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Ethics Management in Higher Education System of Romania

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Abstract

The article presents the problems of ethics management in higher education system of Romania and tries to identify the best solutions in order to improve the ethical climate in universities, with a proper implementation of ethics management instruments and procedures. The purpose of this study is to create a background for managers in these institutions in order for them to know and implement the adequate tools they can use in order to increase the ethical climate and scientifically apply an ethics management system. The research methodology is based on a questionnaire conducted during June 10 and July 20 on a number of 76 managers in higher education system from all over the country, from public and private institutions. The collected data were analyzed with SPSS program, using descriptive statistics and other indicators and correlations offered by the program, in order to verify the main hypothesis of the study. The results of the study reveal some important aspects in the ethical climate of Romanian universities, some lacks, but mainly reveal the perspective of managers on the ethics management and its implementation. Conclusions highlight a better perception of managers on the ethical climate, but in discordance with the general perception of the society. In our opinion, this may be a consequence of the fact that managers are not all familiar with the concept of ethics management, with its instruments and procedures. The main recommendations of the research refer to a better understanding of this area of management and focusing on a better integration in higher education system of Romania.

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1. Introduction

The issues addressed by this article refer to the implementation of ethics management in higher education system of Romania as well as to the perception of managers in these institutions. The need for this research has risen from

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the constant critics brought to the educational system related to the unethical behavior. According to Transparency International (2013) that measures Global Corruption Barometer on Romania, 33% of the respondents said that education system is corrupt or highly corrupt and 43% said corruption in Romania increased a lot during the last two years. So, this is an important problem that has to be discussed in the context of a proper implementation of ethics management. The research is based on a study conducted on a number of 76 managers in public and private institutions in higher education system. This empirical research could be helpful for those interested in education management because highlights some recommendations for improving the ethical climate in these institutions, using instruments of ethics management.

Ethics management becomes an important theme of research for specialists in the entire world. Ethics management is approached in different domains in the professional literature, one of them being the public sector. In Romania, most part of higher education system is public, so we focused especially on analyzing other studies of ethics management in the public sector, with a greater accent on education. Moreover, the private education sector in Romania is also regulated by public authorities. Menzel (2012) appreciates “There is no magic potion that can be applied to transform public organizations into organizations of integrity”. We agree with the author’s opinion, because the element that makes the transition from a public institution to an ethical organization is the human factor. Humans are those who make organizations corrupt or ethical, public institutions themselves do not have morality like people do.

Melé (2012) analyzes the reasons for which good management would require ethics in an entire chapter of his book. The simplest reason for implementing an ethics management is that management is made by humans; it is not an automatic activity. In consequence, management needs ethics, because people are not born ethical or unethical. Ethics is taught and these facts make it necessary for an implementation in organizational management. A more complex definition of ethics management was offered by Kaptein (1998): “the systematic and coherent development of activities and the taking of measures in order to realize the fundamental and justified expectations of stakeholders and to balance conflicting expectations of stakeholders in an adequate way” (p. 42). Kaptein’s definition is more complex, but still limited, because ethics management is more than an accomplishment of stakeholders’ expectations or a balance of interests.

Trevino and Nelson (2010) address some interesting questions that many of us may have been asked too: Can ethics be taught? Why be ethical? Why bother? Authors highlighted their conclusion according to which ethics is about the quality of connections between people. Authors also analyze the bad apple theory that states people become unethical because of some bad individuals. This theory is very risky for companies and institutions, ignoring the importance of the environment in which employees act. In many cases, a bad environment and an unorganized one lead to bad behavior of more and more people. Weiss (2009) analyzes the connection between ethics and the environment. Nowadays, the environment is very dynamic, determining changes in the ethical or unethical behavior of people.

The most important ethical issues for universities are summarized by Hardy (2010): fair treatment, academic freedom, responsibility for content expertise, plagiarism, teacher-student relationship, discrimination, conflict of interest, impaired performance, use of institutional resources and also the classical virtues like truth, honesty, respect. The issues are also presented by Mungiu-Pippidi (2011) being more specific for the Romanian context: financial management practices, forgery, falsification, receiving payments for hours not worked or bribe. To fight against them, there should be proper committees, regular controls, rules and procedures to combat plagiarism and a better communication and a deep analysis of the reported problems.

2. Methodology

This study is based on a questionnaire applied on a number of 76 managers from the public and private higher education institutions from Romania. We chose an online questionnaire because ethical issues in the form are delicate and managers would have been feeling uncomfortable with a face to face interview. Confidentiality was assured and answers were more honest, even if managers are obviously kind of subjective, because they have to express their opinions about the ethical background in the institutions they manage or they managed. The data was introduced in a SPSS database and the program generated results that validated or not the main hypothesis of our

research. The questionnaire was sent to almost 400 managers in higher education system, so a percentage of approximately 19% on online surveys is a very good one.

3. Results of research

In our research, we started from two main hypotheses that we had to verify after applying our survey on managers from higher education system:

Hypothesis 1: Professors (also including managers here) in higher education institutions have a very important role in developing ethics among students, being themselves a model for them.

Hypothesis 2: Managers apply few instruments of ethics management, having more a reactive attitude than a proactive one when ethical problems are involved.

These hypotheses were formulated taking into account the experience of managers and the image of these institutions at the level of the society. The research is more a qualitative one, because it is very difficult to measure ethics from the subjective perception of managers. Questionnaire may be seen as a written interview, a face to face interview would have been more difficult to realize, taking into account the sensitive subject of our research. The structure of the sample was the following: 31.6% were aged between 36 and 45 years, 56.6% between 46 and 60 years and less, just 9%, having more than 60 years, most of managers beyond this age being retired. The percent of the managers between 46 and 60 years was the highest, more than 56% of them reacting to the survey very promptly, despite of the lack of time, inherent for these positions. The structure of the sample related to the respondents' gender was: 55% male and 45% female managers, also proving there is no discrimination for occupying such positions in higher education system, the difference of 10% being small.

