

The appraisal and performance management of academics in Romanian public universities

Bogdan BĂCANU¹

Abstract: *The study is focused on the appraisal and performance management in the public organizations, with an emphasis on the Romanian academic world. The trigger of this study was generated by the notable incongruence between approaches in terms of performance appraisal in the public sector. The study case examines the staff assessment procedures, as well as amalgamated and distorted processes that lead to rather compliant staff versus performant one, in the same logic of seeking false virtues while chasing real performance criteria in evaluations.*

Key-words: *performance appraisal, performance management, public university*

1. Introduction into the general theoretical frame

From the outset it must be stated that the concept performance refers in Romanian to a particularly good result. The reference to performance management in current literature means a discussion about an ordinary result, not particularly a very good one. To comply with these trend of literature will continue to talk about "performance management", when in reality the subject will be about „results management”.

The problem of individual performance in an organization is linked to the performance of the organization. Evaluation and management of individual performance in case of public organizations is all the more necessary, as the organization's performance measurement is more difficult, rarest and with dramatic consequences in cases of unfavorable results. It is more difficult because its real substantive form in a public organization is still unclear (Băcanu, 2014).

Individual performance management in public organization is deficient because the fuzzy characteristic of its final product of and because of the market structure, generally a monopolistic one, typical for this type of organization. In some cases the performance of public organization is difficult to assess because there is not a convergent opinion of stakeholders on the nature of the performance. In other cases public organization is genuinely not interested in improving performance,

¹ Transilvania University of Braşov, b.bacanu@unitbv.ro

given its monopoly in the provision of a public good or service, in conjunction with the special conditions of supply.

In the case of state owned enterprises it should be easier to identify ways to associate performance with the final product, while in the case of organizations, such as universities, organizational objectives are more difficult to quantify.

For services offered by a university assessment criteria are continuity, consistency, and the conformity of the procedures used. In these conditions individual performance can be assessed difficult or has little relevance to what would be the organization's performance. For simplicity it is assumed that performance is consistent with the organization's mission.

The literature provides convergent approach and similar lists regarding the goals of assessment and its methods, the errors sources, as well the methods to avoid them. The assessment takes the form of a formal and periodic process and performance is designed to control both subordinate and superior behavior (McGregor, 1960). The procedures are regulated and tend to be uniform for a given category of public organizations, such as the Romanian public universities.

In many countries the formal assessment is based on personal interview, after which a notation is made. Scoring requires a formal methodology applied uniformly at national or regional level. The results are recorded in writing and be accompanied by observations. Following a superior score relative to that of colleagues it can get some benefits, such as, for example, a promotion. It is highly probably to overlap also an informal component, which is the result of observations accumulated over time, review conversations or random events (Torrington and Hall, 1991). The influence of this component is furthermore important as the assessed activity is more difficult to quantify and formalization is questionable (Drumea, 2014).

The balance between formal and informal is difficult to manage, especially when there are no prerequisites to ensure objectivity of assessment. The implication of politics is very important. Then the attribute "formal" goes from meaning "official" to the meaning "appearance".

Given the objective and subjective problems mentioned, the performance assessment is cataloged as a "trap" (Henry, 2004) and one of the most complicated and debated activities in the public sector (Roberts, 1998). Factors such unclear standards processing errors or reduced assessor's education in this training field, not to mention politics deformation of assessor's behavior, reduce confidence in the assessment based on performance (Daley, 1992).

2. Specific problems in Romanian universities

The idea of measuring the work of public servants has become a wave that travels from the US to other Western countries and then to the rest of the surrounding areas. From the landmark data set by Weber for the work in bureaucracy, and which would

almost perfectly accommodate the large public organizations in modern states, it went to Taylor's. In fact, we talk about a Ford variant, marked by the omnipresence of depersonalized IT "eye" of the manager.

Clearly and expectedly, in US appeared the first counter-waves of critiques in addressing the aberrations generated by this approach. In Romania, for reasons that are not fully clarified, formal alignment of the landmarks of this wave was done very quickly. But the alignment was made in the well-known a manner of "form without substance". For example, Romania has quickly adopted a so-called Bologna system for universities without any adaptation to national specificities of higher education.

