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Into the Job or Becoming Acquainted with an Academic Institution

Abstract

As new faculty begin to build an academic career, three dimensions need to be part of the introductory socialization phase: knowledge of intra-organizational structures and processes, knowledge of cultural norms and values and the realization of their role within the institution. This article portrays two practical examples for the professional onboarding and socialization of academic faculty at different career levels. A Training Passport assists all newcomers during orientation. An academic leadership course within a moderated peer learning setting guides newly appointed professors through the introductory phase. Although single ideas and instruments might not be new, the example shows that each institution of higher learning needs to carefully consider an effective method for developing and socializing academic faculty within their respective cultural and environmental conditions.

Keywords

Into the job, Socialization of Academics, Training Passport, Newly Appointed Professors, Knowledge Management

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1 Into the Job

Both academic newcomers and experienced scientists alike are grateful for any initial support they receive when entering a new job. Young scientists need an introduction to their academic work place and their new professional role in the field of academia. Likewise, scientists at a higher career level, such as newly appointed professors, may make use of the available support network during their introductory phase. Organizational culture is complex, and newcomers commonly overcome organizational challenges by trial and error. Additionally, the first period is often characterized by loneliness and unfamiliarity (THIERNEY, 1994). In a survey, professors estimated the duration of their orientation period to be between one and two years (BECKER & PROBST, 2004). Only after this period of time do most newly appointed professors start to fully comprehend how formal and informal institutional processes work.

Faculty socialization – how faculty learn to be faculty (TIERNEY, 1994) – concerns all entries and promotions within academic institutions. In one way or another faculty become accustomed to the organization's norms. Several levels of knowledge are crucial. On the one hand, knowledge of the environment is required: how does this organization work; how do decision-making processes work; which processes are decisive; who are the most important stakeholders and potential collaborators? On the other hand, knowledge on cultural norms, the unwritten rules of social interaction and common values and attitudes is also critical. Explicit and tacit knowledge are considered equally important during the socialization process (c.f. NANAKO, 1994).

Lastly understanding one's role in their new professional field needs to be achieved. This includes reflection of one's role perception, the importance of professional symbols and common concepts on required competences. The key to success of these efforts is to reach an appropriate fit between the individual and the (new) professional environment. Possible initial mutual disharmonies should be reduced to allow for fruitful cooperation. At the same time, it is essential, especially for newcomers, to recognize where and how they can actively create a contribu-

tion to the further development of their professional environment. The incorporated innovations must be compatible with the respective institution and academic field.

Collective standards for the introductory phase of new faculty members facilitate their career development. Though academic development consists of many individual perspectives (AKERLIND, 2008) and levels of scientific excellence, to a certain extent it is a social construct (ZIMMERMANN, 2006). Organizational and cultural knowledge are indisputably crucial for the effectiveness of research and teaching activities. This is increasingly true in times of boundaryless career development (ARTHUR, 1994), where the academic career is no longer tied to one institution, and the world wide shift from core funding in research to project-based funding, where doctoral and postdoc positions within third party funded projects and other individual fellowships play an increasingly important role (LAUDEL, 2013). Flexible career paths include various career positions nationally, internationally, and at university and non-university institutions. As with every change, it is important to quickly adapt to new environments.

At University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Vienna (BOKU) centralized activities are taken in order to actively shape and support academics in their introductory phase at different career levels. The aim is to improve internal cooperation and mutual understanding and to encourage retention of academics with unlimited contracts, as well as increase the employability of academics with limited contracts.

In a global scientific community, adequate forms of personnel management at universities should be explored in a process of joint exchange and learning (PELLERT & WIDMANN, 2008). Hence BOKU's model for a Training Passport and leadership course for professors are portrayed as follows: The Training Passport supports all newcomers in better orientation and documents the lifelong academic learning process. The academic leadership course enhances the introductory phase of newly appointed professors within a moderated peer learning setting.

2 Training Passport

“It is unbelievable how much people do NOT know about the University even after many years of working here,” one colleague stated at the beginning of our discussions on the introduction of a Training Passport. Indeed, it was criticized that the knowledge on guidelines and core processes in teaching and research are not evenly distributed, since onboarding is carried out individually in the immediate working environment at the respective departments or university locations.

This decentralized approach is not surprising in the environment of a loosely coupled system (WEICK, 1976) where sometimes the potential for identification and the shared activities with the scientific community in the subject are greater than with their respective university. The way to couple loose elements – in our case academic disciplines and departments – is communication (SIMON, 2007). To offer explicit space for communication and knowledge transfer may prove very useful. This is one intention of the Training Passport; to boost corporate identity.

