Assessing faculty's performance: war of the worlds?

GABRIELLA KECZER

In the vast majority of Hungarian state universities individual performance is not assessed, according to a recently conducted survey including 11 institutions. Assessing individual performance in the academe is a controversial and delicate issue not only in Hungary, but also all over the world. More controversial and delicate than in the corporate world or even in the public services. Nonetheless, assessing individual performance has an enormous impact on motivation, engagement of the employees, institutional effectiveness and the output.

In the first part of my paper I deal with the conceptual framework of individual performance assessment of the university faculty. I list those characteristics of higher education that make performance assessment a difficult and complex issue. These concerns must be taken into account when elaborating and introducing an assessment system at any Hungarian universities. However, these characteristics do not make individual performance assessment a 'mission impossible' at the universities, only a complex professional task.

Individual performance assessment of the university faculty has been introduced and operated successfully in several countries of the world. In the second part of my paper I present some good practices pursued at foreign universities – they could be adapted to Hungarian state universities.

Keywords: higher education, faculty performance, performance assessment, teaching, research and service roles

1. Introduction: individual performance assessment and its significance

„Performance assessment is a process of an organization to get and give feedback about the performance of its employees" (*Elbert* et al 2003, p. 254.). Evidently there are many other definitions of performance assessment in the literature, also called 'performance appraisal', but the one cited is absolutely adequate for us. The literature, emphasizing the significance and the role of individual performance assessment in the success of organizations, is also huge; we mention only some of the most important considerations. „In every situation, be it organizational or individual, performance has to be managed and measured to ensure continuous excellence. The performance of the employees holds the key to the success of the organization" (*Yu* et al 2009, p. 814.). „Performance appraisal is an important supporting activity for the accomplishment of organizational goals and to channel individual behaviors. Appraisal mechanisms are means by which an … organization measures success, identifies problem areas and monitors progress" (*Dilts* et al 1994, p. 21., p. 5.).

Decisions in organizations, such as strategy, resource allocation, salary, promotion, work load, etc. can be either performance based or non-performance based (*Dilts* et al 1994). Subjective, ad hoc decisions, made without systematic, formal performance assessment may have the following negative impacts:

- inequity of performance and reward demoralizes employees,
- expectations of the organization are not clear to employees and can not be enforced,
- due to the lack of motivation individual competencies are not manifested,
- poor performance and its reasons are not revealed, thus development is improbable,
- etc.

Archer makes it clear: if universities are unable to recognize and reward high-achievers, some of the best will leave. And some that remain will become de-motivated (*Archer* 2005).

Performance based decisions have the following positive impact:

- merit pay and reward fosters equity and morale,
- regular appraisal and feedback help organizational expectations to be met,
- measuring and rewarding good performance have a motivational effect,
- revealing poor performance helps to develop employees and activate dormant capacities (based on *Pálinkás–Vámosi* 2001).

Individual performance assessment can be the base of:

- rewarding and stimulating individual effort and contribution,
- mapping development needs,
- revealing strengths and weaknesses of employees,
- following their progress,
- planning human resources,
- providing information to decisions concerning personnel,
- reviewing jobs, workload, expectations, division of labor,
- giving feedback,
- forming realistic strategy and goals,
- etc.

As any other organizations, universities also make use of individual performance assessment. The purposes of performance assessment at universities are:

- Administrative – promotion, dismissal, organizational planning,
- Motivational – self appraisal and acts as incentives to hard work,
- Developmental – identifying training needs,
- Performance improvement – through MBO, participative goal setting and other work planning processes (based on *Okafor* 2005).

Steps of individual performance assessment:

- definition of performance expectations for the next evaluation period,
- assessment of the extent the expectations were met to,
- analysis of accomplishment or lag,
- execution of rewarding, training or career change (*Poór* et al 2008, p. 115.).

2. Performance assessment in higher education

2.1. Characteristics of higher education related to performance assessment

The notion of assessment has become accepted among the employees in the competitive sector, and this attitude is now spreading to the civil servants of the public service sector. But the overall attitude of a/the faculty toward performance assessment is quite different: although many members of the faculty are for it, some are skeptical, others are even hostile. That can be one reason why in the vast majority of Hungarian state universities individual performance is not assessed according to a recently conducted survey, (*Poór* et al 2008) including 11 institutions. The arguments underpinning that performance assessment is impossible, or at least hard to execute in university context, are many.

