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LA CALIDAD DE LA VIDA LABORAL EN LA ACADEMIA: EL PRESENTE Y EL FUTURO DE LAS UNIVERSIDADES COMO ORGANIZACIONES

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ABSTRACT

THE QUALITY OF LIFE AT WORK IN ACADEMIA: THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE OF THE UNIVERSITIES AS ORGANIZATIONS

This paper aims to provide some implications about organizational well-being and risk factors evaluation in Academia. Moving from a mainstream literature on the “Healthy Universities” and the Job Demands-Resources model, the paper explores scientific contributions about the social, organizational, and individual conditions related to the quality of life at work in the academic communities. Some recurrent challenges of the academic working life (e.g. job insecurity, financial cuts, increased administrative demands, pressure at work, difficulties in academic career advancement and tough competition) are extensively stressing teachers, administrative staff, and students in many European and non-European universities. The purpose of the paper is to explore the literature about wellbeing in Academia and to introduce some guidelines developed by an Italian research network named “Quality of life at work”, presenting the theoretical framework, the process and the practical implications.

Keywords

Quality of life at work - Healthy universities - Well being - Job demands_resources model

Introduction.

Since a few decades ago, being an “Academic” was a positive professional identity, connected with a socially esteemed status and with the broader sense of responsibility and privilege to work in higher education. The academic working life was characterized by research, teaching and many tasks related to academic role. It was considered as a job with vital interests, not only in curricular issues, but also in a way in which the institutions of higher education are managed and governed (Farnham, 1999). Recently, changes in academic contexts have started to challenge the traditional authority of academics in the educational and decision-making processes of institutions. The professional quality of the academic staff, the processes through which they are recruited, rewarded, trained, and motivated have become increasingly essential for the effectiveness of modern higher education system. At the same time, the support of the administrative staff in Academia is no more simply addressed to achieve

institutional goals, rather it represents a strategic organizational asset to implement effective management of the structure.

In this vein, academic contexts are very complex socio-technical systems, where people and environments need to be in a constant reciprocal positive relationship oriented toward the achievement of specific organizational goals through the maximization of interpersonal exchanges.

There are identified two facets of HE institutions: the “public life” (its configuration, governance and finance and its network with external stakeholders) and the “private life” (the academic life lived through in lecture halls, libraries, and the teaching and learning experiences of academic staff and students). They represent two central missions of the HE community. The high quality of the centers of learning, the scholarships, the research groups and all those elements that make a community alive and flourishing can be achieved thanks to effective collaboration and reciprocal support and vision among the funds raising managers, the governance, the management and all those internal and external stakeholders that contribute to well-being and flourishing of the Academia, in a sustainable perspective. The Academia is becoming an increasingly multifaceted machine, composed by different organizational, managerial, and cultural models often reciprocally conflicting, making both the working life, and the organizational goals more complicated. In the last decades, higher education has been changing rapidly, and its role in the Society is furtherly changing; the Academia is considered a key resource to national and international economic and social growth, transforming itself as the center of scientific and cultural innovation (Farnham 1999). In the current scenario, Universities are transforming into high-stress-inducing environments; the changes deriving from the labor market revolutionized the traditional idea of work. The rapidity and the complexity of these changes (including the current outbreak) involved the organizations of all sectors, private and public. The Academia has also upset its internal organization and modified the relationship with external contexts. These modifications have been required by all the actors who contribute to organizational goals, academic and administrative staff, and students. They are crucial to successful performance and productivity (Dooris et al. 2020). Universities have been considered “place-shapers”, with a civic and wider societal engagement (UPP Foundation, 2019).

It implies that Universities provide an added value in connecting health and sustainable well-being at work. As well as other organizations, they have experienced, and continue to experience, changes that impact on all those working in university and on their working role. For teaching and research staff, the introduction of time contracts, difficulties in fund raising, competition with colleagues, the precariousness of their job position, together with the growing uncertainty about expected role behavior and the multiple management activities, have led the academic staff to be more exposed to illness and work-related stress.

