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New trends in performance appraisal

25 May 2021, 14.00 – 16.00 pm (CET)

Account of the webinar

Introduction

The central objective of the webinar was to discuss how staff recruitment and promotion is organised in the context of new trends in performance appraisal, which includes steering away from purely quantitative indicators in measuring research productivity and staff performance. The seminar included an overview of current trends in assessment and three case-studies, from Flanders, the Netherlands and Norway.

Main discussion points

In the last couple of years, there has been a great number of initiatives launched by universities, policy-makers, and research funders to reassess how research performance was being measured. This was initially triggered by the Open Science movement. Today, the conversation is shifting to a holistic assessment of academic careers rather than simply its research component.

In 2019, the European University Association (EUA) launched a survey on career assessment (260 responses in 31 countries) which revealed that research was the main aspect being assessed based on bibliometrics. Interestingly the most important metric used was the "Journal impact factor" even though it was not designed initially as a measure of individual performance. Sensing, however, that change was afoot, EUA examined 10 case studies to evaluate how practices were changing and found some general principles across all of them:

- *Top-down and bottom-up dynamics*: Universities are taking the initiative for change by ensuring an interplay between top-down and bottom-up dynamics. It typically starts with staff who leverage existing networks in the university and bring the issue up to leadership. The leadership provides support and removes as many barriers as possible. Often, the leadership will assign a task-and-finish group to develop criteria that fit within the institution's strategy and provide resources for training and awareness events.

- *Joint responsibility*: There is recognition that this is a shared responsibility with university and the other actors in the system. The system must also change to align policies and the legal framework and provide capacity for university to set their own evaluation criteria.

The case-studies presented in the World Bank webinar confirmed these findings.

Nele Bracke, Senior Research Policy Advisor, Ghent University (Belgium) noted that before the University embarked on changing its approach to career assessment, several developments had taken place, particularly earning the “HR excellence in Research” label and focusing on staff welfare.

Assessment is important at the recruitment, staff development and promotion phases. Ghent started looking at the evaluation of the current staff and determined the principles and the indicators that would be used.

The prior evaluation model at Ghent was focused on output and quantitative indicators. Academic staff were constantly writing reports on what they had done and what they intend to do. They were competing against one another and their achievements in other areas than research were not counted. This led to a great deal of dissatisfaction.

The main idea behind the new model is that "Those who perform well will be promoted, with a minimum of accountability and administrative effort and a maximum of freedom and responsibility“:

1. The starting points for the new model are the talents of the academics and the trust that each one of them wants to progress in his or her career. The approach is merit- & evidence-based:

2. At the start of an evaluation cycle, the professor is not asked to set a list of mainly quantified objectives or targets, but to write a text in which he or she describes his or her personal ambitions (in relation to the larger context).

3. At the end of the evaluation cycle, the academic reflects on his or her most significant *achievements* ("What are you proud of?") instead of providing an exhaustive list of *output.*

4. The ambitions and achievements are explicitly NOT only geared towards research. The academic staff are asked to reflect upon 4 domains: (1) research, (2) education, (3) leadership & people management, (4) institutional & societal engagement. The specific individual focus might of course depend on the talents of the academic and the needs of the larger group). Inspiration for each domain is documented in a portfolio.

5. Each academic is part of several larger entities: the research group, the department, the faculty and the university. That is why each staff should also reflect upon his or her role at the group level: how do I fit in? How do I contribute to larger, more strategic goals?

6. Personal feedback and career guidance are essential elements of the evaluation model. Each academic is assigned an HR Committee, composed of peers and of HR experts. The HR Committee gives (1) advice to the Faculty Board regarding promotion and (2) and feedback to the academic staff. This feedback can include career guidance, support and coaching.

7. Finally, the evaluation rhythm is considerably slower than in the past. The standard now is an evaluation every 5 years (i.e., minimum provided for by law), instead of 2/4 years.

Ghent University aiming for? All academic talents (not only in research, but also in teaching, leadership and outreach) are valued, so academic staff are able to develop their own strengths, thus contribution to their research group, faculty and the entire university. Professors no longer compete with their colleagues but are promoted if they perform well. This should decrease the competition among peer within the university. This is expected to have a positive aspect on the work pressure. The

administrative burden is considerably lower than in the past. As a result, academics will have more time for their core academic activities.

