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Responsible QA – committing to impact

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Paper proposal form

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Proposal

Title: Towards measurement of academic performance – the case of the South East European University (SEEU)

Abstract (150 words max): Quality assurance and enhancement is central to all higher education activities. The educational authorities in the Republic of Macedonia (RM) have tried for about a decade, to assure the quality of higher education in the country. However, these efforts have been visibly weighted towards legal compliance, quantitative aspects, and have been monitored through inspection. Therefore, institutions need to re-align their approach in order to link the quality control with quality assurance and enhancement and thus drive the institutional and individual performance. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how the South East European University (SEEU) has established an internal system of quality assurance and enhancement with procedures and mechanisms which enable the institution to concentrate on quality and at the same time to use them for recognition and motivation. Particular focus is put on the instruments for measuring the 'academic performance' through a comparative data-driven approach.

The paper is based on: research / policy / practice (select one)

Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere? No

Text of paper (3000 words max):

1. Introduction

Quality Assurance and enhancement is central to all higher education activities, for all stakeholders. It should be fully integrated into law, strategic planning and every activity and process nationally and institutionally.

The Law on Higher Education of the Republic of Macedonia (RM) provides very specific, highly detailed and regulated legal framework for Quality Assurance (QA) in higher education and leaves little room for autonomy or broader development of practice. Article 2, point 10 defines the QA as:

“An assessment of the quality of higher education covering numerous explicit procedures for assessment of the quality of the higher education institutions, academic staff, and their study programs in accordance with the accepted procedures and standards and the guidelines (instructions) for quality assurance adopted by the European higher education quality assurance institutions..” (Zakon za visoko obrazovanie na RM, p. 2).

The Law further specifically regulates (article 68) the assurance and assessment of the quality of higher education by determining the components of the system for QA and assessment, setting among the other things, the process of accreditation of the study programs, as well as an estimation of the quality of performance, the management of the institution, financing, academic and other activities through a system of evaluation. The structure and the competencies of the Accreditation and Evaluation Board are also well defined and in line with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2015), (articles 69, 70, 71 and 72). However, these activities



refer only to the accreditation of the study programs and do not include any evaluative activities apart from the self-evaluations that the institutions are required to do. So, it remains to the institutions of higher education to determine and operationalize the development of QA whilst complying with legal requirements.

The only positive movement in this regard recently has been the governmental initiative to include the Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP) as an independent organ in the evaluations of the work of the higher education institutions, especially because of its focus based on the current developments in higher education in Europe and the areas for improvement.

Therefore, nationally, a reform of the evaluative body and its function to make it fit for purpose is needed, while institutionally, a re-alignment of vision and approach, from quality control to quality assurance and enhancement.

2. Institutional QA response

South East European University (SEEU) was established in 2001 as a private-public, not-for-profit University within cooperation of one international and one national foundation. From 2003 it started to be self sustainable, which until present relies almost completely (80.59% as in 2015) on student tuition fees.

From establishment, as a result of the international orientation and the then lack of national strategy for QA, the University has focused on development of a QA system that is heavily student related and yet different and unique from all other institutions in the country, both state and student funded. It has introduced a quality structure and methods of external review which actively add insight into strategic and operational planning and improvement, but has also focused on internal procedures for enhancing learning and teaching, including and considering students and their feedback, staff performance, as well as development of student support services and information and information systems. These are constantly monitored, analyzed and revised in line with the national legal framework and international guidelines.

The University's Quality Office leads and coordinates on various initiatives and processes, with a central Quality Assurance Management Commission and the Rector having oversight. Moreover, each academic unit has a Quality Team comprising of staff, students and external stakeholders. These teams also function in line with a recent legal requirement for every academic unit to have a body for 'transparency and trust' (Article, 67)

Further on, besides the external evaluations by the European University Association, the University engages international experts who evaluate different areas related to the functioning of the University and give recommendations for improvement. The University addresses these recommendations through action points which are the main foci of the professional development and training sessions organized twice a year.

Internally, there are different instruments for getting student feedback and ensuring student-centred learning and teaching. The staff is encouraged constantly to use modern teaching methodologies such as flipped classroom and digital technologies in order to be in line with the international trends. Google classroom platform has replaced the institutional learning management system and it is with obligatory use, monitored regularly.