As the idea of a Training Passport arose in 2014 a broad based working group with representatives of academic and administrative departments began to develop a concept for a Training Passport. The aim was to facilitate continuing education as well as regular internal knowledge transfer and subsequently high quality standards in teaching and processing of research projects. The working group identified fields of knowledge and content-related topics for the Training Passport and worked on possibilities of appropriate transfer and instruction. In the end, a modular concept was developed which includes the following steps:

1. essential guidelines and regulatory provisions are available and promoted for self-study from the beginning of the employment onwards
2. general knowledge of the university is presented in a centralized Welcome and Introductory Lecture twice per semester
3. internal processes and framework conditions in the fields of teaching and research are conducted in workshops with the related service departments at the beginning of each semester

4. an extensive internal further education program is offered to provide individualized further training and education opportunities in the work place.

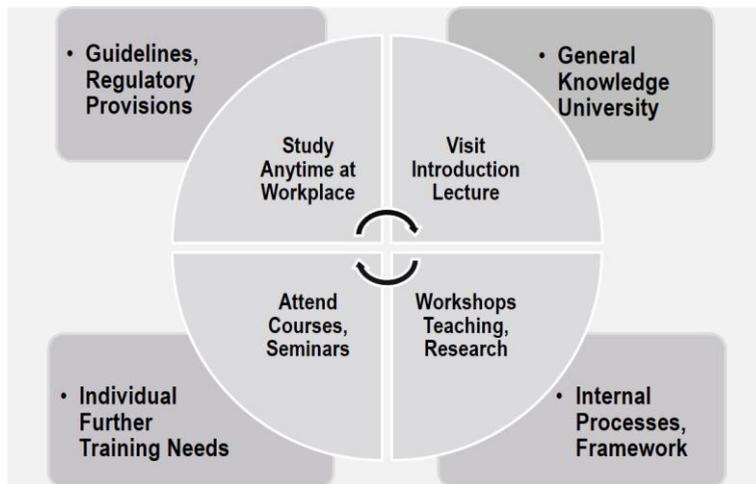


Figure 1: Modular system of a Training Passport

In order to make the Training Passport applicable, the Center for Information Technology programmed an in-house application software. The program offers the option to register for current lectures, workshops and seminars and displays guidelines and regulatory provisions to document the self-study progress. It enables every staff member to manage their personal training passport, to retrieve the status quo anytime, to plan further educational steps in a forward-looking manner, and to print the personal training passport in form of a presentable certificate when required. The last functionality was considered highly interesting in terms of employability, as the certificate may be attached to later applications.² The individual

² BOKU employs approximately 700 academics with project-funded and limited contracts.

Training Passport lists all professional and continued trainings. Courses attended externally may also be uploaded and listed as proof for an extended competency profile.

During implementation and creation of a need-based structure for the Training Passport, several questions and challenges had to be addressed. They were solved in the following way: like all universities, BOKU has a multitude of guidelines and regulatory provisions in its various fields. It is not feasible for new staff to work their way through all documents. Thus, we focused on three documents and placed those in first position. These three documents are of particular relevance for all staff members: House Regulations, Compliance Guidelines and General Safety Instructions. All further documents were categorized (such as “Teaching”, “Research”, “International Cooperation”, or “University Management”) to help make apparent which regulatory guidelines are applicable for one’s specific field of work.

The Welcome and Introductory Lecture was structured so as to communicate general knowledge on the university and its organization that might be interesting for all different staff members regardless of their respective job profile: the university’s historical development and mission statement, scientific disciplines and fields of competence in research and teaching, strategic cooperation and project partners, administration and organizational structure, legal framework and reporting obligations, media of internal communication, corporate design, and ecological and social sustainability.

It was a desire to represent the university’s culture and values at the Welcome and Introductory Lecture. Thus the event is certified as a “Green Meeting”³ to set an example for ecological sustainability. Amongst other things this means that BOKU’s recycling and waste-management concept are highlighted, distributed

³ The Austrian Eco-Label for Green Meetings and Green Events is sponsored by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management. It aims to promote environmentally conscious management.

print media are prepared using Fair Print and in reception disposable packaging is avoided and regional products are included. Prior to the event, participants are advised to make use of public transportation or to use their (BOKU) bicycle instead of a car. As welcome present all, new staff members receive a forest and climate protection certificate. In line with the issue of social sustainability we show our short film “Intercultural Snapshots”. This BOKU-produced, humorous narrative presents pictures and scenes focusing on intercultural sensitivity, tolerance and mutual understanding.

In the area of internal processes and framework conditions regarding teaching and research, three-hour introduction workshops are conducted by internal instructors from the Center for Education and from Research Support, Innovation & Technology Transfer. The workshops provide basic know-how on study law, course and exam administration, research project registration and quality control. Further training programs are offered in different fields to provide more in-depth insights, e.g. Patent Legislation, Legal Basics for Research Promotion Contracts, University Didactics, Academic Instruction and Copyright in Teaching. These may be attended as needed.

