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The opinions of research assistants in education faculties regarding their working lives

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Abstract

This research was conducted to investigate the impact of indefinite expressions in the legal job definition of research assistants on their workload. The research group was limited to 286 research assistants from education faculties in 4 state universities in Ankara. The researcher developed and conducted the survey “Specifying the opinions of research assistants regarding their work” for that research group. This study is only composed of the responses to the following two questions: (1) If you think that you engage in plodding, please specify these Instances (open-ended question); and (2) How do you assess your process of research assistantship? (Multiple choice question)

Responses to the open-ended question were organised under certain codes. Both the codes and the responses to the multiple choice question were evaluated using a frequency analysis. All of the results are presented below using the samples taken from the responses, in frequency and percentage tables. The findings are interpreted.

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1. Introduction

The primary objectives of universities include the production of science and technology and raising people qualified to produce and implement the same (Aytaç, 2001, p. 64). In the universities, institutions having such important aims, the academic personnel play a leading role in the production and spread of information. It can be argued that the academic personnel resources of the universities are almost completely made up of research assistants who hold a position among the university staff (Sezgin, 2002, p. 1). Therefore, raising research assistants needs to be seen as proportionally important.

A career is a life-long engagement, a job (Çalık, 2000, p. 31). In the process of such engagement, the happiness of the individual becomes one of the most important elements. One of the most important factors affecting the satisfaction of academic personnel regarding their working life is the management and structure of the organization (Murat & Çevik, 2008). Organizational life is a type of collective existence. One of the most important reasons for organizational inefficiency is the commodification of human beings and a sense of management defining each individual as a “worker” (Aydın, 2010, p. 116).

A very important element of academic organizations is to provide for the research assistants who are at the outset of their academic career. Each individual would like to develop his/her knowledge, ability, experience, manner and skills in the organization in which s/he is involved. S/he needs to have the necessary information and to know the requirements of the job for him/her to be successful at work and properly conduct his/her work

in the future. The commitment to the organization of individuals with such opportunities, as well as their motivation and feelings of trust, will increase (Demir, 1999, p. 279).

1.1. Working life

The statistics show that the working environment is a living space where people spend almost one third of their life. This living space is the environment in which the individual performs his knowledge, skills and abilities in accordance with the tasks assigned, for the purpose of professional development within a framework of physical conditions, technological equipment and social relationships. The concept of working is psycho-socially considered to provide a service to obtain a status that meets the socio-psychic requirements of the individual and has a career guarantee (Aytaç et al., 2001, p. 51- 55).

The individual has to act within the limits of the norms imposed and task assigned by others in the organizational environment where s/he pursues his/her career. If the conditions imposed by the organization are contrary to the individual's own values, then an unhappy working life may develop.

1.2. Job Definition and Workload of the Research Assistants:

Role expectations may be deemed to be the key to success in working life. In this sense, both faculty academicians and research assistants have mutual expectations. The clarity of role expectations also constitutes the basis for academic success (Brown-Wright, Dubick, & Newman, 1997, p. 410). Thus, the worker will know the tasks that he will do, not have any doubts about what he is responsible for, know his rights, foresee the upper level positions to which he may be promoted in the future, feel safe thanks to such clarities and pursue his career (Başaran, 2008, p. 252). In determining the workload, a fair division of labor should be performed, considering the quality and quantity of the actions to be included in the worker's list of tasks in accordance with the usually legally-determined working hours, and the distribution of workload should be reviewed at regular intervals and re-arranged (Başaran, 2008, p. 249). At this point, it is of great importance, with the help of a "job definition", to clarify the list of works that constitute the workload. A job "is an organizational document, which is granted to the worker, or where the works are indicated, that provides guidance for the worker to perform his job without deviating from the organizational goals" (Başaran, 2008, p. 252)

In Turkey, the job definition of the research assistant is involved in the Law of Higher Education No. 2547, as is indicated in the Article 33 of the Law: "The research assistants are the teaching assistants who provide assistance in researches, surveys and experiments conducted in the higher education institutions and perform other relevant tasks assigned by the authorized bodies."