2.1. Instruments for QA and enhancement

2.1.1. Teaching Observation

The procedure for the Observation of Learning and Teaching, involves scheduled observations, with pre-observation and feedback meetings and reports highlighting effective methodologies and areas for improvement. The judgments in the reports enable faculties and the University to analyze general data and to target training sessions as needed. The procedure has shown to be very useful. (Emini, 2015, Zeqiri, 2015). It has increased awareness amongst staff of a range of pedagogical methodologies and approaches, provided opportunity for discussion on learning and teaching amongst academic staff and the areas for which some additional training is needed. What is also very important, it supplies evidence for staff in the process of promotion and annual staff performance evaluation.

2.2.2. Student evaluation



Student evaluation is conducted once a year. The evaluation of academic courses (one per professor) is done at the end of the academic year for all three cycles. It is operated on site by student advisers in order to ensure greater student participation, while ways are being considered to operate an online evaluation for all courses in the future.

The information gathered from these evaluations is then distributed through the Quality Office to the individual staff members and the deans. In this way, every person is informed about students' perceptions regarding his/her performance, while the dean uses the information in the end-of-the year appraisal process.

2.2.3. Student achievement

The Office of Academic Planning provides annual reports of student achievement and retention for the purpose of creating the institutional Self-Evaluation Report. These reports are sent for consideration and analysis to all Faculties. Reports for individual professors and courses are also available from the central data base.

2.2.4. Research activities

The criteria for conducting research activities are regulated by the Law (article 125) and are required for promotion into academic titles. Based on the Law, SEEU has set additional criteria prescribed in the Rule for Scientific Research and has created an online system in which individual professors enter data about scientific publications which are then verified by a central Research commission.

2.2.5. Academic staff digital profile

In line with the latest international trends and the goals set in the Communiqué, resulting from the Ministerial Conference in Yerevan 20015, according to which: "Enhancing the quality and relevance of learning and teaching is the main mission of the EHEA", and support of higher education institutions and staff is encouraged in promoting further student-centered learning and the benefits of digital technologies, SEEU insists on raising the digital profile of every professor. This is done by making the use of Google Classroom obligatory for every course in the following way: level 1 is the minimum requirement that encompasses some basic materials and the course syllabi uploaded on the platform. Level 2 is the next level that besides the syllabi and lectures requires some additional online materials, such as links to other tutorials, video recordings, announcements and online tasks, while level 3 is the most advantaged use that contains recording of lectures.

The University E-learning Centre keeps track of all these activities and sends regular reports about the use of Google Classroom. In this way, deans are informed about the digital profile of every professor, according to the amount of work and materials uploaded online, as well as the communication, feedback and interaction with students. This is also entered as an information and evidence in the annual staff evaluation report.

Evidently, the University has not only created different instruments for QA, but also systems for collecting and tracking data. Having all these data available, it appeared necessary to consider ways to incorporate them in a model that would represent the academic staff performance profile and at the same time define an acceptable standard. The intention was to motivate the individuals to strive for success and academic excellence and thus contribute to increasing the institutional quality.

3. Measuring the academic performance – the methodology

In order to determine the academic performance of an SEEU academic staff member and set certain standards, first the international experiences were considered. Then they were compared with the SEEU practices. The next step was to position two randomly chosen cases (professors) for the last three academic years and discuss feasible and acceptable standard performance and finally to consider ways of following individual achievement and progress.

University of Wisconsin for example, based their academic performance on the following elements:



- (1) Positive peer review- at least three class observations for each year in rank based on direct observation, with reference to course organization, classroom presentation, interaction with students and mastery of course content.
- (2) Student evaluation from every course, every semester
- (3) Activities that enhance teaching skills – ex. participation in an individual or informal professional development activity or program related to teaching
- (4) Satisfactory support of departmental instructional goals ex. development of new courses
- (5) Research activities

In the last decade, in Slovenia, there has been a shift towards “a less ambiguous and more meritocratic” conditions for academic promotion. According to Klemencic and Zgaga (2015), “the criteria for measuring research productivity in particular (but also teaching) have become strictly defined and quantifiable through bibliometric indicators” (p.23)

The University of Ljubljana based the academic standards on appointment criteria, according to the National Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency (NAKVIS, 2010):

