provide the best education to their students, the strategy of the university has to be consistent with this overall mission.

The **resources of universities** are primarily faculty, students and staff. In addition, some programmes may also depend on equipment and machinery, such as engineering, IT and design departments. What all schools have in common, though, is their strong dependence on the performance of their faculty members. While it has always been clear that universities are characterized by the experts whom they have hired for teaching and research, it is nevertheless a fact that human resource development has not been developed well at most universities. It appears that many higher education institutions expect their faculty members to possess all skills and competences for excellent teaching and research before they are recruited so that any (additional) HR development measures are not necessary. This is, however, completely false. It is untrue for two reasons: First of all, many professors are mainly focussing on research because their academic career depends mostly on their publications. Many academics neglect teaching, many academics even see teaching as a nuisance which keeps them away from research. Secondly, universities have another important role: the role to educate future scientists and lecturers. For those junior academics, training in research and teaching methods is crucial. Nobody is born with all skills required for excellent research and teaching. It is hard work and it requires thorough preparation. Therefore, each university which claims to provide excellence in teaching has to set up strategies on how to effectively train their faculty members.

If an organization determines a strategy the organization will have to define measures and monitor and assess the effects of these measures. However, is it possible to **measure the quality of teaching**? While some key performance indicators may be used to measure the R&D output (e.g. publications, amount of research funding allocated), measuring the quality of teaching is even more difficult.

When looking at the **output of universities** in terms of teaching, the employability of the university graduates could serve as an indicator, however, the employability as such cannot be measured easily, since the employability is not equal to actual employment and salaries of university graduates. So, looking at the result of teaching does not render clear results on the quality of the education.

When looking at **input factors**, the quality of education primarily depend on the students and the faculty members. If universities have a rigorous selection process for students, these universities may have a high retention rate of students and a highly motivated and highly able student population. Rigorous selection processes, thus, help to achieve a high level of quality among the students. Whether a higher education institution is able to pursue such a selective process depends on the number of applications. Only such HEI which have a high reputation will have a high number of applicants. This leads – again – to the importance of matching brand image and brand identity in regard to the quality of education.

And what about faculty? The quality of faculty is, in most HEI, assessed in the light of their research achievements. However, being an excellent researcher does not automatically mean that the professor is a good teacher as well. Knowing the academic field is a prerequisite but not the only condition for being a good lecturer. Whether a professor will be willing to invest in his/her abilities in teaching depends, *inter alia*, on the reward system and the career paths provided by the HEI. These issues will be discussed in the next part of this paper.

HR DEVELOPMENT AT UNIVERSITIES

According to standard definitions of HR development, human resource development includes all measures which are taken in an organization in a structured and planned way in order to achieve the goals of the organization in terms of education, improvement and training of its members (Becker).

Universities are **expert organizations**. This means that the main asset of universities are their faculty, staff and students. At the same time, human resources at universities are demanding and not easily managed. Experts seek freedom, acknowledgement in the scientific community and rewards for their achievements. Professors, especially at a senior level, have a high level of self-esteem, which implies that they would usually not respond favourably to any HR measures which are imposed on them from above. The nature of universities as expert organizations requires specific processes in the implementation of new standards and tools which involve those persons whom the measures are addressed to. There has to be a participative process where faculty and staff members are able to voice their concerns and bring in their ideas. The expertise and knowledge of the faculty members should be used by the organization to arrive at well defined and also well accepted measures.

If a university aims at excellent teaching (see above part 2 on university strategies), this strategic goal has to be reflected in all processes and decisions in the university. If it is a key strategic priority that faculty members should provide excellent teaching, the university should first of all **hire such faculty which have a passion for teaching** and who are well qualified for teaching. Ideally, candidates for faculty positions shall have didactical knowledge. They should be able to reflect on their teaching methods and outcomes, they should have a willingness to further develop their teaching skills and they should, especially be ready to engage in intensive dialogue with their colleagues in order to provide a consistent education for the students in the specific programme. Faculty who are qualified for teaching can also be expected to coach other colleagues on their teaching, they should introduce innovative teaching methods

and interact effectively with students.

In addition, **specific measures for didactical training** of such faculty members who are lacking these qualifications need to be introduced. These measures could include seminars on the **planning of courses** with respect to

- learning outcomes
- teaching methods
- examination tools
- combination of face2face teaching and e-learning parts

In addition, the seminars shall address issues of the role of lecturers and students. In the light of the paradigm shift from knowledge transfer from faculty to students to a more balanced system of common creation of knowledge, also through the use of social media, the role of professors has been changing gradually. While professors would in certain contexts have the task to introduce students to an academic field, to explain certain concepts and make these concepts comprehensible to students, faculty members will in other contexts serve as coaches, especially in thesis supervision or research seminars at higher academic levels.

The introduction of these HR development measures at higher education institutions will, however, only work if

- a) faculty is involved in the creation of these programmes (participative process);
- b) the incentive system of the university provides material and immaterial rewards for engagement in good teaching.

Providing **incentives for investments in teaching** can include monetary incentives (bonus system), immaterial awards ("best teacher award") and career paths. If career opportunities at universities are linked to achievements in teaching, faculty members will be more likely to invest time and energy in their teaching abilities.

CONCLUSION

This paper discusses the following questions: Investing in the quality of teaching in higher education: Why and How? The first question, namely WHY higher education institutions should invest in the quality of teaching cannot be answered in a general way which fits all universities. Those higher education institutions, however, which claim to provide excellent education HAVE TO invest in the quality of teaching. Otherwise, these universities would not be able to fulfil the claims they make. These universities would have gaps between their brand image and their brand identity. This would, in the mid- to long run drive away all stakeholders: students, sponsors and faculty. If, on the other hand, a university is strongly research based and has a clear vision and mission to achieve outstanding results in research, this university will not have a need to invest in the quality of the teaching of their faculty. The opportunity costs would be too high and they would contradict the main objective of the institution.

The second question, namely HOW to invest in the quality of teaching, should be answered by taking into account the organizational culture of the respective higher education institution. The focus on the quality of teaching should, in those universities which claim to be teaching oriented, be of high relevance in the hiring of new faculty members. When it comes to the introduction of programmes and measures to increase the didactical skills of faculty, the organizational culture plays a major role as well. Since universities are, *per se*, expert organizations, an introduction of measures which aim at enhancing the quality of education, shall be designed, planned and implemented in a participative manner, using the know how, skills and competences of the faculty of the institution.

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