Academic recruitment will be organized along the same lines/principles as the evaluation and promotion.

Two key lessons from the Ghent experience:

The responsible use of indicators involved identifying those that are feasible from the point of view of the evaluators and the administrators and that fit with the strategic profile of the University.

Engineering such a change requires ensuring internal institutional capacity and expertise, internal communication and ambassadors.

Ragnar Lie, Senior Advisor, Universities Norway, explained that both Open Science and DORA had an impact on their thinking. Universities Norway set up a working group (WG), which drew inspiration from the activities of EUA and the Dutch Rectors' conference (VSNU). The WG mandate included the following:

- How to include **bibliometric analyses** and indicators in assessments of researchers and research.
- How **openness** can be assessed at various stages of the research process.
- How published works **other than traditional academic articles** can be included in an assessment.
- What an appropriate **implementation of DORA** could mean in practice.
- **Multilingual dissemination** of research (the Helsinki initiative).
- How the Open Science Career Evaluation Matrix (**OS-CAM**) can be applied in a Norwegian context to recruitment and promotion.

Based on the "Open-Science Career Assessment Matrix", the WG came up with six principles:

1. Measure quality and excellence through a better balance between quantitative and qualitative goals: Bibliometric indicators should be used with caution and supplemented with other information.

2. Recognise several competencies as merits but not in all areas at the same time or by each staff: an individual academic is not expected to excel in all areas. It is the universities that must achieve the expected objectives given by the government regarding research, education and interaction with society, not the individual academic.

3. Assess all results, activities and competencies in the light of Open Science principles: Openness should be seen as an integrated part of the academic activity.

4. Practice transparency in the assessment and visibility of what should be recognised as merit: Individuals must know what criteria will be used to assess them and must be given insight into how the criteria are applied.

5. Promote gender balance and diversity: Changes in the assessment criteria must be sensitive to their impact on gender balance and diversity.

6. Assist in the concrete practice of job vacancy announcements and assessment processes locally: The framework should be a helpful tool in the recruitment and appraisal processes in the institutions and within the academic communities.

Furthermore, the WG proposed four recommendations:

1. To establish a comprehensive framework for the assessment of academic careers
2. To engage internationally in developing a Norwegian assessment model
3. To use NOR-CAM (the new tool kit that they developed) as a practical and flexible tool for assessing academic results, competence and experience for academic personnel.
4. To develop an 'automagic CV system': a user-friendly web-based CV system that enables academics to retrieve data that can be used to document competencies and results in their own career, including applications for positions, promotions and external funding.

The Matrix has been expanded to teaching, innovation, leadership, and other experiences in a flexible way. The approach stressed narratives, documented with evidence identified in the Matrix, to show career progression. Their tool kit can be used by institutions, funders, authorities and individual academic. The PowerPoint presentation includes a discussion on the role and responsibilities of each type of actors (p. 12).

Ragnar Lie stressed the need for an international consensus on this approach. Research and academic activity are international by their very nature. A real shift towards new assessment practices therefore requires multiple national and international actors to make changes.

The Dutch model was presented by Kim Huijpen, Policy Advisor, VSNU, and Rinze Benedictus, Strategic Advisor and Prof. Frank Miedema, Vice Rector for Research from the University Medical Centre Utrecht model. They stressed the following aspects:

A change in assessment of academic careers is important because of the gap between what universities and their staff aim for and what the system rewards. The system is too focused on research and needs to be more holistic.

A new approach requires a joint-up approach from universities, funders and authorities.

The transition to a new approach was facilitated by several priori developments such the Open Science movement, concerns over work pressure to the need to applying for research grants, concern for societal needs and scientific integrity and the implementation of more holistic a career assessment in Dutch universities. The transition took two years between Nov 2018 and March 2020.

The main aims of the new approach are to

1. Enable diversification of career paths to promote excellence in education, research, social impact, leadership and patient care.

2. A better balance between team and individual performance.

3. More focus on quality rather than quantity of work. Quality is defined as increasing knowledge and solving societal challenges.

