

Valuing Academic Excellence in Higher Education: The Case of Establishing a Human Development Unit in a European Start-up University

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Abstract : In the fusion of neoliberalism and globalization, Higher Education (HE) is becoming increasingly complex. The changing patterns of the economy worldwide caused the development of high value-added economy HE has been viewed as a social investment, significant for the development of knowledge-based societies and economies. In order to contribute to economic competitiveness universities are required to produce local and employable workers in order to fit into the neoliberal economic environment. The emergence of neoliberal performativity, which measures outcomes, is a key aspect in a neoliberal era. It facilitates the redesign of institutions making organizations and individuals to think about themselves in relation to their performance. Performativity and performance management systems lead academics to become more effective, professionally advance, improve and become better than others and therefore act competitively. Besides the aforementioned complexities, universities also encounter the challenge of maintaining a set of values to guide an institution's actions and which have always been highly respected in developing a HE institution. The formulation of a clear set of values also determines the institutional culture which will be maintained. It is evident that values create a significant framework for the workplace and may determine positive institutional results. Universities are required to engage in activities for capacity building which will improve their students' competence as well as offer opportunities to administrative and academic staff to professionally develop in light of neoliberal performativity. Additionally, the University is now considered as an innovation ecosystem playing a significant role in providing education, research and innovation to help create solutions to meet social, environmental and economic challenges. Thus, Universities become central in orchestrating multi-actor innovation networks. This presentation will discuss the establishment of an institutional unit entitled 'Human Development Unit' (HDU) in a European start-up university. The activities of the HDU are envisioned as drivers for innovation that would enable the university as a whole to maintain its position in a fast-changing world and be ready to face adaptive challenges. In addition, the HDU provides its students, staff, and faculty with opportunities to advance their academic and professional development through engagement in programs that align with institutional values. It also serves as a connector with the broader community. The presentation will highlight the functions of three centers which the unit will coordinate namely, the Student Development Center (SDC), the Faculty & Staff Development Center (FSDC) and the Continuing Education Center (CEC). The presentation aligns with the aim of the conference as it welcomes presentations to discuss innovations and challenges encountered in HE. Particularly, this presentation seeks to discuss the establishment of an innovative unit at a start-up university which will contribute to creating an institutional culture shaped by the value of academic excellence for students as well as for staff, shaping and defining the functions and activities of the unit. The establishment of the proposed unit is crucial in a start-up university both to differentiate from other competitors but also to sustain its presence given the pressures in a neoliberal HE context.

Keywords : academic excellence, globalization, human development unit, neoliberalism

Conference Title : ICHE 2022 : International Conference on Higher Education

Conference Location : Amsterdam, Netherlands

Conference Dates : September 15-16, 2022