The Training Passport addresses new and experienced staff members. A colleague with years of work experience at the university stated after attending the Welcome and Introduction Lecture: “I sort of knew most of the things mentioned here but now connections have become a lot clearer.” Since implementation one year ago more than 600 colleagues attended at least one of the different passport modules. We are, step by step, coming closer to reaching the target of a steady internal knowledge transfer. The passport activities are coordinated by the Department for Personnel Development and highly promoted internally by rectorate and responsible managers.

3 Peer Learning for Professors

3.1 Description of the Program

Several years ago, BOKU faced the challenge of having a relatively high number of university professors – one third of all - retiring within just a few years. In the course of their replacement it was necessary to rethink the onboarding for newly appointed professors in terms of supporting a gentle integration and also reflecting the change of generations on a broad level. Because of the accumulation of recruits and appointments it was obvious that opportunities for a collective socialization were needed to be developed (THIERNEY, 1994).

Thus, in 2011 a five-day course for university professors was launched which since then has been attended by the majority of BOKU's university professors. The objectives of this program included faster and more effective integration into the faculty community and better orientation (decision structures, internal procedures). Leading competences required for scientific management should get a space for reflection and through early networking possibilities and a better preparation for the new role retention should be promoted. In case of professorship, retention is particularly important as every new appointment procedure costs a lot of time and effort.

In the conception phase it seemed essential to include all stakeholders for the later acceptance of the program. As for the training passport, a working group was established⁴, to which representatives from rectorate, senate, professors' club, staff council for scientific staff and personnel development belonged. The group discussed the cornerstones for the course and recommended the training content alignment and its framework conditions such as duration, location and timing.

⁴ At universities the set up of committees and working groups is crucial for a later acceptance of a decision process, even for the launch of a new extensive training offer (c.f. KÜHL, 2007)

Put into practice, the training program consisted of two modules. The first included the various scientific leadership roles, role dynamics, role changes and possible role conflicts. The second included classic instruments for scientific leadership. Apart from theoretical input and various exercises (such as role plays), mutual exchange and sharing of informal knowledge were highly promoted. A substantial part of the program was the opportunity to learn from peers: not only newly appointed colleagues were invited to participate but also experienced professors were actively motivated to join the program. On one hand they functioned as mentors for their new colleagues, on the other hand they could relearn their own role within the university – faculty socialization must be seen as a continuous process where even the most senior faculty must learn (THIERNEY, 1994).

A particular highlight of each training course was the fireside chat with the Rector who shared important values of leadership in academia, for instance the significance of a management style promoting respect and trust. In order to relate to the institutional culture, the location was not at a top-class hotel but a seminar building at BOKU's Forest Demonstration Center amidst a forest, surrounded by most spectacular nature. It does not provide WLAN, has only poor cellular phone connections and requires its seminar participants to show their hands-on mentality: they have to make their own beds.

3.2 Role Perception

Leadership is a sensitive issue at universities. Organizational management functions do not have a top priority for academics (JANES, 2010). The fact that the management course for professors was well attended is mainly due to the high promotion and support by the rectorate and professors' club and the unique opportunity to get to know and network within the professorial peer group.

Nevertheless, participants benefited from reflecting on their own leadership roles using the Scientific Leadership Portfolio (Fig. 2). The model was developed at Chalmers University of Technology in Gothenburg, Sweden (SEWERIN, 2010), and was adapted for BOKU's needs. It describes four different fields of action re-

lated to leadership at universities – science, education, networks and organization – and shows the challenge of scientific leadership: each field develops its particular dynamics; the variety of the different leadership roles needs to be handled professionally.

<p>Leading Science</p> <p>Researcher, Expert</p> <p>„core competence“ reputation within scientific community scientific hierarchy</p> <p>power of expertise</p>	<p>Leading Education</p> <p>Program Manager, Teacher</p> <p>responsible for study programs undergraduate education promotion of young researchers</p> <p>professorial authority, mentorship</p>
<p>Leading Networks</p> <p>Head of Competence Centre Project Lead</p> <p>demands network competence often external money driven</p> <p>coordination, persuasive power</p>	<p>Leading Organization</p> <p>Head of Department or Institute</p> <p>„traditional“ line management organizational hierarchy function of administration</p> <p>disciplinary power</p>

Figure 2: Scientific Leadership Portfolio

The core competence in the Scientific Leadership Portfolio is promoting science and opening and developing research areas (“Leading Science”). For institutions with research-oriented teaching, the second field of action (“Leading Education”) is of major importance as well. The field of teaching includes education and training of a constantly increasing number of students as well as the promotion of young academics. While the authority of a university teacher is one of the university’s oldest leadership models, the third field of action is rather new: the increasing-ly transdisciplinary research environment along with the volume of national and

international cooperation need a high amount of coordination and networking competence (“Leading Networks”).