- (1) One foreign language
- (2) Proof of international experience (ex.3 months minimum stay at a foreign university)
- (3) Research activities
- (4) Teaching activities

Compared to these two international practices, it seemed that SEEU, with the instruments used for QA and measuring academic performance, was on the right path in their efforts to set certain standards. Hence, existing data, gathered from the five instruments: teaching observation, student evaluation, student achievement, research activities and use of digital tools were collected and analyzed in order to get the University and Faculty trends. Then, measuring the academic performance for two professors from the same Faculty was attempted. The results of the two professors were compared to the University and Faculty average results from the last three academic years (the trend). Only the results from the research activities and the Google Classroom use were taken only for the academic 2015/2016.

Figure 1 below shows the results from the teaching observation process. It can be seen that the average results of the two professors were identical and they were above the University and Faculty average.

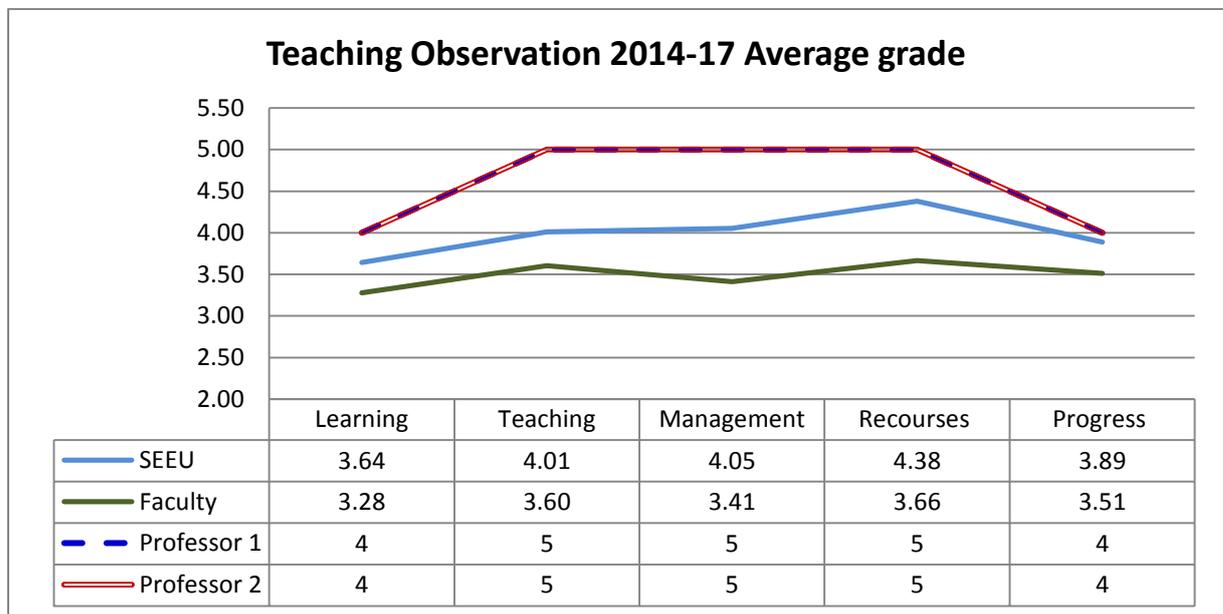


Figure 1. Teaching observation average results

Figure 2 shows the results from the student evaluation process. It is evident that the results of professor 1 are higher than the University and Faculty average, while professor two (bold red line) is below both averages.

