PROFESSIONAL CULTURE AND TEACHER PROFESSIONALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

E. Fragoso Chipaco¹, M. Luísa Branco²

¹Universidade da Beira Interior (PORTUGAL)
²Universidade da Beira Interior, LabCom/UBI (PORTUGAL)

Abstract

Professional culture refers to how teachers carry out their work in teaching institutions. Through this, the work carried out takes on meaning and new teachers learn to solve their problems, being gradually integrated in the professional community. Teachers’ professional culture includes the beliefs, habits and ways of acting that are shared within a particular group of teachers or in the teaching community they are part of, and this can be observed in relationships between teachers. In turn, teacher professionalism is understood as what is specific in the teaching action, i.e., the set of behaviours, knowledge, skills, attitudes and values forming the specificity of being a teacher. Professional culture and teacher professionalism have gained visibility in recent research, above all with regard to higher education, due to the growth and increasing complexity of this sub-section of teaching in current society.

Higher education has undergone major transformation with the introduction of ‘new management’ as a general set of ideological principles with an emphasis on accountability, i.e., providing accounts based on strategic planning, performance indicators, quality auditing, and assessment of research and teaching, which has changed and continues to change the activities of Higher Education Institutions (HEI). The institutional emphasis on results has come to be part of professional culture, presenting teachers with significant challenges, particularly the conciliation of more student-centred teaching with knowledge production, through research and publication, besides performing management and extension functions. The balance, or lack of it, between these various dimensions, or how higher education teachers view professionalism and construct their professionality, seems to be related to the professional culture of the Higher Education Institutions (HEI) they belong to, and as a result of the meanings each HEI creates, through rituals, routines, beliefs or ethics, with repercussions on how teachers carry out their activity, on their relations with each other and the practices they use. In this text, we seek to explore the existing relationships between professional culture and teacher professionality in higher education, resorting to a review of the relevant literature. The literature analysed suggests that how teachers face the different functions they have to perform, and the balance between them, is affected by the perspectives and orientations of their colleagues, in particular groups or in the teaching community. Among these perspectives, scholarship for teaching stands out as a means to develop the teaching profession, whereas that of publish or perish can jeopardize it.

Keywords: professional culture; teacher professionality; higher education; new management.

1 INTRODUCTION

In the current context, HEIs are confronted with changes (1) based on the paradigm of new management, emphasizing accountability, i.e., providing accounts, as well as performance management (2), as standards of quality teaching and research that have altered how these institutions define and justify their institutional existence (2–4). Together with these changes, the competition between HEIs for finance for academic research and the emphasis on university extension (4,3) has also given rise to competition among teachers, the monitoring of efficiency and effectiveness through goals, results, performance and the existence of diverse values and cultures (5).

The new focus on research, management and service to the community (6), besides teaching, has determined a new culture in higher education, oriented towards results and accountability (7). However, in this context, there seems to be a professional culture that can influence teachers’ actions, especially the way they seek their professionality (8) through conciliating functions including student-centred teaching, research/publication, top or intermediate management and accompanying students’ end of course work.
Faced with these changes occurring worldwide, higher education teachers need to conciliate their activity of more student-centred teaching and knowledge production, through research and publication. Therefore, besides teaching, the lecturer has to act in the field of research and extension, since these are inseparable (1). Allied to this action, in juxtaposition, in the domain of teaching and research, there are additional management functions in various sectors of the institution (9) and academic supervision of monographs, dissertations and theses that present a constant challenge (10) based both on the lecturer’s individual development needs and institutional needs (9).

The way of facing these challenges, namely to achieve harmony between the teaching and research involved in the higher education lecturer’s work, may be linked to how lecturers perceive their professionality, which in turn may be related to the professional culture of the HEIs they belong to and the way these professionals perform their activity, in their relations with each other and the practices they use. To understand the professional culture and its weight in the performance of lecturers’ activity, with obvious implications for the state of development or degradation, in the present or future, or their professionalism, it is necessary to understand its construction and use (11).

In this text, our aim is to explore the relationships between professional culture and the teacher professionality in higher education, resorting to a literature review. We will begin by clarifying the relationship between professional culture and the teacher professionality. Then, we will deepen this relationship by concentrating on the area of higher education and bearing in mind the new challenges faced by this sub-system of teaching.

2 METHODOLOGY

Considering the objective stated, we make a systematic search of articles published between 2005 and 2018 about professional culture and teacher professionalism and professionality in higher education in the following databases: Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), ISI Web of Knowledge and B-on. Using the key words of “Professional Culture”, “Teacher Professionalism”, “Professional Culture in Higher Education”, “Teacher Professionalism in Higher Education” and “University Teachers” led us to relevant articles on the subject and studies analysing professional culture and professionality in HEIs and their probable relations.

