Innovations in Education Provision

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Abstract. In spite of population depression that overall brought lower numbers of newly enrolled students across the region, UCM in Trnava is attractive for more and more students than many traditional competitors. As the funding system in our country is based on „per capita“ and scientific research criteria, UCM performs in good economic condition and can afford investments in infrastructure, qualified faculty members and innovations.

Research project focuses on organizational, managerial, administrative, and technological circumstances, in which the innovative potential at the University of Ss Cyril and Methodius in Trnava is being developed and sustained.

Introduction

Background Information on the University of Ss Cyril and Methodius

The University of Ss Cyril and Methodius (UCM) is one of two public universities with its seat in the city of Trnava, but its active educational and research impact and reach is well beyond the region of Slovakia. During its existence, UCM has developed into a modern and dynamic university with educational-research centers, equipped with modern information and communication systems. The educational and research focus of the university is aimed at the area of social, economic, health, natural sciences, humanities, pedagogical and historical sciences.

The University was established only 20 years ago and yet it belongs to prestigious and successful higher education institutions in central Europe.

In spite of population depression that overall brought lower numbers of newly enrolled students across the region, UCM in Trnava is attractive for more and more students than many traditional competitors. As the funding system in our country is based on „per capita“ and scientific research criteria, UCM performs in good economic condition and can afford investments in infrastructure, qualified faculty members and innovations.

Due to previous engagement in international projects subsided by European Commission University of Ss. Cyrill and Methodius in Trnava was invited to the project GAIHE-Governance and Adaptation to Innovative Modes of Higher Education Provision, based on a uniform methodology in order to promote the exchange of best practices across higher education institutions (HEIs) in the European as well as global context. The methodology was aligned with the other two streams of the GAIHE research, namely the literature review on innovation in education provision and the questionnaire survey outcomes that were focused on identification of innovation in education and its provision, on unveiling the major obstacles and motivating factors for innovation as well as on governance, management, and HR-related prerequisites for the raise of the innovative potential and competitiveness of European universities in the global arena.

Research project focuses on organizational, managerial, administrative, and technological circumstances, in which the innovative potential at the University of Ss Cyril and Methodius in
Trnava is being developed and sustained. The first part describes the wider environmental context of the respective HEI in regard to innovation-related issues. The next chapter describes innovations that were introduced in the HEI, and inspects closely various organizational factors that were especially helpful as well as harmful for implementation of these innovations. The basic research questions in this regard were:

Which characteristics of HEI’s governance, management, organizational structures and human resource management are proven helpful in promoting fast and effective implementation of innovations? In other words, what are the best organizational structures, best governance models, best management practices with regards to facilitating the introduction of innovative modes of provision?

The last part of the case study focuses on the delineation of future activities and plans that might be especially helpful for further promotion of innovation at the University of Ss Cyril and Methodius in Trnava.

Education represents the main activity of the university. 6403 students in 114 accredited study programs of daily and part-time study are currently studying at our four faculties and one institute. UCM contributes to the development of scientific knowledge, the dissemination and use of scientific knowledge in various fields of science. The university conducts research in all areas where the educational process is carried out at all levels. UCM, as a university college, pursues in its activities the two main objectives arising from its legal status: higher education research and science, and higher education. It builds its position of research and educational institution that develops an international research program in several areas of research (chemistry, humanities, social sciences). It mediates the recent findings in the education process for students of individual study programs in relevant areas of research. All study programs of graduates of PhD and Master's study are carried out in the areas of research, with an excellent evaluation of scientific output by the teachers.

Scientific research activities at UCM began to develop immediately upon its formation in 1997.

Methodology

In order to identify and describe major innovations in education the methods of semi-structured face-to-face interviews and focus groups were employed.

List of Questions that were Asked during the Interviews and Focus Groups

• What innovations in education provision or governance are implemented in the HEI?
• Which innovations in higher education provision increase the HEI’s competitive advantage?
• Which characteristics of HEI’s governance, management, organizational structures and human resource management are proven helpful in promoting fast and effective implementation of innovations? In other words, what are the best organizational structures, best governance models, best management practices with regards to facilitating the introduction of innovative modes of provision? In particular, what are the best practices regarding human resource management processes (recruitment, selection, compensation, training, development, performance management, talent management etc.), which help to build an innovative organizational culture in HEI’s?
• What are the main sources of obstacles faced by HEI’s when dealing with implementation and utilization of innovation? How can HEI’s effectively combat them?
• How are innovations in education provision internally supported by the respective HEI? For example, have particular organizational structures or initiatives been set up?
• What are the future plans of HEI in the respect of innovations in education provision or governance?
• What should HEI’s improve /change to become, in the next 5-6 years, more innovative/ an innovation leader on the global or EU level? Which innovations in education provision or changes in governance will become the most important in the future?
Results and Findings

Implemented Innovations in HEI

As the most addressed thematic categories, or topics related to the innovations in education, the following ones were identified:

**Academic information system at UCM in Trnava.** The Academic Information System (AIS) is a comprehensive information system designed especially for the management of all three levels of university education and management support of science and research of the University.