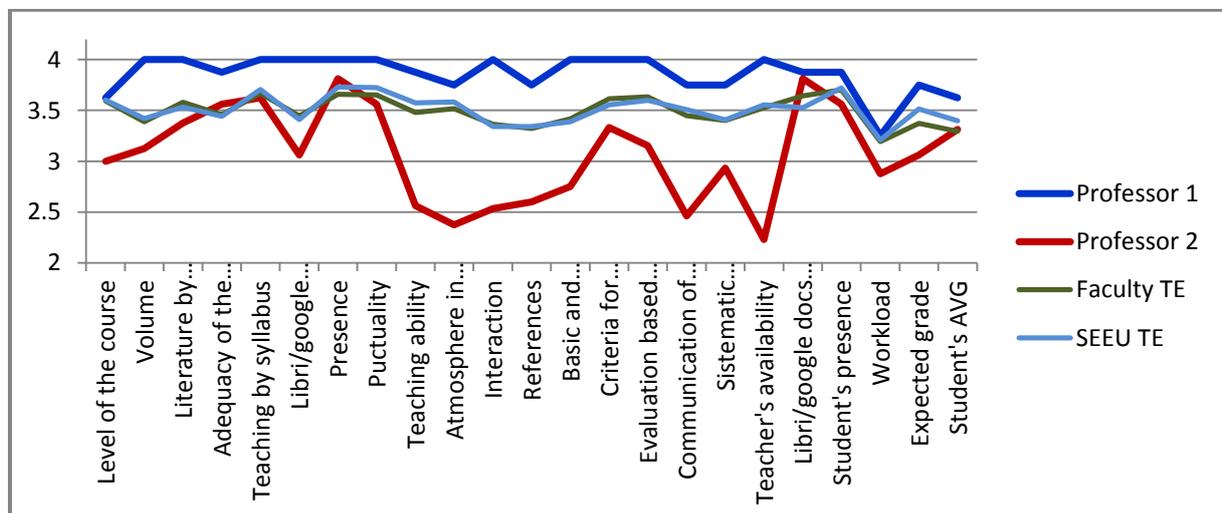


Figure 2. Results from the student evaluation process

Figure 3 shows student achievement results with the University and Faculty trend from the last three years, as well as the two professors' course average grades based on the number of students serviced per semester, their average grade and their courses' pass/fail rate.

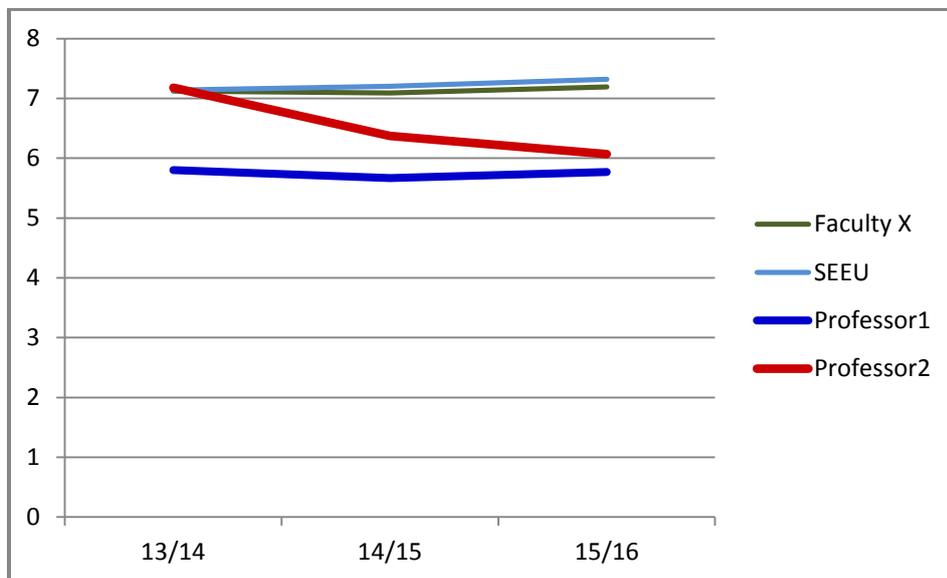


Figure 3. Student achievement results

It is interesting to observe here, that professor 1 student average results are lower than professor 2, which shows that the results from the instruments are not necessarily positively correlated with each other.

Figure 4 shows the research activities for the academic 2015/2016 with the total number and types of publications of the two professors, compared to the total number of publications at Faculty level (All) and the number of publications of those that publish most (productive).

