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The Culture of Excellence in Higher Education: Assessing the Quality of the Measurement Tool and Its Application

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The article aims to present a tool to assess the maturity of a university's culture of excellence (CoE) and the results of its validation.

Research Design & Methods: The respondents were the academic staff, and 363 complete responses/questionnaires were obtained. The questionnaire, available in both Polish and English, was distributed through the university's MS Teams communication platform. The proposed tool consists of 35 items subordinated to seven dimensions.

Findings: Results indicate that the tool is valid and reliable for assessing the culture of excellence in higher education institutions. The maturity level of a CoE at one university has been established.

Implications/Recommendations: The proposed tool can be used to determine individual perceptions of particular CoE dimensions among academic staff, which can help promote the idea of continuous improvement in the workplace.

Contribution: Our contribution to science is to supplement the knowledge about the CoE phenomenon at universities and present the concept of its measurement as a research tool. This tool can be used by other researchers, for example, for cross-cultural studies. The tool can be used to compare universities with each other, e.g., in external peer benchmarking. The CoE diagnostic instrument can be beneficial when the universities are part of an association or federation of universities. This aspect of the research can be regarded as a contribution to practice.

Article type: original article.

Keywords: organisational culture, excellence, assessment, higher education.

JEL Classification: I23, I29.

1. Introduction

Expectations for higher education institutions (HEIs) are increasing, due to several social, political and economic factors (Kromydas, 2017; Handel, 2021; Vergani, 2024). Education in general, and higher education (HE) in particular, is essential for improving people's quality of life and well-being and influences society (Gałat, 2018; Mukherjee *et al.*, 2023). This is particularly relevant in the context of the life-long learning paradigm (Ylonen, 2012), the age of the internationalisation of higher education (Zheng *et al.*, 2020), and most of all, the emphasis on performance excellence in higher public education (Rahman, Voon & Abdullah, 2021). To develop and maintain excellence, HEI must constantly improve service quality. This approach is consistent with Plato's definition of quality, which recognises that quality is only a degree of excellence (Dahlggaard & Anninos, 2022). Moreover, given that excellence is born of culture (Berger, 2003, p. 6), achieving an excellent, above-average level should involve developing a culture of excellence.

This article aims to present a tool to assess the maturity of a university's culture of excellence and the results of its validation. The authors were prompted to undertake the study because there are still too few works in the literature to recognise the essence of a culture of excellence in higher education. Almost no publications mention CoE measurement tools in the HEI. The above research gap was confirmed in the earlier study conducted by the authors of this paper (Wiśniewska & Grudowski, 2024), who, following a systematic review of the literature, proposed seven dimensions of CoE. Based on the above, the CoE assessment tool has been proposed and then subjected to statistical verification. The following research questions were asked: Q1: Is the constructed tool reliable and accurate for

measuring CoE? Q2: If the tool is qualitatively appropriate, what is the level of CoE at the university under study? The survey used the CAWI (computer-assisted web interview) method. The questionnaire was distributed throughout the university's MS Teams communication platform.

