

Changes in Academic Profession: A Comparative Analyses (CAP)

Abstract

The overall objective of this empirical, quantitative-oriented research focused on examining and analyzing the attitudes of university teachers about the academic profession. To put it more precisely, the objective was to answer the following questions: (1) how are university teachers satisfied with the situation at their work place and with their responsibilities? (2) has the relationship towards teaching changed and, if it has, how?; (3) what is the relationship between teaching and research?; (4) how are they satisfied with the conditions and possibilities of research?; (5) how are they satisfied with the governance style within their institution?; (6) do they have influence on the decision-making process? Considering similar previous research was conducted using the same methodology in several different countries, we compared the results where the construct validity of variables allowed it.

For the purposes of this research we did not develop an explicit question about the impact of the current reform of higher education, known as the Bologna process, on the attitudes of university teachers according to their own profession. Nevertheless, certain reflections cannot be avoided considering the research was conducted in the full swing of the reform implementation.

The research findings indicate a slow process of internationalization of the academic community in Croatia. Such a conclusion is drawn from the fact that there is a small proportion of the population who acquired part of the core and scientific qualifications at other and especially foreign universities. It is expected that, with further implementation of the Bologna process and in particular the implementation of European student and teacher exchange programs, the percentage of university employees who will gain their qualifications abroad will grow as well. But at the moment we cannot talk about significant changes in this respect. In other words, the results demonstrate that the process of internationalization, as measured by the before mentioned indicators, has not significantly affected the Croatian academic

community and that Croatia significantly lags behind other countries in CAP. The horizontal mobility between higher education institutions, as well as other institutions outside the higher education system in Croatia is also not a significant trend. In fact, 74.1% of respondents work at the same higher education institution of their first employment.

The idiosyncrasy of the higher education system in Croatia is shown in the additional workload of university teachers and associates at other higher education institutions. Less than half of respondents did not do any extra work, while during this or last academic year, 26.3% of teachers did additional paid work at another higher education institution or research institute, and 15% worked in other organizations (public or private) outside the academic community. Even though this is not a new phenomenon in Croatia, it is evident that the transition to the Bologna system, extending the duration of the study and the expansion of the higher education system (the opening of new universities and polytechnics) caused a significant deficit of teachers and increased the number of part-time associates at all institutions. The repercussions of these processes on the quality of studying and research can be foreseen.

The indicators measuring the importance of academic knowledge and its application in the external surrounding point out to an exceptionally low participation rate of Croatian higher education teachers and assistants in the work of local, national or international political bodies and social service organizations as well as in projects based on community needs. As expected, university professors with tenure are more likely to perform those duties or be members in relation to the other two groups of university teachers. Teachers and associates who have the highest level of education in biotechnological and biomedical field are more often members of national and international bodies, are reviewers more frequently and are more likely to perform the duty of members of governing bodies or be presidents of professional / academic associations / organizations in relation to the other three groups. Teachers from partially integrated universities have often worked with local, national and international organizations in providing social services, and teachers from integrated

universities were more likely to perform the duty of members of governing bodies or union presidents. Men are more likely than women to be reviewers, or editors of books, more often to be an elected representative and members of governing bodies or union presidents. Women are more likely to be members of or participate in projects based on community needs in relation to men. This finding is certainly linked to the age structure of respondents. In fact, the number of women in the sample (as well as in the population) declines with age.

Questions related to the satisfaction or dissatisfaction with various aspects of the functioning of the higher education system and the different work aspects, given the recent changes within the higher education system, suggest that teachers and associates are generally dissatisfied with all aspects analyzed. They are the least satisfied with the state policy towards the higher education system and science, with changes within the higher education system, with background knowledge and motivation of students enrolled and the university policy and the transparency of the decision-making process. In response to this battery of questions, teachers and associates are homogeneous.

Teachers and associates are generally satisfied with their employment (76% of respondents), while only 17.5% of respondents are fully or partially unsatisfied, with no differences between groups on all of the observed independent variables. These results are consistent with the results from other CAP countries, where members of the academic community, although displeased with various aspects and dimensions of work, in the end, still show a positive sentiment towards their profession.