It can be easily understood from this definition that an ambiguity prevails, created by the phrase "other relevant tasks assigned by the authorized bodies..." as stated in the legal job definitions of the research assistants. Such ambiguity creates an open-ended list of works ranging up to 'plodding', including secretarial work, as the duty of lecturing is assigned to the individuals whose primary duty is to "research", although this is legally forbidden (Sancak, Küpeli, & Beyit, 2010, p. 64).

Başaran (2008, p. 249) defines the workload as the whole weight of tasks and actions that the worker must perform to achieve the performance level indicated to him as a goal within a certain period of working.

Although easy tasks allow for simple automation and division of labor, more complex tasks require a different kind of concentration. When the employee is loaded with tasks beyond his knowledge and skills, the person will be exposed to depression caused by a fear of his inability to perform and achieve, even if he wants to do so (Eren, 1998, p. 180-184). Furthermore, the "most boring workload" is defined by Başaran (2008, p. 250) as the one in which the working hours are not enough to meet the deadline and where the tasks assigned are independent from each other and require different skills. On the other hand, a workload which includes tasks that are quite similar to each other and do not require the employee to use his mind so much will create a sense of sameness, and this causes the employee to feel useless and puts the employee off the job because it is a

mental requirement for a human being to use his/her creativity of mind (Başaran, 2008, p. 250; Eren, 1998, p. 180).

Job difficulty, an ambiguity in the definition of roles, duties and responsibilities in the organizational structure and instabilities in their distributions, and lists of tasks that conflict with the knowledge, ability and experience of the employees cause stress on the employees (Eren, 1998, p. 227).

Sancak, Küpeli and Beyit (2010) state that the workload of research assistants consists of variables arising from the ambiguity of their job definition and that they are loaded with many affairs which could be defined as a secretarial kind of “plodding” in addition to their lecture and exam loads. The term “plodding” is lexically defined as making someone do other than his own duty and metaphorically defined as wearisome, boring and forced labor (in Turkish, in the dictionary of the Turkish Language Association (www.tdk.org.tr)).

The term “plodding” used in this study includes affairs that are not involved in the open-ended job definitions of the research assistants and also do not have an academic meaning.

1.3. Problem statement

In considering the foregoing, moving from the ambiguous expressions in the legal job definition of the research assistants, the problem statement was determined as “What do the research assistants working in the faculties of education think about their working lives?”

1.4. The objective and importance of the study

The study aims to determine the attitudes of the research assistants to their workload and the tasks they perform.

In accordance with the findings obtained, an improvement in the quality of the academic study environment is shown to be important, as the findings highlight suggestions to balance the workload of the research assistants. In addition, it stands out that the studies which have been carried out regarding the job satisfaction and working life of academic personnel in the universities have been addressed to lecturers or instructors. The number of studies related specifically to research assistants is limited. The previous studies are also important with respect to their study group, to which they are addressed.

Limitations

The study results are limited to the responses given to two questions involved in a eight-dimensional survey, which were collected in January and February 2011 from the research assistants who were both working at the Faculties of Education of Ankara University, Gazi University, Hacettepe University and Middle East Technical University and willing to reply the survey.

2. Method

The study model decided upon was a descriptive survey model. The study group of the survey was to consist of research assistants working at the education faculties of the state universities in Ankara (Ankara, Gazi, Hacettepe and Middle East Technical Universities). Although it aimed at conducting a complete inventory by reaching the entire target group, a total of 286 persons were reached on the basis of willingness.

For the purpose of finding out the viewpoints of the research assistants on their working life, a question pool was created with the help of a literature review of other organizational behavior studies. These studies examined the problems of the research assistants, satisfaction surveys and job inventories. The “Survey of the Viewpoints of the Research Assistants on their Working Life” worked by determining the sub-dimensions from this pool and receiving expert opinions. In this study, two questions from the survey were dealt with, one open-ended and one multiple-choice.

Descriptive statistics (percentage-frequency) were used in the analysis of the responses given to the multiple-choice questions. Content analysis techniques were used in the analysis of the open-ended questions. The

workload codes obtained by content analysis were described using a percentage frequency table. To increase the comprehensibility of the codes, some quotes are provided from the responses given by the participants.

3. Results

3.1. The percentage frequency values and comments on the question “How would you assess the process of being a research assistant?”