**E-learning at UCM in Trnava.** The aim of its introduction was to achieve a greater flexibility and interactivity of the learning process, and to improve the contact of students with the practice. In addition to the centralized system MOODLE at UCM, also the individual faculties strive to ensure e-learning activities within their own projects.

This automation will substantially save the time of teachers and allow them to use it for other activities. Another important advantage is the computerization of teaching materials and their availability. This makes it possible to use the contact hours for other activities outside the descriptions of learning materials, such as practicing the subject matter or practical examples or approaches to the given topic. Streamlining education will enable the increase of number of students / attendees with respect to time saving. As for part-time study, the creation of community is facilitated, because there is communication between students and between teachers and students, especially regarding the less frequent personal meetings.

**Creative agency Atteliér - theory and practice in one.** Another innovative feature through which the students fully use their time outside of teaching was the creation of creative agency Atteliér and its individual components (divisions/cabinets) at the Faculty of Mass Media Communication in Trnava. The Agency provides the possibility to carry out sports, artistic or other creative activities. Satisfaction can be measured by the number of applicants for involvement in the specified units.

**Internal system of quality assurance at UCM in Trnava.** The most important elements of implementation of the quality education policy at the University may include:

- assessment of study results through AIS;
- monitoring compliance with the conditions of the teaching and learning processes at the individual faculties and institute;
- assessing the quality of education through student questionnaires, which takes place within the CAF;
- report on the number of applicants (admitted or enrolled) from Slovakia and abroad for various faculties and institute;
- monitoring the number of students repeating courses in the standard length of study at the individual faculties and institute, and finding out the causes for such.

Another important criterion of the internal quality system includes the interconnection of education and research at UCM. Currently, the following possibilities are used:

- support of research in PhD studies; there is used also a system of allocating a number of institutional grants to PhD candidates under the age of 35 years;
- inclusion of research achievements into the educational process;
- promotion of competition for young scientific researchers;
- presentation of achievements at domestic and foreign symposia, which concerns mainly the third level education;
- periodic control of scientific-research activity of all teaching and scientific researchers at UCM, in the form of a short report on meetings of the relevant department at specified time intervals.

The educational process is evaluated by means of anonymous questionnaires by students, at least once per academic year. They comment on the overall level of teaching, the work of individual teachers, their methods of work, access to work, professionalism in teaching, willingness to
communicate with students, and in respect of the working time. Students also evaluate the teachers and their subjects depending on how they present and how they attract them, in other words, by popularity. Also, the overall personal, material, technical and information conditions for individual study programs were the subject of inquiries. Student polls are conducted by faculty in electronic or printed form and their conclusions are discussed in academic bodies.

Following particular innovations at the University of Ss Cyril and Methodius in Trnava that are especially helpful for the increase of the HEI’s competitive advantage, were identified:

- Support of an integrative approach.
- Centre for Social Services and Counselling (Faculty of Social Sciences).
- International Media Education Centre (Faculty of Mass Media Communication).
- International Institute of Interdisciplinary Research (Faculty of Mass Media Communication).
- Centre for European Studies (Faculty of Social Sciences).
- Week of Science and Technology.
- Language Centre (Faculty of Social Sciences).
- Startup and Coworking Centre POINTT (Faculty of Mass Media Communication).
- Internal quality assurance system and inspections (CAF system).

Main Obstacles Faced by HEI’s when Dealing with Implementation and Utilization of Innovation in Education

Generally, the most serious external obstacles are: an unsatisfactory legislative environment, serious problems in public procurement, non-transparent administration, lack of finance in the educational sector. Although the stakeholders of the university would like to engage in innovative activities, there is often lack of funds for innovation implementation.

The internal obstacles for innovation lie especially in the person-based barriers: Prejudices of teachers, encrusted (inflexible) thinking of educators, failure to adopt new methods and workflows, reluctance of older teachers to innovate the teaching process, obsolete forms, methods and procedures for evaluating students by teachers, lack of awareness of teachers about innovative ways of learning. Further, HR functions are not well designed especially in regard to raising innovative potential of the academic and administrative staff at the university.

Other related barriers relate to the personal negative attitudes of certain individuals and their resistance to change, fear, uncertainty as well as worries that things cannot be changed. Furthermore, there is another factor and it is a generational gap. Otherwise, some respondents pointed to the fact that modern trends represent the shift from contact teaching to online forms, hence affecting the direct contact; and thereby reducing the quality of interpersonal communication.

The last recommendation would be to communicate clearly that innovation in education is one of the contemporary pillars of university education. All HRM functions have to be aligned with this basic idea of requiring quality in teaching thus increasing pressure on the academic staff.

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