2. Literature Background

Excellence is generally defined as an “outstanding merit or quality” or “extremely good, of very high quality” (Mašková, Kučera & Nohavová, 2024). In HEIs, excellence is synonymous with achieving mission/vision, achieving/exceeding benchmarks and internal measures, best practices, and community engagement. Excellence in HE is equivalent to cost-effectiveness; customer/stakeholder satisfaction; dissemination of good practice nationally and internationally; learning outcomes; making optimal use of all resources, financial and human assets, the match between desired and actual perception, positive atmosphere in staff and student environments, integration in teaching and research, quality of teaching and learning and relative to starting point – achieving targets (Hides, Davies & Jackson, 2004). Brusoni *et al.* (2014, p. 20) suggest that excellence in HEIs can be: a) a description of current provision and a goal or aspiration for institutions, academics, and students; b) describing something exceptional, meritocratic, outstanding, and exceeding normal expectations; and c) a relative and an absolute concept. The authors (Brusoni *et al.*, 2014, p. 19) add that “the concept has no meaning if all are excellent and there is no way of distinguishing the performance of individual institutions and departments.” It can be emphasised that excellence in HE is a continuous pursuit for higher and higher levels of quality (Anninos, 2020) and that the pursuit of excellence should be one of the main goals of HEIs, embedded in their development strategy. HE organisations do this, for example, through the implementation of various national, over-national excellence frameworks (e.g., United Kingdom's Research Excellence Framework; the European Commission's HR Excellence in Research programme) or quality management approaches such as TQM (Total Quality Management), Six Sigma, or Lean Management (Sunder & Antony, 2018). As for the national, Polish, and legal context, it can be noted that The Polish Accreditation Commission, expressing its concern for the highest possible quality of education, awards Certificates of Educational Excellence. This procedure is carried out in compliance with Article 250 of the Act of 20 July 2018 (Prawo o szkolnictwie wyższym) Law on Higher Education and Science (i.e., Journal of Laws of 2022, item 574, as amended), § 4(14) and § 9(3)(10) of the Statute of the Polish Accreditation Committee, as well as Annex No. 4 to the Statute. Nevertheless, the described programme is limited only to the sphere of education and learning outcomes (Strugielska, 2020)

However, for these programmes to function effectively, it is necessary to implement and maintain the right culture of excellence. The CoE is part of organisational culture (OC). According to Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, OC is “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others” (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010, p. 6). Schein (2004, p. 17) defines OC as “a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration.” As confirmed by different sources (e.g., Rahman, Voon & Firdaus, 2016; Rahman, Voon & Abdullah, 2021; Robertson, 2021; Moradi-Moghadam *et al.*, 2023; Wiśniewska & Grudowski, 2024), over the years, there has been a gradual increase in the number of works devoted to the culture of excellence. It seems clear that the concept is ambiguous and multidimensional. An overview of the definition of a culture of excellence was presented by Rezaei *et al.* (2018). Based on this, among others, one can point out the following definitions and opinions on the CoE: “the totality of the beliefs, norms, and values that switch the actions of persons and groups in a company” (Arasli, 2012, pp. 573–590); “a general culture that appreciates excellence in faculties and universities” (Al Shobaki & Abu Naser, 2017, pp. 135–157). These definitions are the starting point for this article.

According to Drucker, “what gets measured gets managed” (see: Curtis *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, to learn if and at what level the CoE is, it must be assessed. However, before measuring the CoE, it is necessary to consider the dimensions that constitute it. Given the thorough, systematic review of the scientific literature carried out by the authors of this study (Wiśniewska & Grudowski, 2024) the following dimensions were taken for the construction of the CoE measurement tool: 1) leadership oriented to excellence (LOE), 2) clear vision, mission, and goals for excellence (CVMG), 3) employee engagement (EE), 4) human resources management (HRM), 5) meeting and exceeding student and staff expectations (MEE), 6) continuous improvement of processes through innovation and good practices (CI), 7) partnership and teamwork for improvement (PTI).

3. Methodology

The respondents were the academic staff of one of the largest universities in Northern Poland. Obtaining consent for the study was conditional on the anonymity of the institution. Considering the number of people working at the university and assuming a confidence level of $\alpha = 0.95$ and a maximum measurement error of 5%, the required minimum number of respondents in the survey should be 341. In our case, 363 complete responses/questionnaires were obtained. The survey used the CAWI (computer-assisted web interview) method. The questionnaire in Polish and English was distributed throughout the university’s MS Teams communication

platform. Completing the questionnaire was associated with informed consent to participate in the study. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. The research did not interfere with the physical and mental health of the respondents and was conducted with respect for their rights regarding their origin, identity, race, and gender. Before the survey began, potential respondents were informed of its purpose, importance, and the essence of a culture of excellence. It took about 20 minutes to complete the questionnaire. The research was conducted following the principles of scientific ethics, as certified by the relevant university research ethics committee (No. 1000/45/23). The survey questions started from demographic aspects describing the respondents in terms of gender, length of work experience, scientific/professional degree, and holding a management position. The central part of the questionnaire – (CoEATHEI – the Culture of Excellence Assessment Tool for Higher Education Institution) was a set of 35 statements (items) subordinated to seven dimensions: LOE, CVMG, EE, HRM, MEE, CI, and PTI (see Table A.1 in the Appendix). Statements were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5) with a neutral middle value (3 – “neither yes nor no”).