One commonly mentioned argument is the intangible character in the output of education. Among others, Salmon cites this argument. While personnel assessment is possible in industrial or bureaucratic contexts, it proves to be impossible when production relates to intangible goods, such as knowledge or education. Thus, the system put in place in certain sectors, such as the customs or finance administrations, was unsuitable for higher education. This opinion, largely held by teachers, is often the basis for the refusal of any of the managers' vague assessment attempts. *Dilts* et al also mention the intangible characteristics of services, such as education, when talking about performance assessment at universities. 'Educational outputs cannot be physically gauged, weighed or inspected for defects. In the absence of a physical product, assessment of quantity and quality of output becomes more complicated. The intangible characteristics of education require far more sophistication in performance appraisal because of the identification and measurement problems associated with the assessment of performance without a tangible output' (*Dilts* et al 1994, p. 18.).

There are other characteristics of higher education that make performance assessment a special issue. According to a common opinion, implementing an assessment system at universities is genuinely difficult, not only because of its inherent difficulties, but also due to the specific context of higher education. „The diversity, sometimes the status, and often the highly specialized nature of the jobs, and the mutual misunderstanding between teachers and administrative and technical staff, make universities a complex place to carry out the assessment process" (*Salmon* 2008, p. 32.). We also have to mention the complex role a professor has, making assessment a complex task: teaching, doing research, conducting service, mentoring, fund-raising, administrating, etc. As Yu say „with the introduction of technology as aids for teaching, especially during the 1990s, the job of an educator has grown in complexity to involve not only disseminating knowledge, but also to keep oneself up to date with new knowledge while conducting research on new discoveries besides giving pastoral care to students. It is difficult to put into words how the profession of education can and should be measured with such diversity" (*Yu* et al 2009, p. 819.).

In addition, higher education is a slow and loosely coupled system, thus performance expectations must differ from those of the corporate world. *Dilts* et al also add an important point to the issue: „Academic decision making should not and cannot be constrained by profit-maximizing goals if educational progress is the goal" (*Dilts* et al 1994, p. vii.). As they say self-interest, campus politics and conflicting evidence often cloud the understanding of the goals and processes of performance appraisal.

The survey conducted at Hungarian universities reflects the same opinions. Some say that without clear organizational goals performance assessment should not be introduced. Experiences show that assessing individual performance is not the interest of most of the faculty, thus fierce opposition, or at least tough bargaining, would precede its introduction. The survey proved the general opinion that in higher education it is hard to measure and evaluate performance, because there are no traditions, no methods, models and practices to adapt. (There are several good practices, methods and models all over the world to adapt – author's note). Quantitative factors, such as the number of lectures and publications, or the contentedness of students cannot reflect the quality and effectiveness of one's work (*Poór* et al 2008, pp. 115–144.).

Salmon describes performance assessment as an issue where the permanent war of the worlds in the academe clearly shows. Higher education is traditionally a sector where several worlds cohabit. A higher education institution can be summarily described as the juxtaposition of a bureaucratic structure principally deployed in the civic world and a professional structure (the teachers) and more focused on the inspiration-driven world. This world is embodied in the figure of the creative genius who cares little about criticism or the market value of his work. Higher education teachers, partly because they are by definition teacher-researchers, are part of this world: the only important thing is the beauty of their research, the scientific value of their publications and the accuracy of their work, regardless of whether these activities result in practical, potentially marketable applications. Therefore, universities are often described as places where two worlds co-exist, which of course does not mean that teachers are without a sense of public interest. The state and the management of the institution, whether they like it or not, hold the values of this market-driven world which stresses the necessity to be competitive, to reduce costs and to attract customers. In this world values consist of conquering market shares and the market-driven world clashes with the inspiration-driven world of the teacher-researchers, as well as with the rigid civic world of the other personnel.

Thus, implementing a reform (personnel assessment) is high likely to revive what we call the war of the worlds within the higher education sector. Therefore, the assessment process will be strongly promoted by the management in the name of the values of the market-driven world. It will improve quality and therefore market competitiveness. On the other hand, it will clash with the teachers who appeal to the inspiration driven world so as to deny the capacity to assess, (in the sense of giving value to) their work, and the right to curb their creativity. The other personnel categories, part of the civic world, will reject it, as they perceive it as a solution promoting the interests of the individual to the detriment of the public interest and serving the interests of the private sector before those of the public service. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that carrying out the assessment process provokes what the authors of the theory call a controversy, the confrontation of several worlds. There are three different ways to resolve this controversy. The first one is to simplify a world: one of the higher principles overcomes the others and the players adopt this principle, accepting the fact that the controversy will be resolved in one certain world rather than in another. The second solution is to search for what is called an arrangement, i.e. a local agreement, similar to bargaining which cannot be generalized on a larger scale and can only be temporary. The third way to resolve a controversy is to aim for a compromise: a more sustainable agreement, exceeding the "values" involved, by establishing a certain dosage of the mix and genuinely combining the ranges of actions of all the players (*Salmon* 2008, pp. 39–42).