3 PROFESSIONAL CULTURE AND TEACHER PROFESSIONALITY

If on one hand the notion of culture emphasizes the subjectivity of actors in a collective centred on relations with shared and mobilized knowledge in the work domain (12), on the other, the notion of professionalism emphasizes a shared process through which workers improve their status, increase their earnings, their power and their autonomy (13). From this perspective, professional culture refers to professional groups whose work and job have a social status and prestige, based on possessing a high academic title and qualification that allows using and applying abstract and scientific knowledge in actions considered exclusive to professionals rather than amateurs (14).

The teaching professional culture is defined by Hargreaves as a set of beliefs, values, habits and forms accepted as ways of doing things in communities of teachers (15). Morgado adds that it is the dominant norm that influences and determines what teachers consider valuable in their professional context and also the politically correct ways of thinking, feeling, acting and relating to each other (14). This vision shows that teachers’ professional culture amounts to a way of thinking and acting, and results from a set of meanings, behaviours and practices characteristic to each teaching institution. Teaching professionalism is what is specific to teaching action, i.e., the set of behaviours, knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that form the specificity of being a teacher (18). Alarcão adds that it includes a multidimensionality of knowledge areas (theoretical, process, contextual), values, rights and duties inherent to the social function of educating, by teaching (19). As Evans puts it there is a close relationship between the (collective) professionalism and the individuals’ professionalities, that are always the result of an individual appropriation of the latter (20).

For Roldão, teacher professionality is inseparable from the social and institutional changes of the current times, with unavoidable, and very complex, processes of reorienting forms of producing/building professional knowledge. These changes are, however, essential to development of the quality and confirmation of the teaching profession, at all levels of its performance, promoting its adaptation to the educational situations and needs of the present and future (21). Here, teachers’ professionality does not only assume solid knowledge of content and how to mobilize and structure
this pedagogically, but also implies knowledge of the curriculum and understanding of educational purposes, objectives and values (19).

By favouring the teacher’s personal development and construction of knowledge and action, professionality emerges as linked to professional culture, i.e., to teachers’ professional context – ideologies, beliefs, routine and technical knowledge present in practice (16,19,21). Consequently, teaching professionality as a means to produce innovative pedagogical and scientific knowledge necessary to exercise the profession effectively is constructed gradually and continuously, based on the development of practices, culture and the values of the profession (16).

3.1 Professional culture and teacher professionality in Higher Education

In the new management context, the teaching profession has seen its functions extended (22), with university lecturers having to accumulate academic and administrative work (23). By forming a non-homogeneous group of professionals with high academic qualifications and autonomy to perform technical-intellectual work (14), lecturers take on functions and set themselves against institutional power through the activity group (24), without this prevailing over the roles and obligations of academics and the institution’s main objective (23).

An activity group is formed by lecturers with different career paths and who do not necessarily share the same activities, but who build a professional culture that reflects aspects of the institutional activity (14). In those circumstances, which go beyond sharing, a community of practice is formed, anchored on a professional culture in which the activity group resorts to collective efforts towards legitimacy and satisfaction with the results obtained at work; contextualizes knowledge; and gives rise to autonomous and collaborative reflection that allows symbolic equality among group members (24).

Development of the modern university has emphasized research rather than teaching (6,22), there being a tendency to value research and publication for career advancement and stability (6). When this perspective does not contemplate a balance between research and other functions, it can have negative impacts on teacher professionality (25). Therefore, the search for teacher professionality in higher education means developing not only the four main functions (teaching, research, management and extension), but maintaining a balance between them (6).

Consequently, the way lecturers seek their professionality, above all through interaction with their peers, should consider the harmony of the functions of teaching, research, top or intermediate management of the institution (9) and also the function of academic supervision: monographs, dissertations and theses (10). All these functions occur in the specific context of an HEI, which develops its own particular identity, values, attitudes and beliefs, some of them being explicit and others implicit; some shared and others group-specific (6).

By following the Bologna recommendations on the act of teaching, associated with research practice that allows the lecturer to orient and support others’ learning work (18), professional culture in higher education can contribute to teacher professionality. Roldão claims that to improve the practical and technical tendency of teaching work, the search for professionality should be made within a professional culture focused on practice per se, patent in collaborative investigation between universities, schoolteachers and the community (26).

The introduction of a culture of presenting results and accountability allows lecturers the possibility to transform their practice (7) through available institutional support/policies that value career progression and stimulate the development of research on teaching practice (27). The emphasis on research and publication (22), as well as organising communications, conferences and seminars for lecturers to present and discuss successfully implemented innovations with their peers (27) has pressurized university lecturers to give priority to research to meet the criteria of entry, progress and stability in the academic career (22), influencing how they seek their professionality.