The STATA SE16 software was used for statistical data analysis. Cronbach’s alpha, Bartlett’s test of sphericity, and Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure were used to analyse the quality of the measurement tool. Descriptive statistics and the logical inference method were also used in the study.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1 presents the quantitative characteristics of the respondents in connection with their division based on four criteria: length of employment at the university, professional/scientific title or degree, managerial position held, and gender.

Table 1. Characteristics of Respondents Based on Four Categories of Their Division ($N = 363$)

Specification	<i>n</i>	%
Scientific or professional degree/title		
BA	5	1.4
MSc	96	26.4
PhD	138	38.0
Associated professor	79	21.8
Full professor	29	8.0
No title/degree	16	4.4

Table 1 cont'd

Specification	<i>n</i>	%
Managerial position		
Do not hold a managerial position	290	79.9
Head of an administration unit	16	4.4
Head of the team/lab	32	8.8
Head of the department/institute director	18	5.0
Rector/vice-rector/dean/vice-dean	7	1.9
Work experience at the university		
Up to 5 years	90	24.8
6–10 years	65	17.9
11–15 years	47	12.9
16–20 years	40	11
21–25 years	48	13.3
Over 25 years	73	20.1
Gender		
Female	193	53.2
Male	105	28.9
I do not want to answer	65	17.9

Source: own study.

The largest group was represented by those with a doctoral degree and respondents who did not hold a management position. The study group was predominantly women and respondents with up to five years of work experience.

4.2. Assessing the Quality of the Survey Questionnaire

To assess the reliability of the measurement tool, the alpha-Cronbach test was used. The accepted practice is also to calculate the alpha coefficient not only for the entire scale but also if the tool is intended to be multidimensional, for individual subscales (or dimensions) (Panczyk, 2022). This was also done in this study. The second criterion determining the quality of any measurement tool is construct validity. It can be defined as the property that determines whether a tool measures what it was designed to measure. Validity indicates that the interpretation of the results is consistent with the facts. This condition is crucial to draw up adequate conclusions about human traits or characteristics derived from the study conducted

with a given tool (Panczyk, 2022). In this case, we performed Bartlett's test of sphericity and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy (KMO).

The results of the statistical analysis are presented in Table 2. They relate to seven dimensions. Table 3 shows the detailed results presenting respondents' attitudes toward these seven dimensions.

Table 2. Factor Analysis

Dimension	Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy	Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (p -value)	Cronbach's Alpha
The whole questionnaire	0.971	< 0.00001	0.974
LOE	0.888	< 0.00001	0.909
CVMG	0.816	< 0.00001	0.878
EE	0.827	< 0.00001	0.865
HRM	0.863	< 0.00001	0.897
MEE	0.803	< 0.00001	0.861
CI	0.888	< 0.00001	0.929
PTI	0.844	< 0.00001	0.881

Source: own study.

Table 3. Respondents' Attitudes toward Each of the Seven Dimensions

Item (Statement)	Mean	SD	Factor Loading
Dimension 1 – LOE – 2.740			
Q1.1	2.790	1.182	0.892
Q1.2	2.587	1.152	0.857
Q1.3	2.730	1.161	0.882
Q1.4	2.975	1.197	0.812
Q1.5	2.617	1.148	0.842
Cronbach's α	0.909		
Dimension 2 – CVMG – 2.861			
Q2.1	2.937	1.119	0.833
Q2.2	2.860	1.166	0.859
Q2.3	2.823	1.128	0.876
Q2.4	2.785	1.055	0.849
Q2.5	2.901	1.098	0.684
Cronbach's α	0.878		