The “Scale of Working Life Satisfaction of the Research Assistants”, part of the study conducted on the research assistants, included a survey type question as well as an open-ended question. In the survey type question, the research assistants were asked, “How Would You Assess the Process of Being a Research Assistant?” and they were allowed to tick more than one choice among eight choices. The percentage frequency values obtained from the responses to this question are provided in the Table 1.

Table 1: The percentage frequency values for the question “How would you assess the process of being a research assistant?”

How Would You Assess the Process of Being a Research Assistant?	Frequency	%
Pleasant	115	40.2
Comfortable	63	22.0
Useful	153	53.5
Proud	88	30.8
Boring	35	12.2
Stressful	202	70.6
Useless	19	6.6
Discreditable	28	9.8

One of the most remarkable values among those obtained is that the choice “stressful” is ticked at a rate of 70.6%. There are many reasons for this work stress. It is thought-provoking that stress, which may be caused by job quality, organizational structure, external environment, and personal reasons, is found in a majority of the research assistants - as much as 70%. While stress results in physiological, mental and emotional problems on the part of employees, it also brings along a number of other problems such as reduced efficiency, conflicts within the organization, alienation, fatigue, exhaustion, and absence. Such stress should be got to the bottom of and strategies for stress management should be applied within the organization. This would hopefully provide a more healthy and efficient environment in the organization (Soysal, 2009).

The findings also indicate that more than the half (53.5%) of the research assistants find their working life “useful”, while also finding it stressful. Furthermore, it is also seen that a large proportion, as many as 40%, of research assistants consider the process to be “pleasant”, which cannot be underestimated.

The findings can be interpreted as proof that research assistants enjoy their jobs, although they consider the process to be stressful, and that an academic career is entirely a matter of commitment. Criticizing competition among academicians and the unfair policies of the faculty and academic members towards research assistants, Fish describes being an academician as “masochism”. He also states that in an academic life based on intense work and competition, the academicians are promoted in the academy by learning to experience problems and even to like such problems, and that in the future, they will present all these difficult conditions generously to their assistants, just as described by Brett (1997) in the analogy of “bestowed relationships” (Fish, 1993, cited in: Sharnoff, 1993; Brett, 1997). While Fish concludes that such instinctual sources as commitment to the job and devotion, as well as all the challenges, enable academicians to obtain concessions within the organization, he also highlights that he actually finds this fact odd and disapproves of it.

It can be said that the comments made in answer to the open-ended question in this study match with the findings above, that research assistants, who find the research assistantship “stressful”, also experience it as “pleasant”.

3.2. Coding, frequency and interpretation of the responses to the open-ended question

This study began to develop with the following questions, “What is the workload of a research assistant? How much of it is scientific, and how much of it is plodding?” Therefore, an open-ended question was included at the end of the survey, which was “If you think you engage in plodding, please specify such plodding.” None of 286 participants did not reply to this question, and the workloads specified in all the responses given were organized under certain codes. These codes and their frequency-percentage values are provided in the Table 2.

Table 2: Coding, frequency and interpretation of the responses to the open-ended question

Work code	Frequency	Percentage (%)
To engage in secretarial work, correspondence, etc.	69	24
Invigilation	39	13
To draw up programs and to act as exam coordinator	38	13
Student counsellorship	34	11
Social activity tasks (Department meetings, workshops, symposiums, graduation ceremonies, etc.)	27	9.40
Lecturing on behalf of the faculty members	22	7.6
Additional course transactions	20	7
To provide technical support (troubleshooting computers, setting up web sites, etc.)	19	6.6
Some private affairs of the faculty members	17	6
To evaluate and assess the assignments and exams	13	4.5
Stationery-photocopy	8	2.8
To collect money (to provide ego banderole and hologram for the students and for a variety of department meetings, etc.)	7	2.4
Cleaning	5	1.7

The percentage distribution is provided in proportion to the study group of 286 persons. The frequencies and percentages are listed in descending order. It can be seen that the perception of plodding in the answers of the research assistants answering the open-ended question is generally gathered in the codes including “secretarial”, “to draw up the curriculum and exam schedule”, “invigilation”, and “student counsellorship”.

There are other striking answers than the above, even if the frequency of these seems to be less. To illustrate some of these answers:

“The duties of the research assistants look like the indefinite expressions in mathematics. In sum, they do what is ordered them to do [sic] by the head of department... Bill payments of the department teachers, mailing affairs, carrying things, “something came up; you give the lecture”, etc.”