One of the main approaches to the study of stress in the working environment is the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker, Demerouti 2016). The model assumes that job performance is characterized by resources and demands which are related to working conditions. In this model, demands and resources are the main factors influencing the motivational process or, at the opposite, a health impairment process.

The model, in details, is composed by: 1) Job resources, defined as psychosocial, physical, and organizational aspects of work, useful for achieving work objectives, personal development, and for reducing job demands; 2) Job demands, namely all the psychosocial, physical, and organizational aspects of work that require cognitive and emotional efforts and that are associated with certain costs for the individual (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). When job demands increase, they request higher levels of effort to the worker, who can use his/her resources to balance the requests. Indeed, job demands are not all negative: however, when they become harder, and they are not governed by resources, they can bring to the exhaustion of physical and psychological resources. This level of overload can easily lead employees to experience high levels of stress and burnout. Many methods of analysis and intervention are available on the scientific and professional market, although they are not specific for academic contexts. In the Italian context, little research has been carried out and the experience of diagnosis about organizational well-being in public structures has not yet contributed to develop a definite set of tools, intervention methods and data collection practices.

The international research has investigated these constructs, focusing on organizational well-being and the quality of working life in the university, considering both teaching and administrative staff. Different fields of research have focused on the analysis of burnout and its elements such as emotional exhaustion, cynicism and reduced personal achievement (Watts & Robertson, 2001; Moreno et al., 2010; Rothmann & Barkhuizen, 2008). These studies showed that exposure to a very large number of students predicts burnout and that male teaching staff got higher cynicism scores, while female teaching staff were more at risk of emotional exhaustion (Watts & Robertson, 2001). Additionally, older staff showed greater stress management skills, while young teachers were found more at risk of burnout (Watts & Robertson, 2001; Rothmann & Barkhuizen, 2008). Another field of research on academic work concerns the measurement of work-related stress

and job satisfaction. In particular, emerged that: job insecurity influences stress significantly, and for both dimensions coping skills count (Safaria, bin Othman, & Wahab, 2010); stressors such as time pressure, amount of information, supervision style, work environment, remuneration and career development were found to be strongly related to reduced job satisfaction (Pick & Yeung, 2012); coworking activities and career promotions have been found to be the best factors that increase job satisfaction, even more than remuneration (Saygi, Tolon, & Teko-gul, 2011); job insecurity remains the biggest source of stress in academic staff (Ty-therleigh, Webb, Cooper, & Ricketts, 2005).

At the European level, the most interesting experience is that of the Norwegian ARK Programme - Arbeid-smiljøog arbeidsklimaundersøkelser (Environmental and Work Climate Surveys). Since 2013, ARK is conducted in 18 Norwegian universities, with the participation of more than 20,000 employees and deals with psychosocial risks and work well-being in universities. The results confirm the validity of the JD-R model, showing the significant association between resources, on the one hand, and work involvement and academic productivity indices on the other hand (Christensen, Dyrstad & Innstrand, 2018).

Basing on this perspective, the literature suggests that the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model is today the main reference in the field, offering the best cost-benefit ratio to those who want to produce valid and reliable research related to stress and well-being in the workplace. The JD-R model has many advantages: a) It has a solid and verified scientific basis in multiple contexts and with different research perspectives; b) it is widely accepted by the international scientific community, as evidenced by its wide spread in the most prestigious reference journals; c) it is flexible enough to allow, within the basic theoretical model, to include and investigate a large number of background, moderator and mediator variables; d) it is largely independent from the characteristics of the specific work situations studied, so that it can be applied to jobs designed in a very different way, both for the social-relational component, and for the technological one.