Table 3 cnt'd

Item (Statement)	Mean	SD	Factor Loading
Dimension 3 – EE – 2.897			
Q3.1	2.884	0.979	0.799
Q3.2	3.028	0.922	0.852
Q3.3	2.890	0.974	0.848
Q3.4	3.256	0.942	0.789
Q3.5	2.427	1.101	0.743
Cronbach's α	0.865		
Dimension 4 – HRM – 2.631			
Q4.1	3.033	1.114	0.799
Q4.2	2.567	1.200	0.884
Q4.3	2.518	1.135	0.861
Q4.4	2.424	1.113	0.837
Q4.5	2.614	1.132	0.828
Cronbach's α	0.897		
Dimension 5 – MEE – 2.866			
Q5.1	3.174	1.069	0.845
Q5.2	2.972	0.916	0.819
Q5.3	3.162	0.916	0.822
Q5.4	2.601	1.162	0.746
Q5.5	2.421	1.162	0.778
Cronbach's α	0.861		
Dimension 6 – CI – 2.804			
Q6.1	2.700	1.034	0.891
Q6.2	3.041	1.020	0.883
Q6.3	2.747	1.055	0.892
Q6.4	2.788	1.083	0.881
Q6.5	2.747	1.131	0.868
Cronbach's α	0.929		
Dimension 7 – PTI – 3.142			
Q 7.1	3.471	0.958	0.835
Q 7.2	3.215	0.982	0.865
Q 7.3	3.369	0.998	0.802
Q7.4	2.862	1.047	0.855
Q7.5	2.796	1.094	0.758
Cronbach's α	0.881		

Source: own study.

Based on the analysis of the data presented in Tables 2 and 3, the CoEATHEI is a reliable, internally consistent, and valid tool (factor loadings values, Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.7$). Thus, the answer to Q1 was obtained.

The answers given by the respondents regarding all proposed dimensions fall within the arithmetic mean range of 3 ± 0.579 , representing the neutral attitude as the dominant one. However, this does not necessarily mean that the average respondent is indifferent to the assessed issue. It is a characteristic effect in a situation where respondents, not having complete knowledge about the phenomenon in question and not knowing whether they are treading on “muddy ground,” choose a neutral point on the Likert scale so that their answers (approving or disapproving) are not interpreted as socially ambiguous or controversial (Nadler, Weston & Voyles, 2015). This fact also demonstrates the need to participate in training courses in which the meaning and idea of improvement based on a developed culture of excellence will be clearly explained.

4.3. Determination of the Maturity Level of the Culture of Excellence

By confirming the reliability and validity of the survey tool, it was possible to measure the CoE, both overall and in each of the seven sub-dimensions (see Table 4).

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics Resulting from All Responses Regarding the Seven Dimensions and the Entire Construct of the Culture of Excellence

Dimension/Construct	Average	Standard Deviation
LOE	2.740	1.001
CVMG	2.861	0.914
EE	2.897	0.791
HRM	2.631	0.959
MEE	2.866	0.836
CI	2.804	0.940
PTI	3.143	0.835
A culture of excellence	2.849	0.788

Source: own study.

As can be seen from Table 4, the average assessment of the CoE as a seven-dimensional construct differs by only 0.151 from position 3 on the Likert scale, which defines a neutral attitude. As argued earlier, this does not necessarily mean the average respondent's pessimistic indifference to the culture of excellence as a complex construct, but rather “social caution” in expressing his/her opinion on a previously unknown issue. Seven CoE dimensions obtained average scores

