

Joca Zurc, PhD

A Qualitative Paradigm of Pedagogical Research in Higher Education Evaluation

The main purpose of assessing the quality of higher education is to monitor the implementation of the vision and strategy of the higher education institution (Quality Assessment Committee of the Faculty of Arts, University of Maribor, 2020, 2021). A well-developed feedback system on the quality of work can be understood as a positive feedback loop that enables the professional and personal development of higher education teachers and assistants. The result is high-quality higher education, which stimulates students' interest in studying and contributes to better academic performance, which in turn contributes to higher performance and better reputation of the entire university (Pogorelčnik & Boštjančič, 2023).

Among the various data collection and analysis techniques used to monitor the quality of higher education, online surveys on student and staff satisfaction stand out, as they are widely used. However, this quantitative approach to quality assessment encounters some methodological dilemmas that require critical reflection on its use (Štemberger, 2015). Existing quality criteria that are only focused on quantitative research do not meet the specific needs of other methodological approaches to quality assessment, such as action research (Bleijenbergh et al., 2011). The criticism of positivism leads to the establishment of qualitative research as an alternative approach to quantitative research. The pioneers in the field of the qualitative paradigm, Lincoln and Guba (1985), questioned the basic assumptions of the quantitative methodological tradition in science in their work *Naturalistic Inquiry*, which is considered one of the foundational works of social science research methodology. The positivist paradigm prescribes empirical, verifiable, and repeatable research approaches and, as such, cannot explain all scientific facts and comprehensively define the non-positivist research perspective. Lincoln and Guba (1985) have proposed an alternative approach that supports the naturalistic paradigm, also known as the constructivist or interpretive research paradigm. Qualitative methodology is characterized by the collection, analysis, and interpretation of narrative data, using various techniques such as categorization and contextualization strategies. The central aim of qualitative research is to portray the participants' lives as authentically as possible from their perspective, experiences, and understanding. Qualitative research follows two principles – flexibility and context dependence (Kogovšek, 1998). A qualitative researcher is characterized by an inductive research perspective that focuses on understanding the individual and takes into account the complexity of the research context (Creswell, 2014; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

When monitoring employee satisfaction through surveys, it is also important to gain a qualitative insight into their opinions, perspectives, and experiences of working in higher education. Our study aimed to explore the qualitative paradigm of pedagogical research in evaluating the quality of higher education and to utilize a focus group interview to obtain the perspectives and experiences of a selected group of staff, their agreement, differing views, and challenges at work. The study was conducted using an empirical qualitative approach and a semi-structured interview technique in a focus group. We planned and conducted the focus group in four phases according to Klemenčič and Hlebec (2007, pp. 9–10): 1) planning a focus group with problem identification; 2) selecting and recruiting participants; 3) conducting a focus group session; 4) qualitative data analysis and reporting.

We invited managers and representatives of the administrative staff of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Maribor (FF UM) to participate in the focus group. One representative was selected from each administrative unit (e.g., Secretariat, Office of Student Affairs, Accounting, International Office, Project Office, ICT Office, Office of Human Resources and General Affairs, etc.). A total of 10 members of administrative staff employed at FF UM in the 2021/2022 academic year participated in our focus group. In terms of gender, women predominated (70%). The average age of the participants was 40.9 years ($SD = 11.21$ years), with the youngest participant being 27 and the oldest 56 years old. All participants came from the Podravska region. Regarding the level of education attained, 75% of the participants stated that they had obtained a university degree or upper secondary education. Two-thirds (67%) of the focus group participants were in permanent full-time employment. As many as 75% had no experience participating in a focus group; one participant had already taken part in interviews. Only two participants had experience with a focus group.

The measurement instrument used in the focus group was a semi-structured interview. The questions were based on the results of previous self-evaluation reports (Quality Assessment Committee of the Faculty of Arts, University of Maribor, 2020), the results of a focus group with student tutors (Zurc, 2021, 2023) and the results of a survey on employee satisfaction at work (Quality Assessment Committee of the Faculty of Arts, University of Maribor, 2020). A focus group with administrative staff representatives was held on Monday, 14 February 2022, from 9:30 am to 10:33 am. The group interview lasted 1 hour and 3 minutes. It was conducted remotely via MS Teams. Data collection was conducted following the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki on Ethical Principles for Research Involving Human Subjects, the Personal Data Protection Act, and general ethical research principles. All participants took part voluntarily and had the option of cancelling their participation at any time without consequences. The collected material was analysed and combined without separating the statements from each other. All statements were coded. Due to the unequal representation of participants by gender and the possible recognition of the identities of the small number of male participants, all representative statements in the report were presented in female form. The data were analysed manually in MS Word using the qualitative content analysis method presented in Adam et al. (2012).

The findings show a high level of employee satisfaction and commitment to their work organization. Good mutual relationships within the team, good cooperation with different stakeholders, interest in the work, and well-being in the workplace are crucial factors for the job satisfaction of administrative staff in higher education. As one of the participants stated: “The biggest plus for me is that these are my colleagues. The work can be difficult, extremely difficult or extremely easy; it depends on your colleagues” (2/S-1). Participation in lifelong training and qualitative approaches to quality assessment appear to be key strategies for overcoming challenges and improving the work engagement and performance of university administrative staff. These factors should be given special attention in the future, as previous research has shown that employee satisfaction or happiness is statistically significantly related to the culture of the organization, and specifically to the existence of supportive relationships between colleagues and to supervisors' sensitivity to the needs of their employees (Ficarra et al., 2020). A systematic review of qualitative studies on the motives for continued employment of employees who have already met the requirements for retirement found that enjoying work, good mutual relationships, achievements, and helping others are the most important motives for remaining in the work environment, even when there is the possibility of retirement (Bratun et al., 2023).

Based on the findings, we conclude that the use of a qualitative semi-structured focus group has proved to be a suitable methodological approach for assessing employee satisfaction in higher education institutions. The focus group revealed the shared aspirations, endeavours, and needs of staff in administrative services, which contributed significantly to collective cohesion. As one of the participants explained, such an approach significantly promotes the development of shared goals within the team: “I like it very much, also because I heard actual examples of what we want. [...] And then from my colleagues, when I see their perspective and hear why they want something, or why they need something, not just want it, then it's different. This experience is very enriching for me” (9/V-13).

The discussion presented in this study contributes to the current debate on quality assessment in higher education (see Pogorelčnik & Boštjančič, 2023; Štemberger, 2017). Conducting a qualitative quality assessment with representatives of higher education administrative staff has proved to be successful, as it has provided a broad and deep insight into their experiences, expectations, and challenges in the workplace. Therefore, it should be followed up in the future and extended to other groups of employees, as well as to different stakeholders involved in higher education. The insight into employee satisfaction, motivation, and engagement factors gained in this study provides starting points for future development and awareness of the quality culture at Slovenian universities and faculties.

The paper is part of the programme group “Slovenian Identity and Cultural Consciousness in Linguistic and Ethnic Contact Spaces in the Past and Present” (P6-0372), funded by the Public Agency for Scientific Research and Innovation of the Republic of Slovenia and implemented at the Faculty of Arts, University of Maribor.