The Italian context and the national research group

In this framework, common research interests lead a group of researchers to set up a research network named QoL@Work (Quality of Life at Work; <https://aipass.org/qolwork-quality-life-work>), currently composed by members from more than twenty Universities, placed in North, Centre and South of Italy. Members of this group belong to the section "Psychology for Organizations" within the wider context of the Italian Association of Psychology. The main aims of the network are: - To promote scientific, intra and interdisciplinary comparison on the topic of work-related stress management and organizational well-being assessment in universities, on theoretical models, methodologies, and tools (validation and development of standardized -new or already existing - measures). - to promote opportunities for

discussion with the main stakeholders to share research lines, tools, and methodologies. - to organize workshops and training sessions to provide tools for theoretical and methodological updating. - to develop guidelines and suggest improvement actions. The network is characterized by the tension towards a high scientific quality of its work, together with the objective of producing knowledge transfer by means of tools and methodologies of analysis useful for intervention on these topics in universities. Its national extension also makes it capable of drawing on multiple local experiences and to act as a national reference on these issues.

Assessing organizational wellbeing in Academia: A procedure proposed by the Italian QoL@Work Research Group.

In light with the theoretical premises drawn above, the Italian QoL@Work developed a process to carry out the assessment of well-being in the academic context, articulated into several steps. Each step is crucial to achieve positive outcomes and to activate the next one, toward the whole vision of the project which must be shared by all the community.

STEP 1 - FIRST CONTACT WITH THE UNIVERSITY

ACTIONS: The Rector and/or the Director General receive an initial briefing on the general characteristics of the research, the main feasibility conditions, the timetable, and the possible final products.

INSTRUCTIONS: The organizational complexity of the universities (non-homogeneous structures; not easy availability of “objective data” and “homogeneous groups” related to the work-related stress survey), requires awareness of the investment of resources and time. QoL@Work is a non-profit organization. A technical cost plan, designed on the specific characteristics of the university, allows governance to assess the resources to be invested. Renegotiation is possible according to possible additional activities (e.g. intervention on emerging issues and/or follow-up).

STEP 2 - CONSTRUCTION OF SHARED OBJECTIVES BETWEEN CLIENT AND RESEARCH TEAM

ACTIONS: A Research Coordination Group (RCG) is set up, with members from the University indicated by the client and researchers. The RCG draws up the Action Plan (with a timetable), which envisages the methods for: a) definition of which, if any, accessory parts of the questionnaire are required, in addition to the core part that is identical in all the universities, b) involvement of stakeholders and workers, c) collection of the answers, d) return of the results of the survey (or dissemination), e) subsequent monitoring of the results, f) identification of the resources needed for the project.

INSTRUCTIONS: IMPORTANT NOTE. Depending on the university's intentions and available resources, focus groups or other qualitative methodologies may be carried out before and/or after

the questionnaire survey, to investigate specific organizational areas of interest.

STEP 3 - INVOLVEMENT OF INSTITUTIONAL STAKEHOLDERS

ACTIONS: Internal stakeholders are involved/informed. For example: HR managers; trade union representatives; Guarantee Committee for equal opportunities, employee wellbeing and non-discrimination at work; Internal evaluation committee. If the survey is also used for the purposes of Legislative Decree 81/2008, the entire safety system is officially involved.

The GoC validates the technical requirements of the survey questionnaire, regarding the protection of data confidentiality (both in the sense of preventing the attribution of answers to single names of respondents, and of the protection of all data present in the platform).

INSTRUCTIONS: A fundamental process objective is to build an alliance with the internal strategic referents, to guarantee the best conditions for carrying out the survey.

The composition of the RCG is fundamental: if it is made up of members from both the trade unions and the administration, the “perception of third party” nature of the survey/evaluation intervention is reinforced.

STEP 4 - DIFFUSION OF THE INITIATIVE AND INVOLVEMENT OF WORKERS

ACTIONS: The expected aims of the survey, as well as the modalities of the survey and the return of the results are made known to the whole university.

INSTRUCTIONS: It is necessary that the governance commitment (e.g. through a document signed by the Rector) is made visible, to increase the involvement and interest of the different components of the university. The concrete operational modes of communication are decided according to the context. For example, it is possible to think of information meetings for Departments. Detailed web pages should be set up, including information on the tools to be used and on data protection (in compliance with European legislation), as well as dedicated FAQs. Other forms of communication/promotion (short videos, also on web pages) could be considered. As is evident, the characteristics of this communication phase greatly influence the propensity to respond to the survey and the accuracy of the responses themselves.