In other words, provisions have been introduced in legislation on the functioning of individual performance assessment and management, but in practice appeared immediately negative effects of its premature and unprepared adoption. Instead of positive effects on the overall results of the organizations appeared more obvious the effects associated with abuse of power and arbitrary behavior of those who were involved in managing this process.

It hoped to obtain a de-politicization of public organizations, but in fact the opposite effect was obtained. The alleged objective results of an assessment of the performance of people have been replaced by a subjective opinion of an evaluator guided by political interests. "Politics" should be understood as a manifestation both related parties and as a manifestation of the power of stakeholders groups. The fact was observed in administration and justice, but also in education and the consequence has been the decreasing of public confidence in these institutions.

Universities yielded a "mix" with negative results. The general context of Romanian high education, the introduction of an assessment based on some industrial type tools and the climate of an environment with intense political activity generated negative effects of the type mentioned. Specific manifestations are extremely varied, each university presenting situations analyzed that fall into the category of textbooks case studies.

The legal basis for the so-called assessment process is a special law for education, Law no. 1/2011. In this law there are only some relatively vague clarifications, which strictly tie to individual performance assessment in universities. Assessment appears to be linked to both the teaching process and of the research process, allegedly carried out by academics. In parallel there is an assessment of compliance with the regulations associated with the activity, with special reference to academic ethics and issues of discipline. In law there is also a vague reference to a connection between the two "areas" rated, meaning that a poor outcome associated with the research activity can be considered a violation of a provision of discipline.

In practice problems of demarcation between teaching and research, as the boundary between voluntary action and those that are designated as a task, are insurmountable. This fact means that their treatment can be based only on common sense, but there is a rather high probability to slip into an abuse of power, generating a labor conflict.

The law provides that the assessments are mandatory, and also some partial details of associated procedures. For example, it states that the outcome of a particular type of assessment is public, but there are no other details to materialize this attribute. For example, it does not specify whether "public" means that the result is visible on the intranet, or on Facebook or it is to be published in the State Gazette.

Like many other laws of Romania, the law is designed guided by the idea of being completed with numerous instructions for its application issued by the education ministry in the form of ministerial orders. Obviously, according to the theory and practice of the existing law, the intentions of the law are significantly diverted by these additions, not to mention revisions and additions operated directly on the text of the law.

Besides the many passages with questionable interpretation and clearly uncorroborated between them, there are provisions that transfer to every organization the task to choose specific assessment tools. Obviously in this way it is neglected the explicit requirement that organizations regulations to comply with the spirit and procedures of existing law. In other words, problem assessment and performance management in Romanian universities are stuck in a jungle of internal regulations made by each organization. They show elements inconsistent with the legal system, but their "soft" character prevents a significant corrective treatment. Contradictions are demonstrated only in labor disputes and only if they result in a procedure in a court.

A quantitative analysis of regulations on performance assessment in universities is unlikely to be achieved, because the discouraging "motivational landmarks". On the one hand each university has a lot of regulations that relate to this topic. On the other hand, this analysis seems meaningless because the insignificant practical results of the application of assessments.

Reading carefully the various internal regulations, visible on universities sites, reveals very strange aspects. The predominant impression is that they were designed so that the organization can do anything without the assessed person could be able to contest or to have a reaction of any kind of doubt.

Regarding the practical result of the assessments it should be noted that for a total of 3-40000 teachers, those that are eliminated due to theses assessments are very exceptional cases. Rather they are eliminated on the basis of administrative conditions or abusive application of regulatory provisions, application generated by power games.

In "extreme" side, the positive impact of a favorable assessment is dimmed by a system of wage increments associated with teaching degree and seniority, as well as other wage conditionality applicable in a specific type of public organization. Even the so-called "merit pay", which is associated with an internal competition guided by an assessment of individual performance, is awarded based on each university's regulations, and they are questionable in most cases. I.e. "merit" is more connected with the individual administrative compliance mode by aligning to the power group in charge than the performance in teaching or research.