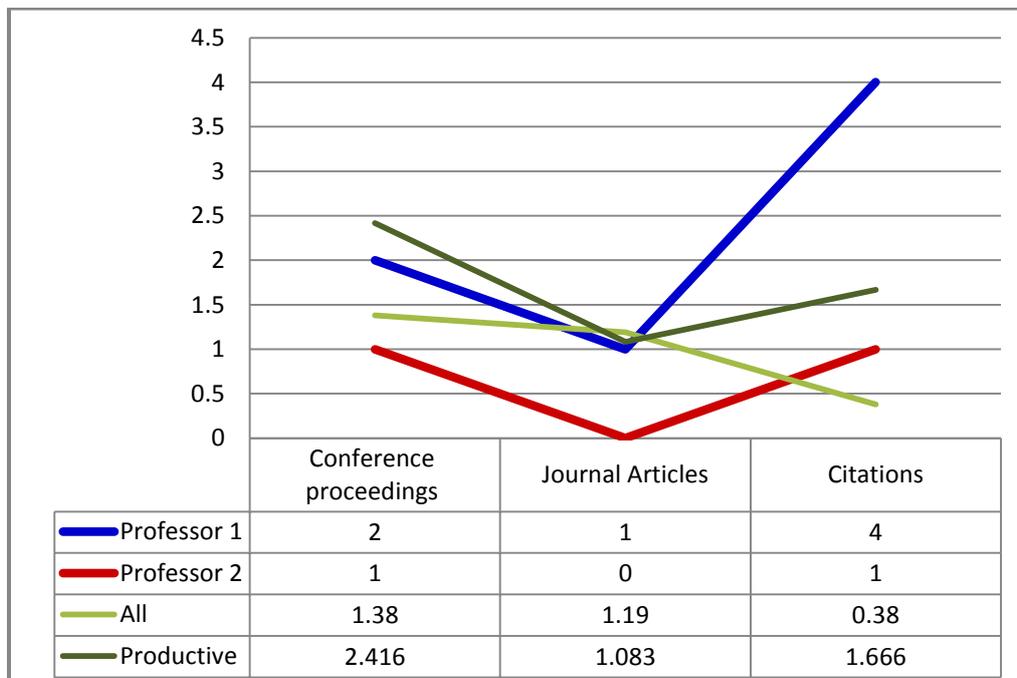


Figure 4. Research data for the year 2015/2016

The results show that Professor 1 performs higher than the averages of all and the productive ones with regard to the number of publications in conference proceedings and citations and is almost at the same level with regard to the journal publications. Professor 2 performs lower than both averages and actually managed to produce one publication in conference proceedings, none in a journal and had one citation.

Figure 5 illustrates the use of digital data of the two professors, again compared with the University and Faculty level. Based on this, professor 1 has more resources and more assignments on Google Classroom than the averages, while professor 2 is below the University and Faculty averages.

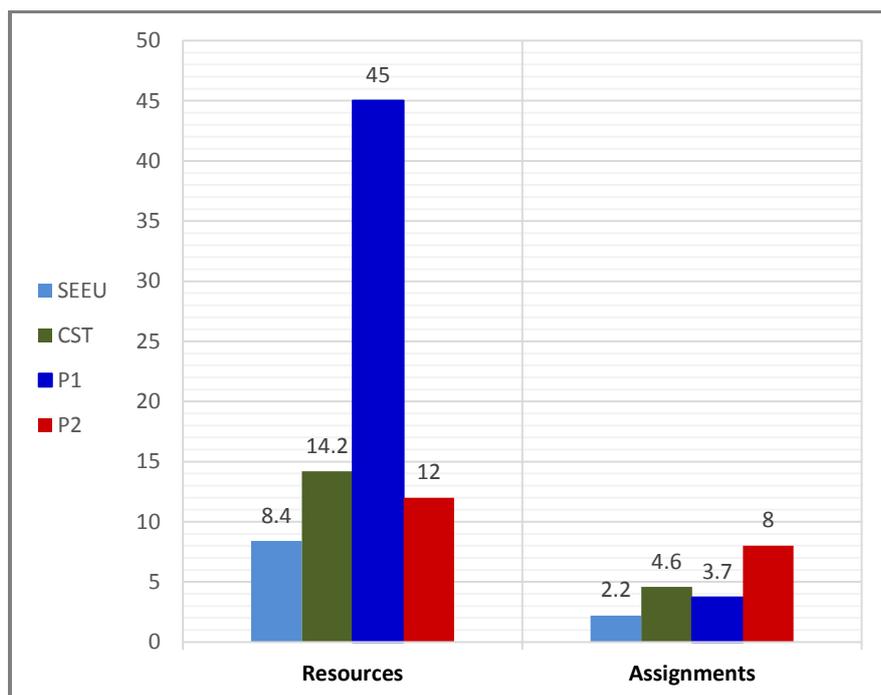


Figure 5. Results from the use of Google Classroom

The next step is to create an academic performance data-driven matrix as an analytical tool to benchmark the ‘measured’ part of the performance. This approach is expected to initiate a substantial discussion and debates within academic community at the University. We are strongly convinced that this approach will stimulate the academic staff to pursue the culture of permanent improvement and will actively support the university to increase the efficiency of the performance oriented processes to maximize the individual capacities and commitments.