Another research assistant lists all the affairs that s/he considers as plodding as follows:

*“To grab the phone that the lecturer has forgot at home,
To have the documentation of the lecturers photocopied,
To perform the checking affairs of the lecturers,
To make the announcement, which is actually a secretarial task,
To collect Money from the department,
To carry papers to the dean’s and chancellor’s offices,
To order tea for the lecturers,
To carry the house keys of the lecturer to the real estate agent,
To bring the lecturer, who do not know how to come to the faculty and comes from outside, to the faculty,
To give lectures instead of the late lecturers,
To follow all the official correspondence of a dissertation student out of the university.”*

This answer contains striking expressions, even if it is assumed to be valid for only one research assistant. This research assistant, whose eyes tell of his stress and exhaustion, highlights that he even pays for the fuel for all the transportation tasks he is ordered to perform outside. The following is another example:

*“To try to open the manager’s file on computer, which cannot be opened,
To be responsible for the disconnection of the manager’s internet connection,
To change the passwords of the manager,
To check the manager’s flight tickets,
To arrange the course hours of the manager,
To know and not to forget what the manager forgets!”*

Another research assistant states his/her complaints about his/her job thus:

“The duty of the research assistant is not to act as a secretary. It is scientific research. What I feel is most worrying is that I cannot receive feedback for my studies.”

With this statement, s/he points out that what s/he suffers from is a lack of communication.

The following is the answer of another research assistant holding office in art education:

“I engage in so much plodding... I go t three-floors downstairs just to make tea. I wash the dishes of the lecturers. I do not like to serve cake, tea and napkins during the master’s degree, PhD, associate professorship examinations. We provide secretarial services when there is no secretary around in the department. I am involved in the institute’s assignments. I perform enrolling works. I can barely take time for my own studies. The school doors are closed at the weekends, so we cannot works at that time, either. It feels unpleasant to be continuously followed by cameras in an art environment. The lecturers call me just when I am about to leave the school building and I have to come back. This kind of imposing speeches makes me feel like insignificant.”

Both during the conversations at the time of responding to the scale, and also in the answers written on the survey, it was clear that one of the most significant problems faced by the research assistants is the tasks they do for nothing. It especially makes frustrates them that they cannot receive recompense for their work when they lecture instead of the faculty members but they are not paid any remuneration. The experience of a research assistant holding an office at a music training faculty is provided below:

“We clean our office, even the mice crap. We are forced to work at the cocktail parties and opening ceremonies, free of charge...” said one research assistant.

It is understood from the responses given that a task performed free of charge may become “plodding”, even for artistic people.

The profiles mentioned above are experiences that can be deemed tragic for the faculty member candidates of the future. In addition to the above responses, there are also those research assistants among the participants, who have stated that they do not engage in plodding, they are not charged with the private affairs of any faculty members, and that they consider it as gain to give lectures instead of the faculty members. These participants consider all the work they perform as an investment in the future and feel positive about their professions and organizations. This indicates that different tasks are assigned to different research assistants working at different universities, or even at the same departments. However, the source of such difference in the responses given may be considered as a consequence of the ambiguity of the legal job definition for a research assistant. To fairly distribute the tasks, it is of great importance to clarify the job definition

. Conclusion and suggestions

In the responses to this survey, complaints about their roles and responsibilities indicate that research assistants need a clear job definition. The ambiguities in the current job definition for research assistants should be eliminated and a specific job definition should be set out.

What is important is to provide good opportunities for individuals at the outset of their academic careers and make the profession, and therefore science itself, attractive for them. This means moving away from “plodding” and focussing on academic development and career advancement; young scientists should bring Turkey one step forward, engaging in scientific activities as an effective part of the development of the country. A new, clear job description is one of the more important suggestions to be offered as a result of this study, both to the governors of the country and the managers of higher education, which will help them achieve such success by providing the required environment for it. The future of science in Turkey rests with the universities, and therefore with the current new generation of research assistants.

It can be suggested that future researchers could make this study, which is only limited to the faculties of education as well as the state universities located in Ankara, a more extensive one, so as to make comparisons between foundation and state universities and between different cities or even throughout the country, thereby including research assistants working at different faculties and different departments across Turkey.

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