of 2.631–3.143, proving similar opinions about them among the entire university staff. The overall average CoE level was 2.849, which is not entirely satisfactory. The respondents rated the PTI dimension best, considering the mean scores for each of the seven dimensions. Moreover, out of 35 statements, the highest average score resulting from the respondents' opinions was obtained by the statement "Our university creates a network of cooperation with external partners, allowing us to improve ourselves" (Q7.1 – 3.471). The PTI is, therefore, the strongest pillar for assessing the culture of excellence at the university under study. It was also recognised by the workers, which can be considered a positive sign, especially since, as the researchers argue, CoE cannot develop without vital partnership and teamwork (e.g., Haris, Sultan & Said, 2021; Rahman, Voon & Abdullah, 2021). The partnership for improvement should involve the whole academic community and all its stakeholders (e.g., students, industry representatives, local government, and communities) (Sunder & Antony, 2018). According to the respondents, the weakest dimension of the culture of excellence is HRM when considering the average ratings. Effective HRM should be of concern because, in any organisation, especially in education, the staff is the primary and most important asset (Iyoha & Igbinedion, 2022). The researchers confirm a direct correlation between the role of human resources management and outstanding performance (Arqawi *et al.*, 2018; Faeq, 2020). Bringing the university to an above-average level requires introducing different types of support and motivation and setting an example of personal commitment on the part of the managers (Ogunode, 2023). It is also interesting to note that, considering all 35 statements, Q5.5 – "At our university, the authorities try to take into account the individual needs of their employees" (2.421), belonging to the MEE dimension, was by far the least rated. While this can be explained by the fact that the university under study is a large entity in which it is not easy to identify the individual needs of each employee, it is now more challenging from the perspective of individual departments. Nowadays, due to the progressive development and growth of students' expectations, the needs of employees may concern, for example, personal development, IT, and also psychological support issues (Borges *et al.*, 2023; Zemaitaityte *et al.*, 2023). According to Provance *et al.* (2022), the "people side" of organisations is crucial to forming a culture of excellence. This is particularly important for any HEI, especially one with ambitious goals that require individual employees' daily commitment and effort. Hence, demanding employees without listening to their daily needs may limit achieving the organisation's goals.

It turned out that the dimension related to the issue of leadership (LOE) is the second weakest pillar of the culture of excellence assessed. The results obtained, i.e., the respondents' relatively poor assessment of the current role of university leaders in leading for excellence, are not a positive symptom. All the more so because today's challenges for modern universities place very high demands on

HEI managers (Ballesteros-Rodríguez *et al.*, 2022; Jamali *et al.*, 2022). The university leaders' commitment, genuine concern, and leading by example are critical to the university's success (Osseo-Asare, Longbottom & Murphy, 2005; Ahmad & Ahmed, 2023). The role of rectors or deans has changed over the years (Artzen, 2016). Nowadays, they should not only be managers but leaders of positive change and behaviour models (Amorin, 2021), especially when it comes to transformational change. That requires multi-level leadership with a unified commitment to a shared vision of change and its goals (Klempin & Karp, 2018). The above data and considerations made it possible to get an answer to Q2.

5. Conclusions

This study indicates that:

1. The CoEATHEI is a valid and reliable instrument for assessing the culture of excellence in higher education institutions.

2. The tool can be recommended for further use. It can be applied to measure individual perceptions of particular CoE dimensions among academic staff, which can help promote the idea of continuous improvement in the workplace; a survey of this kind should be repeated systematically.

3. The maturity of a culture of excellence at one university, as an example, has been assessed and represents a level equal to 2.849.

4. The identified level of CoE confirms that there are many areas for improvement, and it was observed that the critical aspects of the university under study, "human resources management" and "leadership oriented to excellence," are among the most vital needs for improvement.

The CoE diagnostic instrument can be beneficial when the universities are part of an association or federation, and when they want to compare themselves in order to create a coherent organisational culture within this federation. Within a given university, the results of a survey using the CoEATHEI tool can help identify the strengths and weaknesses of the existing organisational culture, primarily looking at dimensions such as leadership oriented to excellence; clear vision, mission, and goals for excellence; employee engagement; human resources management; meeting and exceeding student and staff expectations; continuous improvement of processes through innovation and good practices; and partnership and teamwork for improvement. Identifying weaknesses in these dimensions can allow the implementation of appropriate training strategies and improvement programmes. This aspect of the research can be regarded as a contribution to practice. Our contribution to science is to supplement the knowledge about the CoE phenomenon at universities and present the concept of its measurement as a research tool. This tool can be used by other researchers, for example, for cross-cultural studies.