STEP 5 - SURVEY WITH A STANDARDISED QUESTIONNAIRE

ACTIONS: Engagement of all employees through appropriate communication strategy (mailing list, bulletin board, plenary presentation, reminder) planned and carried out to introduce the survey and its aims. Start of the online survey.

INSTRUCTIONS: The possibility of contributing with the survey to the fulfilment of the Legislative Decree 81/2008 (SLC) is a point of interest. Being part of a regulatory obligation, in fact, can potentially allow to increase the responsibility of all those

who take part in the process, to support the perception of effectiveness of the process and to make more visible the resources dedicated to the intervention.

STEP 6 - DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERNAL REPORTING FOR THE CLIENT

ACTIONS: Edited by the QoL@Work research group

INSTRUCTIONS: If the survey also serves the purposes of Legislative Decree 81/2008, this first report is also provided to the security system. The first discussion document of the results may include both the development of an annex for the Risk Assessment Document and a report comparing critical points and strong points with all the other universities that have used the same survey system.

STEP 7 - RESULTS: FEEDBACK AND DISSEMINATION TO WORKERS

ACTIONS: According to the modalities decided by the GoC and depending on the purposes of the client.

INSTRUCTIONS: The involvement of respondents in the interpretation phase of the results is important for three reasons: a) it confirms the not only evaluative nature of the survey, but its purpose of imagining and promoting organizational change interventions for the quality of working life; b) it increases the perceived fairness of the process; c) it contributes to the quality of the contextualized interpretation of the results.

STEP 8 - DRAWING UP THE FINAL REPORT

ACTIONS: Edited by the QoL@Work research group

INSTRUCTIONS: Based on the results of the survey and in line with the agreements in point 1, the report may include the identification of possible improvement actions, to intervene on critical points and to enhance strengths, both of which emerged from the survey.

STEP 9 - CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

ACTIONS: Possible identification, from the data analysis report, of improvement measures.

Possible gradual launch of a longitudinal monitoring system for the dimensions considered relevant.

INSTRUCTIONS: The assessment of psychosocial risk factors cannot be an occasional action but is part of a strategy that includes periodic monitoring of the quality of working life. The RCG can build the “monitor” of the academic quality of life, able to give suggestions for the University management strategies. Based on the specific needs and organizational strategies of each university, a system of indicators can be configured through which monitoring can be continued over time.

Conclusions and future implications

The aim of this short contribution was to root the activities of the Italian QoL@Work research group within the wider theoretical

framework of Healthy Universities and therefore of wellbeing in the academic context.

The QoL@Work approach provides a common and scientifically reliable survey basis to measure both organisational well-being, and work-related stress risks. The two types of assessment are not identical, but the broad overlap of many common research aims (and therefore also of part of instruments and method in the survey) is a clear advantage of this approach. The QoL@Work model and approach are in any case in line with current national good practices for the detection of work-related stress risks. This approach allows a flexible adaptation to the needs of the client, thanks to its structure composed of a core part and modular parts. This also makes it possible to consider the differences within the academic staff (teaching staff, research staff, technical staff and administrative staff). The method can provide for a longitudinal design and comparison within the single university, making easier the control of the investigated phenomena and the evaluation of the effectiveness and efficiency of the possible subsequent improvements. It also can offer comparative analyses between different universities, if they are requested, authorized, and considered appropriate, since the collected data remain in the full possession of the single university for its use and future practical implications (such as training actions). It's important to highlight that data, under authorization, can be used by the QoL@Work research group for scientific research purposes only, and always in an anonymous way, i.e. in such a way that it is impossible to link each result to the individual university where it was collected. Finally, the QoL@Work research group complies, both in the collection and processing of data, with all the privacy protections required by current EU legislation.

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