Given the changes in the academic career and profession, which seem to co-exist with teachers’ perception of the growing importance of research and publication in HEIs (6), Roldão points out that the association between research and teaching, in higher education, seems to be the most promising way to strengthen teacher professionality as regards knowledge (18). Consequently, professional culture should promote responsible exercising of the profession and involve lecturers in dynamics of reciprocity and exchange of knowledge and services among peers (19). In this connection, the production of new professional knowledge that gradually make professional knowledge more visible has gained social recognition (19), through the idea of scholarship of teaching as a means of self-development (19,22).
Faced with the changes occurring in higher education, through the scholarship of teaching lecturers can seek their professionality based on the different functions they must perform, producing knowledge about teaching. Here, the scholarship of teaching is set in the idea of collaborative interaction that creates a common culture and a shared ideal, with the following characteristics: becoming public, being exposed to criticism and assessment by peers and being available for future use (19). Given these practices, Roldão argues that teacher professionality can be formed in a climate of belonging to a professional community with its own culture and identity (11).

Professional culture can lead the lecturer to build knowledge more autonomously (18), with the incorporation of the scholarship of teaching allowing the inclusion of academic activities carried out by university lecturers, at the same time as making the implications and relevance of the different tasks clearer in the search for teaching professionality in higher education (22). This search for professionality is also influenced by the inter-peer work demanded by research (18), inasmuch as lecturers, especially the youngest ones, learn to cope with the complexity of teaching and its practices with the support of older colleagues (27).

Given the strong presence of research, as the other side of the professional culture of higher education teaching (18), the lecturer needs to supervise theses, give lessons and produce increasingly through research and publication according to the publish or perish (28) imperative. By emphasizing the need to consider the demands of the scientific community, and rapid, continuous production, publish or perish can jeopardize the lecturer’s action regarding more student-centred teaching and consolidating this university culture which is gaining prominence in HEIs (29).

It is necessary to change this tendency through a professional culture, which means knowing why something is done, what is done and when and why it will be necessary to do it differently, i.e., teaching practice able to balance the different functions the university lecturer must perform (30), so that research does not take precedence over the other functions encouraging practices such as salami publishing, whereby authors divide their research in many parts so that each one corresponds to a study to be published (29). Publish or perish, allied to salami publishing, can cast doubt on the search for teacher professionality in higher education due to indicators of the existence of groups exclusively devoted to the publication of scientific articles and the poor quality of academic production (28), as well as the development of scientific knowledge and forms of building modern knowledge (18).

Therefore, scholarship of teaching and publish or perish emerge as two opposing positions of new management. If on one hand, scholarship of teaching characterises the whole activity of critical and systematic research, in any field of knowledge and the dissemination of results for review by academic peers and by the public through publishing reports, presentations or other forms of communication (22), on the other, publish or perish pressurizes lecturers to publish more and more work, in high-impact journals, as an instrument for measuring the quality of teachers’ work (29). For Leite and Zabalza, this position of publish or perish has led in some cases to difficulties and doubts concerning time management of the different activities the lecturer has to perform (31). Scholarship of teaching stands out by encouraging cooperative practices among peers that can ensure harmony between the different functions the university lecturer must carry out.

It is necessary to prioritize peer collaboration in performing all functions, to allow construction of a professional culture able to strengthen each teacher’s degree of professionality, through balancing the different functions they perform which is affected by the perspectives and orientations of the colleagues they work with, in particular groups or the teaching community (18).

4 CONCLUSION

The changes occurring in higher education, resulting from new management, have made practices of presenting results and accountability commonplace, allied to standards of quality in teaching and research which have changed professional culture in higher education. This change has had a direct influence on the activities carried out by lecturers, and consequently, on how they seek their professionality, aiming to reconcile functions that include teaching, research/publication, top or intermediate management or supervising students’ final coursework.

Scholarship of teaching and publish or perish, as opposing practices emerging in the context of new management, present university lecturers with different challenges. By prioritizing peer collaboration in performing all functions, scholarship of teaching allows construction of a professional culture that can strengthen lecturers’ degree of professionality, through balancing the different functions they perform and affecting the perspectives and orientations of the colleagues they work with. On the contrary, by
giving too much emphasis to publishing in high-impact journals, the publish or perish tendency raises questions regarding management and the time devoted to the different activities the lecturer must perform, and may call into question the way they seek their professionalism.

This leads to the conclusion that a professional culture that prioritizes peer collaboration in performing all functions is able to strengthen the degree of teacher professionalism, considering that the way lecturers face up to the different functions they have to perform, and the respective balance, is always affected by the perspectives and orientations of the colleagues they work with, in particular groups or the teaching community.

REFERENCES


[28] Lima MMB, Maia VM. Os riscos e os desafios das universidades públicas diante do fenômeno da privatização do uso público da razão. 2017; (June).