The study is not free of limitations. Due to the design of the questionnaire in the demographic part, the opinion of administrative employees, as a separate one, has not been studied. This implies further research, which should include this particular group of respondents.

Authors' Contribution

The authors' individual contribution is as follows: Małgorzata Zdzisława Wiśniewska: conceptualisation, methodology, writing – original draft preparation, writing – review & editing, formal analysis, supervision. Piotr Grudowski: formal analysis, software. Ewa Malinowska: resources.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Appendix

Table A.1. The Culture of Excellence Assessment Tool for Higher Education Institution

Item	Statement
Leadership oriented to excellence (LOE)	
Q1.1	Our leaders, managers, and authorities, with their attitude, set an example for others in terms of improving their activities
Q1.2	Our leaders, managers, and authorities apply various incentive and funding systems for performance excellence
Q1.3	Our leaders, managers, and authorities create appropriate working conditions for employees, conducive to the improvement of activities
Q1.4	Our leaders, managers, and authorities actively promote and communicate the idea of continuous improvement
Q1.5	Our leaders, managers, and authorities apply the principle of “the best person in the right place” when recruiting employees
Clear vision, mission, and goals for excellence (CVMG)	
Q2.1	The university authorities create a clear vision and strategy that allows employees to improve
Q2.2	Perfection and improvement of activities are the priority of the functioning of our university
Q2.3	Employees know the improvement goals according to the function they perform
Q2.4	Employees know and understand their role in achieving these goals
Q2.5	Our university uses symbolic artifacts (e.g., brochures, copies of certificates, slogans) to emphasise the role of excellence and improvement
Employee engagement (EE)	
Q3.1	Employees do everything to be a model of excellence in action
Q3.2	Employees actively participate in initiatives for excellence and are interested in their results
Q3.3	At our university, employees willingly submit proposals for improvement solutions
Q3.4	Employees willingly participate in training and report training needs
Q3.5	There is a widespread belief in our university that improvement pays off
Human resources management (HRM)	
Q4.1	At our university, there is a programme for improving the qualifications and skills of employees, allowing them to improve their work
Q4.2	Our university recognises and supports the best employees and their talents
Q4.3	Employees are promoted taking into account the criterion of excellence and above-average performance
Q4.4	Our university cares about the master-student relationship between the employees
Q4.5	At our university, employees are encouraged to report improvements in their workplace

Table A.1 cnt'd

Item	Statement
Meeting and exceeding student and staff expectations (MEE)	
Q5.1	At our university, students' needs are identified and analysed to better meet them
Q5.2	The results of measuring student satisfaction confirm that we meet their requirements better and better
Q5.3	At our university, we engage students in improvement initiatives
Q5.4	Employee satisfaction is measured and evaluated at our university
Q5.5	In our university, the authorities try to take into account the individual needs of their employees
Continuous improvement of processes through innovation and good practices (CI)	
Q6.1	The implemented processes are constantly improved, taking into account the best available models
Q6.2	Our university promotes and introduces innovations in various areas of operation
Q6.3	Our university systematically evaluates the effectiveness of the solutions adopted for improvement
Q6.4	At our university, we collect and share ideas and practices undertaken by employees, aimed at joint improvement
Q6.5	At our university, we are happy to discuss excellent solutions undertaken by other universities
Partnership and teamwork for improvement (PTI)	
Q7.1	Our university creates a network of cooperation with external partners that allows us to improve
Q7.2	Our university knows and implements standards in terms of excellence
Q7.3	Our university is systematically assessed by independent institutions in terms of meeting the standards of excellence
Q7.4	At our university, we create partner and trusted teams whose role is to monitor the direction of our improvement
Q7.5	At our university, employees willingly cooperate and report their willingness to cooperate for improvement

Source: own elaboration.