3. Study case: T University from Romania

The T University is one of approximately 50 public universities in Romania. By reference to a research performance ranking it is positioned in the top 15 universities. By reference to a ranking of compliance with legal regulations (ranking highly questionable because of underlying problems mentioned) it is in the last third.

Like all Romanian universities, the T University uses the current payroll system for staff, which does not provide differentiation based on performance, but only the possibility of granting a merit pay and some bonuses for research related activities. These bonuses are inspired by the ministry, partly funded by it and they stimulate publishing articles in ISI journals.

Merit pay is granted based on an aggregate indicator that includes an assessment of the relative research performance and of the teaching process. But it also integrates administrative criteria, including activities that are paid separately. This approach reflects the measure of adoption of the position of the university dominant power group.

Consequently, each criterion and their combination generate consistent dilemmas associated with the process of setting and of his use in practice. The criteria choose and its associated details are adopted on 2-3 levels vote procedures by various decision-making groups. The vote process mask the incompetence associated with the assessment, but also show some informal forms of illegitimate power of the dominant group. In other words, any rational or legal argument associated to the main issues is removed through an internal voting mechanism.

Under the label "quality management" is carried out a series of academics assessments by students or by fellow. Without insisting on the details it should be stated that if it had used the usual research standards in the field, the assessment design, in fact the whole research would not get the passing grade. Negative phenomena associated with poor quality of assessment procedures are diverse, including labor disputes involving specialized courts.

For now, given the obvious poor quality of these assessments the appraisals impact on academics assembly is insignificant.

If the wage effects of these evaluations were positive, it is noteworthy that it is much better "remunerated" the compliance at hierarchical order. So an assessment with objective claims has less effect than the subjective impression of a supervisor. As universities' hierarchies are more complex than the companies' ones, the hierarchical compliance means in reality a destructive form of groupthink. Finally it is to be noted that there is no element of assessment to match the performance with the university's "market behavior", translated into performance indicators related to students, and not into administrative abstractions.

4. Conclusions

Assessment and performance management of the employees in public organizations is an area of research that shows a significant number of dilemmas and problems that have not been solved even in theory.

In fact, applying different ideas and concepts in real life has done nothing but amplifying the problems identified in the initial theory and added a number of additional problems. Experience of the advanced Western countries suggests keeping an attitude based on common sense approach instead of embracing a "mechanical" industrial approach.

The concern for the introduction of a performance criterion in the Romanian public organizations is obvious, but rushing is not justified in regards to the mentioned dilemmas. Forcing Romanian Universities to adopt a performance management is all the more inappropriate, since the general public framework is still precarious for organizations and academic institution is even more complex than other institutions in Public Administration.

Although there is a legal obligation to conduct performance evaluation, the methodologies in the universities practice are dilemmatic. Given their said precariousness, their negative effects become predominant.

Assumptions and effects on quality assessment and performance management are confirmed by the general theory and practice, as well as case studies in the field. It allows a deepening of the subject and avoids the trap of using statistical averages that ignore the multitude of elements with unique character.

5. References

- Băcanu, B., 2014. The performance of public organization: still unclear. *Bulletin of the "Transilvania" University of Brasov*, Vol. 56(2), Series V, pp.111-116.
- Daley, D.M., 1992. *Performance Appraisal in the Public Sector*. Westport, CN: Quorum.
- Drumea, C., 2014. Staff performance evaluation in public organizations. *Bulletin of the "Transilvania" University of Brasov*, Vol. 56(2), Series V, pp.133-138.
- Henry, N., 2004. *Public Administration and Public Affairs* (8th edition). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- McGregor, D., 1960. *The Human Side of Enterprise*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Roberts, G.E., 1998. Perspectives of enduring and emerging issues in performance appraisal. *Public Personnel Management*, 27(3), pp. 301-320.
- Torrington, D. and Hall, L., 1991. *Personnel Management - A New Approach*. London: Prentice Hall.