In times of autonomy among universities, the fourth and last field of action (“Leading Organization”) has gained importance. It includes strategic focus, direction of employees and commercial prudence. As professors usually draw most of their professional identity from research and their reputation in the scientific community, the necessity of organizational hierarchical functions and administrative tasks are often regarded as bothersome and are thus among the most unwanted responsibilities.

The Scientific Leadership Portfolio is particularly helpful as it shows organizational management work is not in competition with scientific tasks. Instead leadership is required in all four fields and it is necessary to develop a holistic view and the competence to successfully switch between the various fields of action. The model illustrates the role variety of scientific management. Participants in the training program reflected on the requirements and conducted a personal analysis of their current level.

3.3 Sustainable Benefits

The sustainable benefits of the program were evaluated using an online questionnaire. Participants who completed the training course before 2014 were asked about various categories like satisfaction with the program and learning outcomes. Results showed that the newly appointed professors could especially profit from peer learning and the informal organizational knowledge transfer. They received deeper insights in internal decisive structures and a sense for the academic leadership culture at BOKU. Experienced professors benefited in such a way that new approaches and external views were brought in through the newcomers.

The majority of respondents stated that getting to know their colleagues, creating a network and the exchange of experience were the main results of the training course. Almost all professors continued to make good use of their established networks even several years after their successful participation (Fig. 3). This network

helped in sharing knowledge, exchanging experiences and developing ideas for inter- and multidisciplinary scientific projects.

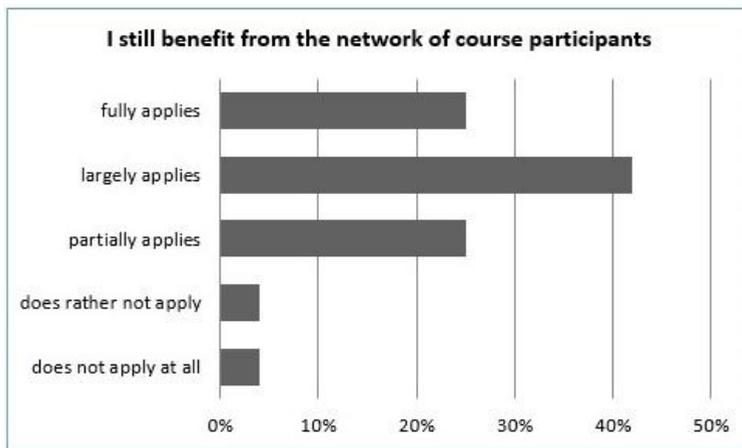


Figure 3: Evaluation of network building thanks to the training course (Source: Personnel Development, BOKU)

Many participants profited from the reflection of their (new) role. The academic leadership role brings not only new duties but also new design leeway. Professors need to create efficient communication tools and channels in their division and scientific environment. In this respect, a role play in which a critical conversation with a member of staff was conducted seemed to be among the most helpful tools.

A certain number of answers highlighted an increased understanding of the needs of staff members and colleagues as well as organizational needs. Regarding changes in the management behavior, the most important outcome was a gentle modification of the leadership attitude (being more patient, having lower expectations, maintaining own beliefs). The discussion of the Scientific Leadership Portfolio

enhanced the own role perception and the awareness for the role requirements (“it helped to sharpen my senses”).

The initial aims of effective socialization through faster integration into faculty, better orientation for internal structures and procedures and the further development of a useful role perception were largely achieved.

4 Conclusion

Professional and careful onboarding and development should not be taken for granted. In any event, it is difficult to make general suggestions that are particularly valid for academics regarding the many different career levels and scientific disciplines. It is most useful to work out tailored approaches and programs for different target groups and institutions.

For BOKU, the Training Passport is an essential milestone in order to purposefully support new staff members in their introductory phase. With some minor adaptations the Training Passport was moved from the pilot phase to a regular process one year after implementation. Equally, the training course for professors provided an effective and adequate option for newly appointed professors to gain insights into the university and to enhance faculty socialization through peer learning.

The above described set of measures focuses on transferring internal knowledge related to structures and processes as well as on cultural values and norms. The model of the Scientific Leadership Portfolio, in particular, provides a supportive opportunity to strengthen the professional role perception. All these efforts have numerous benefits. The earlier one understands informal and formal procedures, the more effective one can be regarding the own academic career and the organizational (university) output and key performance indicators. The submission of project proposals is, for instance, more successful with the referring knowledge of main procedures and guidelines. Newly appointed professors are more effective in guiding early career researchers when they are more familiar with certain decision structures.

In addition, professional knowledge management and a better understanding of the administrative necessities and legal frameworks promotes the cooperation between academics and service staff. Professional onboarding, thus, directly reflects back to the attitude towards collaboration and organizational culture.

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