For validating our first hypothesis, we analyzed the answers of managers to questions regarding the trust of their students in their moral judgment, the ethical model they represent and the ethical behavior of employees in relation to students. All these qualitative problems of the higher education system were processed in SPSS program, version 21, revealing the following data in table 1. The issues addressed in the questionnaire were formulated both in a positive and also a negative way, in order not to induce the answers to managers or create some automatism in their responses. We used the scale of Likert to analyze the managers' perspectives on the ethical issues in their institutions, starting from 1 for total disagreement to 5 for total agreement. Most of the managers agreed that professors and managers in universities play a very important role in creating, developing and maintaining a solid ethical climate, with also a similar standard deviation.

Table 1 Indicators for main qualitative problems of ethical background in universities

Ethical issues	Mean	Standard Deviation
Professors have an important role in developing ethics among students	4.55	0.790
Students show trust to them in relation with ethical problems they observe and notice to them when occurring	3.68	0.983
Evaluation of students is related to the professors' preferences, being highly subjective	2.07	1.147
The language of professors in relation with students is cold and superior	2.39	0.925
The language of secretary is also cold or impolite in relation to students	2.33	1.012
Bribe in a rare phenomenon among professors	4.34	1.065
Receiving gifts from students is frequent	1.58	0.913
Professors make pressures on students to buy their books	1.68	0.734
Evaluation of students is objective and not dependent on criteria like gender, age, physical aspect etc.	4.53	0.642
The managers of institution play a very important role in maintaining a solid ethical climate	4.66	0.740
Nepotism is a problem of higher education system	2.30	1.317
The transparency of management style leads to an ethical climate in their institutions	4.74	0.551

Related to managers' style, 98% of the respondents agreed or totally agreed with the connection between their transparency and the ethical climate within the universities, the mean being 4.74 and the standard deviation 0.551. Other important problems were related to bribe, receiving gifts, nepotism in employment, evaluation of students and the language used by professors or secretary, each mean showing that these aspects are seen by managers as rare phenomena. As a consequence of all these qualitative perceptions of managers, we can conclude that the first hypothesis is validated.

The second hypothesis takes into consideration some instruments used in ethics management that should be implemented in higher education system in a more firm way (codes of ethics, ethics committees, ethical trainings, whistle-blowing procedures, ethics audit). Almost 99% of managers apply and implement an ethical code in their organizations and understand its importance, just one of the respondents saying that there is no ethical code and no meaning for its existence, but this was an exception and probably a random answer. This code is obviously important stating different rules to which employees and students must comply with. These rules may refer to discrimination, harassment, the language used, bribe, gifts, incompatibilities between professors and students, plagiarism, unethical behavior, protection of authors' rights, nepotism, evaluation and other ethical issues considered important at the level of these institutions. The behavior of professors may be seen as a mirror for the efficiency of an ethical code in universities as well as for a good dissemination and transparency of these codes. One of the problems noticed in the interviews with students was that of pressures for buying books written by their professors. At this question, managers' opinion was in a significant proportion that they are not aware of these practices among their professors. The mean for this answer was 1.68 (table 1), more than 85% of the respondents being in disagreement or total disagreement with this idea. At the question regarding the custom of students to make copies from professors' books within the institution at the copy shops, managers had different answers, the mean being 2.99 and a high standard deviation (1.238). Most of the managers (32%) had a neutral answer, showing that they were not aware of the phenomenon or they wanted to cover this situation. Other measures regarding ethics in higher education system were those related to plagiarism, even if it is about among students or professors. 84% of the managers agreed and totally agreed that professors make efforts in order to reduce plagiarism among students, the mean being 4.21. At the question related to the implementation of a system to verify papers against plagiarism, the standard deviation is rather high 1.437, because opinions were different and just 61% of the managers responded positively.

The methods used by managers to communicate codes of ethics and other related issues were: e-mail (29%), meetings (27%), newsletters (26%), ethical trainings (10%) or others (8%). The frequency of discussing ethical aspects at the official meetings was rare for 53% of the managers and often for the rest of them. Just 20% of the managers said they used the services of external trainers for ethical trainings, the rest of them responding no (38%) or do not know (42%). All managers said they have an ethics committee in their institutions, but just 46% of them answered that this committee is held on a regular basis. Regarding the procedures for protecting whistle-blowers, 43% said they have these and more than 53% didn't know about this. A similar situation for the question regarding the presence of an ethical expert in the ethical committee (38% said yes, 16% no and 46% didn't know). Analyzing all these data, we can conclude that the also the second hypothesis is confirmed, managers from higher education system showing a lack of information regarding the meaning and the instruments of ethics management in their institutions.

4. Conclusions

Our research revealed that managers in higher education system from Romania believe in their role as ethical models, but they are not really aware of the possibilities offered by a solid implementation of ethics management. They do not know very well the instruments they can use for raising the ethical level of their institutions. The most used are ethical codes and ethical committees, even if the dissemination of the rules stated there is not so efficient. Ethical trainings, ethical experts, ethical hot lines or the procedures protecting whistle-blowers are not even known by most of the managers. The situation of corruption in Romania may be a consequence of a poor understanding and implementation of ethics management. The limits of the study are inherent for such a subjective issue referring to managers' activity. In order to lower them and create equilibrium, the research will be further developed among students, comparing the answers between the two researches.

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