4. Ensure that open science becomes the norm and stimulate interaction between scientists and society. This implies recognizing other research outputs in addition to publications (e.g., datasets and software).

5. More emphasis on the value of high-quality leadership in academia to ensure a strategic approach to research and teaching, achieve impact and enable the best working environment for research teams.

In other words, the aim is to promote a healthy and inspiring work environment that recognizes teamwork and a range of achievements that reflect what society expects from universities. This requires a change in culture, which takes time, and an approach that intertwines university strategy and individual and team talents.

To achieve this change, the following conditions are important:

- A broad dialogue within the sector and each university
- Exchange of good practice and experimentation: each university established a high-level committee to steer the change. The chairs interact at the national level.
- Investing in leadership, which gives HR a very important role to play
- Funders have implemented a narrative CV that stresses two aspects (https://www.nwo.nl/en/dora)
    - Academic profile: who are you as researcher? What is your vision and focus? How are these reflected in your work? How have you used available opportunities, such as grants?
    - Key outputs: motivated list of max 10 items, most relevant to the field, profile, proposal and/or society, contextualized, output specific indicators (so no h-Index, JIF, etc.); broad definition of output, more than just publications, explicit attention to Open Science (pre-prints allowed)

At University Medical Centre Utrecht, the hospital was run like a company and bibliometric were becoming very popular because they made complex decision supposedly fair and objective. But bibliometric indicators had a “streetlight effect” (certain fields appeared to do better than others) and they took the research in areas that were not as relevant to society. In addition, staff started wondering whether it was better to focus on the international research race and ignore the local patients in the hospital and the needs of the country?

Utrecht decided to align evaluation with institutional mission and involved external stakeholders (patient groups, industry, etc.).

Portfolio replaced the CV (see https://www.umcutrecht.nl/en/science-in-transition).

In that change process it was essential to secure the support of the rector and vice rectors.

Open science is now a priority at Utrecht as it is at EU (Horizon is now all based on open science)and the Dutch government levels. The Dutch national research evaluation protocol has incorporated

DORA: the main research funder, NWO, has also adopted DORA. This is essential in order to reduce tensions between what the universities are doing and how the funders evaluate proposals.

More on Utrecht University Open Science program is found here: https://www.uu.nl/en/research/open-science

More Dutch examples are found here: https://recognitionrewards.nl/

During the Q&A sessions, the following issues were surfaced:

Gap between the funders and the universities:

The are no legal frameworks working against DORA in Flanders/Belgium, but the distribution of funding from the government heavily depends on quantitative output indicators. So, this indirectly works against the uptake of DORA by the universities. This creates tension; the funding systems is changing much more slowly compared to evaluation systems. At the moment, all Flemish universities are rethinking their evaluation systems - so the funding mechanisms don't stop them, and it is hoped that the funding system adjust.

National and regional diversity is important in this discussion. Priorities and a path forward will look different in different national and regional systems depending on their starting point.

The transition is the same, but the path is different for each institution and national system. Depends on institutional autonomy and how detailed the law is.

Utrecht conducted a comparison across Europe and found out that change looks easier than what people think. https://rio.jrc.ec.europa.eu/library/mle-open-science-summary-article-enabling-systemic-change-through-mutual-learning

Adoption of the new approach:

Are there some disciplinary differences in adopting this new assessment approach? Humanities and social sciences (with the possible exception of Economics) are generally comfortable with the new system. Medical research resist change but those involved in translational medicine welcome it.

It is estimated that about 80% of academics in the Netherlands appreciate the new approach.

Some Dutch young scientists embrace this movement. They bring energy to the discussion. For young scientists, however, it is difficult because we don’t know what the world will look like in 20 years.

In summary, the key messages are:

1. The new approach requires cultural change, support from the leadership and bottom up and top-down processes

2. A joint-up approach with universities, government and funders will ensure a consistent approach to academic careers. Because academic careers are international, it is important to monitor international developments.

3. Narratives (instead of traditional CV) have become important, but they must be based on solid evidence.

4. The change will allow universities to emphasise teamwork and social engagement of both research and teaching.

5. The approach must be tailored to each university and the indicators used must align with the specific university strategy.