Questions concerning the workload and attitudes toward teaching have pointed out several trends. In comparison with other countries of the CAP, it is evident that respondents in Croatia reported relatively high satisfaction with their employment and have expressed a sense of belonging to the scientific field, branch, department and institution. The average work week and the teaching load correlates with other countries, while assessing the quality of resources and working conditions they were close to the average of other countries. For example, during term, a working week of

teachers and associates lasts more than 40 hours, and out of term, the average working week lasts 40 hours. In relation to working conditions, teachers were satisfied with telecommunications, while just over 50% were satisfied with teaching technology and computer equipment. However, with all other aspects the level of satisfaction decreases considerably. For example, as much as 27.6% of teachers is not satisfied with their workspace, 29.1% with library services, and 32.8% with administrative support. The financial terms were evaluated the worst. Overall, female teachers rate working conditions worse in relation to men, although the degree of correlation of variables is small. Small differences were observed with respect to the profession and age. With respect to the variable of the organizational form of management, university teachers from the University of Zagreb and the teachers and associates from the technical field were satisfied with the conditions, even though the correlations of variables is again small.

In comparison to other CAP countries, a high percentage of Croatian participants (81%) believe their job requires significant personal effort. This can be connected to the nature of current reform changes, which has put high demands and expectations upon the profession.

Furthermore, there is a high degree of social awareness and perception of the importance of applicable knowledge, because 70.2% considered that university teachers have a professional obligation to utilize their knowledge for solving problems in society.

It is evident that both university teachers and associates foster the adoption of practical knowledge and skills in their teaching. This finding is interesting because it is often heard that students are not ready for professional work, that their education primarily puts too much emphasis on theoretical knowledge rather than practical. This may be a direct consequence of the Bologna implementation, which, as never before in the higher education system, puts emphasis on learning outcomes, or which exactly indicates the competencies students acquire during the education process. Respondents emphasize that teaching and research are mutually incoherent.

Furthermore, the teaching workload has increased over the past three years, directly at the expense of science and teaching. Higher education critics claim that higher education is gradually turning into secondary education, and that in this context we can speak about the negative trends and changes caused by the implementation of the Bologna process. Respondents consider that high expectations in terms of usefulness and application of results as well as the increase in research productivity can affect the quality of research.

A high percentage of university professors with tenure and those older than 50 years of age report that the pressure on researchers to gather outside funds for research has increased since their first employment. Some also consider that external donors and clients have a direct impact on their research activities. Likewise, some teachers and associates believe that the restrictions concerning financing and publishing research results have increased since their first employment. Regarding the aspect of funding, the majority of research is funded by the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, but only a small part in full. Institutions, public agencies (foundations) and business firms (the industry) fund research to a small extent, and the least represented are the private or non-profit organizations, i.e. local and regional governments and international sources.

Compared with the answers of respondents from other CAP countries, it is evident that Croatian teachers are less productive in publishing research results with an average of 4.6 papers over the last three years. CAP research results in Croatia, in the part related to governance, point out minor differences in mean responses of respondents with respect to independent variables. It is indicative that female university teachers and associates have less influence in designing and deciding on key academic policies, showing their disadvantaged position in the academic structure. Previous research also supports the claim that the marginalized groups in the Croatian scientific community are young researchers and women (Prpić, 1898).

Perception of university teachers and associates on who has the dominant influence on the institution's decision-making process for most variables is heterogeneous,

bearing in mind that a large proportion of respondents reported not knowing who makes key decisions, indicating a lack of transparency in decision-making and / or uninformed teachers. The two statements with which respondents showed the greatest agreement with are related to the increasing bureaucracy, i.e. tiresome administration and the increase in the representation of the centralized style of governance.

The results obtained indicate a strengthening of the bureaucratic and lacking the collegial model of institution governance as well as poor communication between management and teaching and research staff. It is also evident that the Croatian teachers and associates have little influence in designing policies, in relation to the situation in other analyzed countries. In that respect it would be very interesting to analyze the correlation between this trend and legislation. The evaluation of teaching is predominantly carried out by students, and the evaluation of scientific work is done through the system of professional advancement where the least represented is self-evaluation. In this regard, significant differences were observed in comparison to other countries.

It can be stated that the higher education reform in Croatia was implemented administratively with the university teachers and associates not being adequately informed, educated and involved. For now it remains ambiguous whether this is the main reason for the relatively high discontent of university teachers with the implementation and outcomes of the Bologna process or it is just that some aspects of the reform remain unclear.