All these concerns must be taken into account when elaborating and introducing an assessment system at any Hungarian university, but these do not make individual performance assessment a ‘mission impossible’, only a complex professional task.

2.2. Aspects of performance assessment in higher education

Questions to answer before the elaboration and introduction of a performance assessment system are many, such as:

- What to assess: what kind of activities are those that counts – teaching, research, service– and how to weigh them in the overall performance?
- How to assess: what criteria, standards and evidence should be used and how they should be recorded in the assessment process?
- Who should assess – the individual (self-assessment), the chair, the students, the peers–, and how to make them competent, how to avoid them being biased?
- How to use the results: what the consequences of extreme performance should be? Is merit pay too daring?

We deal exclusively with the question of what to assess.

If individual performance is not assessed at universities (this is so in most of the cases in Hungary) the only criteria for the assessment of one's performance is their scientific output, since it is measured right from the time one starts their career in higher education. To get access to a doctoral school, to obtain a PhD, to accomplish habilitation, to win scholarships and attain managerial positions one has to have an attractive scientific output embodied in publication and citation lists and impact factors. Thus, scientific efficiency is the only criteria one is evaluated against, although a faculty member has at least 3 kinds of tasks: teaching, doing research and conducting service. „Publish or perish! may be the easiest of all performance based appraisal systems to be administered. This system is completely appropriate if publication in leading journals is all that needed to accomplish the mission of the school. But most academic institutions have teaching and service portion of their mission. If teaching and service are expected, they must be evaluated and weighed in decisions concerning personnel" (*Dilts* et al 1994. p. 42.).

The omnipotence of scientific output roots in the Humboldtian model of university, but as Voeks states: „There is no theoretical basis or empirical evidence that demonstrates that research and teaching must be positively correlated" (*Voeks* 1962). The reason can be that „the demonstration of knowledge through publication in referred journals shows that a faculty member is keeping abreast with at least some portion of their academic discipline, but it does not assure that they also have a breadth of necessary knowledge to be an effective teacher of specific courses." (*Dilts* et al 1994, p. 43.). At an average Hungarian state university, especially at faculties having kind of a 'community college' role, a younger member of the faculty having 12–14 lectures a week has to run courses in several different disciplines, while their research must focus on only one specific topic, since publications in other topics do not help their doctoral and habilitation efforts, or to win a research (e.g. Bolyai) scholarship. In these activities one has to prove that they have significant results in their field of research, thus doing scientific work in other fields is definitely a waste of time, money and energy. So talking about the Humboldtian unity of teaching and research, and asseverating the omnipotence of scientific output when evaluating one's performance as a faculty member, lack realities, although match the priorities of those influential professors – with great scientific achievements and less involvement in teaching – who control the system.

2.3. Foreign practices

An admirable attitude: University of New Hampshire

The Philosophy of Performance Management of the University of New Hampshire is the following: "Our ability to fulfill our mission of educational and research excellence and to contribute exemplary service to the larger community largely rests in the hands of our employees. In recognition that the quality and commitment of the University's workforce is an integral part of overall institutional effectiveness, we seek to make explicit the University's core values regarding performance" (University of New Hampshire 2011).

A classical method: University of Leeds

In 2000 a unified staff review initiative was settled to focus the purpose of the activity on a review of objectives and job and career planning rather than a bureaucratic, paper based imposition. Regular reviewer and reviewee trainings are provided and the new Fund for Special Payments specifically identifies ways in which rewards can be made for outstanding performance. It is the task of the heads of departments to appoint the reviewers. They are one of the staff's immediate supervisors or an experienced member of staff. After each review cycle the departments are asked to confirm that the review meetings have been completed and to report back any training needs or issues arising from the Reviews.

The heads of departments are reviewed by their dean biennially in relation to their performance in the headship role. They are required to invite staff from all categories into the department to comment on their performance as heads, directly to the dean. Deans are reviewed by pro-vice chancellor, the vice-chancellor by the pro-chancellor. For senior managers also a 360 degree feedback review model was introduced through an online questionnaire. For senior management, the staff peers and the customers are encouraged to contribute to the feedback.