Figure 6 illustrates the preliminary data-driven performance matrix, based on the previously discussed results and participants, transplotted in a scale from 1 to 5 (5 outstanding), within the following ratio-formula: 15% Teaching Observation; 35% Student Evaluation; 15% Student Achievement; 25% Research; 10% Digital ‘performance’ (Google Classroom). The ratios have been designed based on the quality of data and the actual relevance of the instrument for measuring the particular aspect:

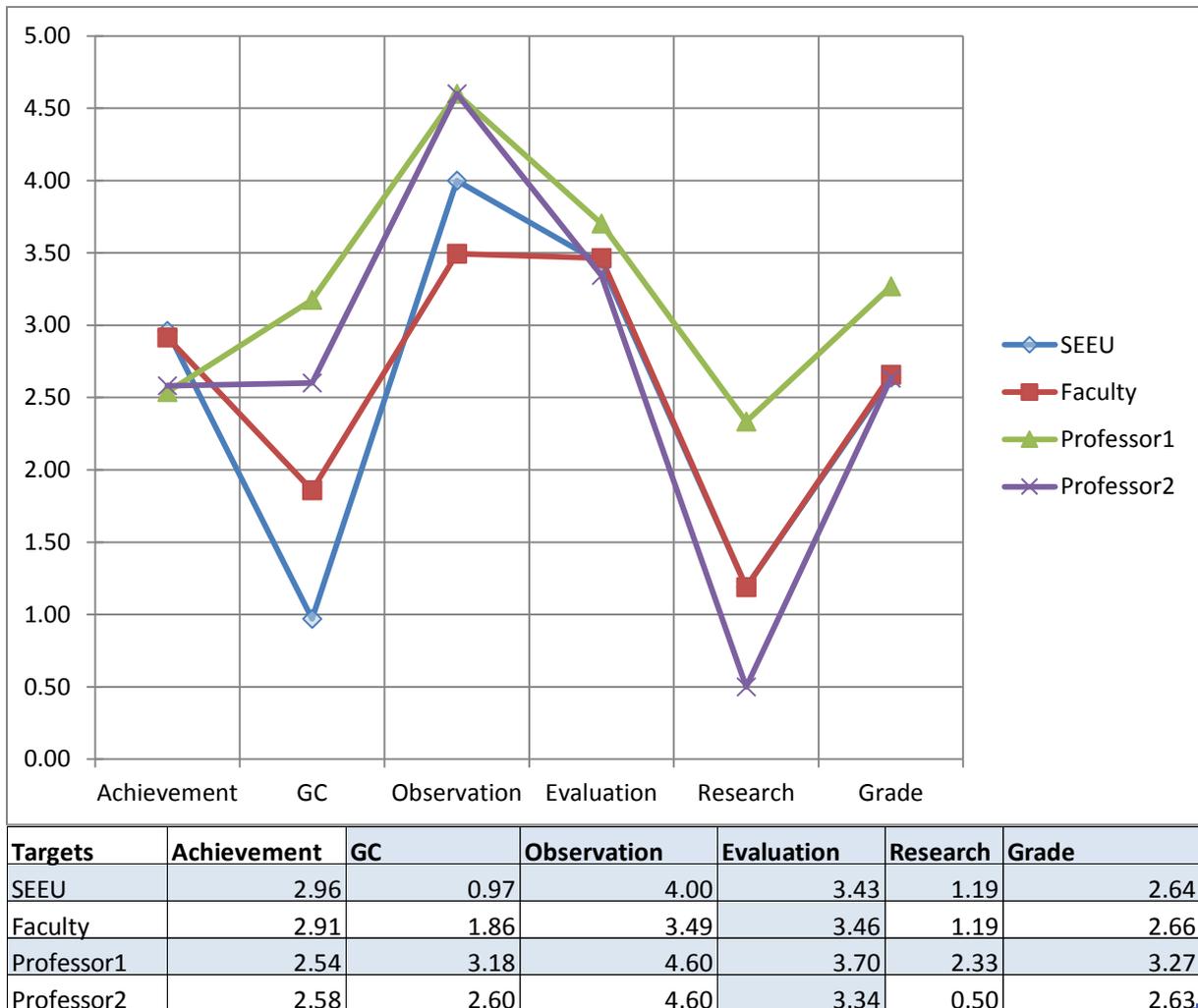


Figure 6. Overall data-driven academic performance matrix

4. Towards Total Performance Management

In its endeavours to develop a quality culture embraced by students, academic staff and management, the University has undertaken an array of actions in the direction of QA and enhancement in its administrative and support services, parallel with those for the academic staff.

From establishment, the determination of the administration has been to acquire modern IT tools to facilitate learning and teaching through computerised processes. Along with these developments, all other support processes were identified, mapped and documented. A detailed description of each of the processes was completed with standardised flows, inputs and outputs in each of the steps, thus producing the Quality management system which was later certified by ISO authorities. All responsibilities of personnel stemming from various process flows were neatly documented and assigned to corresponding job descriptions to complete an account of duties for every administrative position. Apart from this, service standards were designed and published for most of the processes. In addition, regular evaluations by the users (students and academic staff) were conducted to yield valuable data on the level of satisfaction.

Currently, the feedback from the users and observance of service standards is used to determine what corrective action is needed on the parts of services and departments. At the same time, the



individual performance is measured in accordance with the performance of the duties listed in the Job Description and personal targets are being set.

Concurrently, the University has embarked on an ambitious plan to integrate all the fragmented electronic systems into a single resource planning tool (My SEEU) which will enable the institution to enhance students and staff experiences with administrative processes.

Now, when the University is able to produce live reporting and data on many of its administrative processes, a new extensive phase of resource optimisation has been set off, including Skills Inventories of the administrative workforce. The job analysis will break down each job into particular tasks and the time used for each task. The process will conclude with redesigned jobs, redefined job descriptions and setting performance standards. This exercise is expected to provide a state-of-the-art instrument for performance management and quality enhancement.

5. Discussion

