

The rise of blended professionals in higher education systems: empirical evidence from a survey in Portuguese higher education system (0301)

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Introduction

Traditionally, 'non-academic staff' in HEIs are seen as the sparing partners of the scholars, as they may be negatively labelled or rendered invisible (Allen-Collinson 2007; Szekeres 2004; Dobson 2000). In recent years the role of non-teaching and not committed to research staff is increasing in different European countries (Scheijderberg & Merkator 2013) as they are, simultaneously, being asked to fulfil wider and more complex tasks (Gornitza & Larson 2004). This pattern has been particularly evident in the general framework of the entrepreneurial university (Clark 1998) and was clearly reinforced by the general new-managerialism ideology (Deem & Brehony 2005). In fact, this blurring of professional identities has brought reflection on a *third space* of categorization of human resources in universities (Whitchurch, 2008; Rhoades 2010). To this regard, to new calls for more specific training and recruitment (Henkel 2009; Henkel 2010) is added the issue of the new roles that academic and non-academic staff are being asked to fulfil (Graham 2009; Whitchurch, Gordon 2010). This is evidenced in the increasing number of administrative structures and 'non-teaching staff' who are highly qualified professionals (Szekeres, 2011; Sebalj, Hobrook, & Bourke, 2012) and have gained a certain degree of autonomy and power within the academia. Likewise, even the world of scholars has been changing in recent years, with an increasing overlapping of the traditional epistemic community that produce and transmit values, norms and identities (Gordon Whitchurch 2010) with the new quests for accountability (Stensaker, Harvey 2011) and managerialism (Deem Hillyard Reed 2007; Archer 2005). Scholars are increasingly required to be able to perform other tasks and roles, for instance in knowledge transfer structures and in the managerial administration of the academia. To this regard the definition of *blended professionals* (Whitchurch 2010) reflects this degree of convergence and blurring between professional and academics' functions and roles in HEI's.

Although the UK is usually presented as the most evident example of these changes, this phenomenon can also to a certain extent be seen in other European countries, namely in Portugal. It is reflected in the general reform of the Portuguese national higher education system occurred in 2007 (RJES) which reinforces the power of professional structures in Portuguese higher education institutions and increases the pressure for accountability and performance on both professionals and academics (Neave, Amaral 2012). However, in Portugal little is known about the administrative dimension of HEIs (de Lourdes Machado, Cerdeira 2012) and even less about the non-research and non-teaching activities of academics (Carvalho 2012).

Presenting empirical evidence from an extensive survey directed at both professionals and academics in all Portuguese HEI's the aims of this paper are therefore twofold: i) to characterize and empirically to discuss the present situation of the blended professionals in Portugal, here defined as both academics and professionals; ii) to analyse and compare the perceptions of blended and non-blended professionals and academics in different types of institutions (namely universities and polytechnics) on the work relations and mutual representations between the administrative and academic staffs in their institutions.

Methodology

The survey was launched in 2015 and collected around 3200 valid responses from academics and professionals in more than 95% of Portuguese HEI. The operationalization in some key questions allowed for an empirical definition of blended and not-blended personnel. In order to measure the existence of these professionals in Portuguese public HEIs we ask if in a regular week the interviewed performed tasks and roles traditionally pertaining to the others. Using the data of this extensive quantitative survey, and given the lack of secondary data on this issue, we have gained an in depth and totally original insight over what actually administrative staff – especially those in *apical* managerial functions – does (Farndale, Hope-Hailey 2009). Additionally, we were able to run multilevel analyses at two levels: the first is by typology of higher education institutions (private polytechnics, public polytechnics, private universities and public universities). The second level of analysis is the institutional one. In accordance with the response rate within each institution, at the institutional level we don't consider the whole universe of HEIs, but only those achieving at least 20 valid responses in each group (both professionals and academics).

Expected Findings

The first expected finding is to gain a better general overview and to be able to characterize and discuss the roles and functions of professionals and academics in the Portuguese context, providing the first quantitative measure of the existence and number of *blended professionals* in nowadays Portuguese HEI's. We expect to gain a better understanding on both the socio-professional characteristics of these blended professionals such as age, academic qualifications, and types of functions performed and on their perceptions about their own role and work relations in their institutions such as their degree of involvement on decision making processes, levels of satisfaction with a number of factors and the recognition perceived from other peers and colleagues and possible conflicts. From this kind of data exploration we expect to highlight the increasingly relevant role of blended personnel in the academia in accordance with the most recent literature as well as analysing possible conflicts and differences in perceptions on work relations, particularly between these blended professional and their colleagues (academic and professionals) from the same cohort who remained in their respective traditional roles.

We expect to be able to discern by type and by HEI (the multi-level step of analysis) what is the impact of sectoral and institutional characteristics on both the presence of blended professionals (namely in which contexts the *not-academic* staff arose to relevant teaching and especially research tasks and where is the academic staff more prone to be involved in other tasks besides teaching and research) and on the perceptions of blended and non-blended professionals and academics on their respective roles and work relations between the groups.

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