The HR department suggests using a review scheme to do the reviewing. The review scheme consists of 3 parts. Section A is a review of performance and progress since last review. In this section the reviewee is asked to:

- review your progress during the period concerned, indicating particular achievements, and strengths; any problems, concerns or constraints and the extent to which you believe you have met your previous objectives,
- evaluate the benefit of any training or professional development you have undertaken in order to meet your previously agreed objectives,
- suggest work objectives for the next 12 and 24 months, and longer term, including any wider career plans,
- suggest areas in which your skills and abilities might be developed and ways in which this might be achieved.

Section B is a record of discussions during the review meeting. This section should be completed by the reviewer within 10 working days of the Review Meeting. In this section the reviewer should give:

- a summary of progress, achievements and performance for the period under review,
- objectives for the forthcoming 12 months and any longer term aims,
- personal and career development plans agreed.

In Section C the reviewee can make his comments after reading the reviewer's opinion. A copy should be returned to the reviewer and to the head of department within 10 working days of receipt. In the event of serious disagreement over the outcome of the review, the reviewee should request a meeting with the head of department or the designated second reviewer (*Keczer* 2006).

We must add that progress in university management including human resources are initiated and strongly supported by the state in the United Kingdom. In the frame of a government initiative called „Rewarding and developing staff in higher education", 330 million pounds were allocated in 4 years to universities for HRM development including the introduction or the development of performance assessment system (*HEFCE* 2002).

Closer to Hungarian reality: Nigeria

Every University lecturer in Nigeria receives a written performance appraisal annually which provides a feedback on performance and justifies decisions concerning personnel such as promotion. This official form includes a self-assessment page for the lecturer to fill out and it is sent in turn to the respective departmental heads who state their perception. Then the completed form is forwarded to the appointment and promotion committee where it is reappraised and action is recommended. This could be a promotion, continuity with the system, a termination or a warning. The behavior standards expected from the university staff, which form the core of the performance appraisal, are set in the staff hand book, and these standards relate to the tasks that determine academic excellence and the output. Academic peers apply these standards through collegial review.

Problems of this system are the followings:

- The ratio of lecturer to student for a specific course in most public universities ranges from 1:90/200. This large student population impacts the level of resource and is time dedicated to research, publication and community service. Yet emphasis is on publication as a criterion for performance (Publish or perish!) and such publication should preferably be in an international journal. Incidentally mentioned, lecturers' remuneration is hardly able to support such demand. A senior lecturer having a PhD earns a salary of $9000 per year, and this cannot support their payment of an annual subscription to a professional body to attend a conference abroad.
- Performance appraisal in itself is carried out as an event rather than a process. It occurs at a given time of the year, in the month of April.
- A country, unlike the UK and New Zeeland, where students feedback form an important aspect of the proposal, public universities in Nigeria are still toying with the aspect of students inclusion.
- There are problems relating to subjectivity (*Okafor* 2005).

An innovative way: University of Malaysia

The system based on the electronic version of the balanced scorecard is well-known in business. It provides a new method for aligning the objectives of individual lecturers to the organizational goals while offering a way for the individuals to plan their goals and take corrective actions ahead of time.

The actors of the system are: staff – responsible for updating the system with current achievements and keeping track of individual performance; appraiser – continuously monitors the performance of individuals and that of the department, and formally reviews and scores individuals at the end of a performance period; faculty dean – selects the key performance indicators (KPIs) relevant to the faculty from the list of corporate KPIs and assesses the overall performance of the faculty; and system administrator – performs system maintenance and management.

Then the academic staff will continually update personal achievements on the e-BSC, while the appraiser monitors the progress of the individuals in the Tracking Stage/tracking stage. At this stage, the current performance of the individuals can be continually monitored to enable ongoing feedbacks from the superior and to ensure corrective actions that are carried out immediately. When the formal evaluation period ends, the appraiser evaluates the staff's final performance by entering the corresponding scores. Following this, the e-BSC automatically calculates the scores to produce the average overall points and to generate performance reports on the performance of the department that can be viewed by the individual or by the appraiser, or on individual, departmental or overall faculty performance reviewed by the dean. To ensure the effectiveness of the e-BSC, the system administrator constantly performs system maintenance and management to preserve the logic of the system. At the end of a formal evaluation period, performance charts are generated by the system, based on the calculated scores and the overall average points.