A few issues have appeared as a result of the above mentioned activities and each of them involves some challenges. What can be an acceptable standard for the University academic performance? In lack of a national Quality Assurance Agency and standards and criteria other than those in the Law, should the institution set its own standards? Next, since data exist for the University, Faculty and individual level, what deviation from the average could be considered as up to standard? What should happen if certain individual is under the accepted standard? Even more important, if the intention is to use the standard setting for motivation, what kind of action would serve this purpose best - reward, reporting, punishment or something else?

Borowsky and Daya (2014) claim that motivation should be positive and based on the principle of simplicity and transparency but also limited availability – the employee must feel exceptional and distinguished from others. In our circumstances, this means that a proper measure (standard) would be necessary if the intention is that it serves as a positive motivational tool.

Operating in difficult circumstances conditioned by the socio economic and demographic trends in the country, paired up with the disloyal competition of the state funded universities in which the teaching staff is more comfortable as students' numbers are secured and the salaries as well, there is a concern how people will react on the standards setting. Our intentions are genuine as we want them to serve as positive reinforcement. However, the staff might understand this initiative as a chance for promotion and bonus but they might also take it as a threat in case of underperformance no matter whether we report that or not. A record must exist somewhere.

The role of managers is first of all to ensure transparency and involvement of all stakeholders in the process of setting the standards. Then consult relevant international experience in these areas and raise awareness among staff, through organizing open discussions and debates, about the need to have some standards which will show the trends and the usefulness of all the quality instruments that we are using. Finally, our colleagues must be ensured that this is all done in order to raise the quality of provision as it is the only way to survive, attract more students and be different from the others.

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Discussion questions: Should standards be defined for academic performance/output? What is an acceptable standard for the academic performance and how to define it? What if individuals are over or below the standard – reward, report or ‘punishment’? How to integrate other performance processes (administration, quality of student life etc.) with the academic one, in the overall performance of a HE institution?

Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 24 July 2017 to QAForum@eua.be. The file should be named using the last names of the authors, e.g. Smith_Jones.doc. Please do not send a hard copy or a PDF file.