Since every institution of higher education would have different expectations from the academic staff, the e-BSC has to be slightly modified accordingly, to be suitable for the respective institution; the faculty scorecard should not automatically populate the lectures' personal scorecard. The individual lecturers should be allowed to select the relevant KPIs instead, from the faculty scorecard, to plan how they can contribute to the university (*Yu* et al 2009, pp. 820–826.).

3. Conclusions

Higher education is a particularly difficult sector to enforce the assessment process. Its specific characteristics, multiplicity of staff positions and status, the various history of the academic institutions, also its traditions of independence and free spirit, make higher education a real challenge for implementing a personnel assessment process. However, contrary to what some people claim, these specific characteristics do not make the assessment approach impossible, only specific.

CEOs of for-profit corporations argue that a push to upgrade human capital is vital. Some call it „Leadership Darwinism" and are afraid of its demoralizing effect, but many emphasize that it is just the opposite. We must agree with them, as Grote says: „top performers relish working in an environment free of non-contributors, and what genuinely demoralizes is a climate that tolerates mediocrity" (*Grote* 2000, p. 4.).

There is a great number and a wide range of practices abroad that could be adapted by Hungarian universities. Adaptation means to change something to suite different situations or uses, so adaptation is the mean between the two Hungarian extremes: a) doing nothing, b) mindlessly implementing a foreign system.

Strategy and funding are the key factors of progress. When admiring the British universities for their spectacular development in human resources management, we have to add that the initiator and the sponsor of the national project, giving a solid professional and financial framework to the institutions' activities, was the government. Without a central initiative and support, the progress, if any, will be slow and sporadic in Hungary.

Whether individual performance assessment significantly contributes to the achievement of the goals of the universities depends on the consistence of the key performance indicators with the mission of the institution. 'Publish or perish' may help a good scientific output, but may undermine the teaching and the service element of the mission. A balanced attitude is much favorable: some are better at teaching, others at service or research. The question is very simple: who is the sail and who is the anchor on the ship.

Individual performance assessment is an essential tool of motivation and development, as well. Underestimating the importance of the faculty being motivated and developed can be dangerous at least on the long run, because at the universities the output depends not only on technology, but also on the engagement of the workforce, and the social impact of the quality of professors' work is enormous.

References

Archer, W. 2005: *Mission Critical? Modernising Human Resource Management in Higher Education*. Higher Education Policy Institute, Oxford, UK

Dilts, D. – Haber, L. – Bialik, D. 1994: Assessing What Professors Do. *Greenwood Press*, Westport, USA

Elbert F. – Karoliny Mártonné – Farkas F. – Poór J. 2003: *Személyzeti/emberi erőforrás menedzsment kézikönyv*. KJK, Budapest

Grote, D. 2000: The secrets of Performance Appraisal. *Across the Board Magazine*, 37, 5, pp. 14–20.

HEFCE 2002: Rewarding and developing staff in higher education. Higher Education Funding Council for England (www.hefce.uk)

Keczer G. 2006: Humánerőforrás-menedzsment a Leeds-i Egyetemen – egy követhető példa *Humánpolitikai Szemle*, XVIII, 2, Budapest, pp. 59–70.

Okafor, T. 2005: Performance Appraisal a chore or a cure – A review of public sector approach of Nigerian Universities. Conference proceedings “Trends in the Management of Human Resources in Higher Education”. www.oecd.org [Accessed 18 October 2011]
Pálinkás J. – Vámosi Z. 2001: *Emberi erőforrás menedzsment*. LSI Kiadó, Budapest
Poór J. – Bencsik A. – Fekete I. – Majó Z. – László Gy. 2008: *Trendek és tendenciák a magyarországi állami egyetemek HR-rendszereinek továbbfejlesztése területén*. http://www.econ.unideb.hu [Accessed 18 October 2011]
Salmon, E. 2008: Assessment of Higher Education Personnel: Comparative Study of France and Finland. *Higher Education Management and Policy*, 20, 1, pp. 25–46.
Voeks, W. 1962: Publications and teaching effectiveness. *Journal of Higher Education*, April, pp. 212–218.
Yu, M. L. – Hamid, S. – Ijab, M. T. – Soo, H. P. 2009: The e-balanced scorecard (e-BSC) for measuring academic staff performance excellence. *Higher Education*, 57, pp. 813–828.
University of New Hampshire 2011: Philosophy of Performance Management. http://www.unh.edu [Accessed 12 October 2011]