

Effective practices in academic support services in Greek Public Universities: Preliminary findings from Career Services

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Abstract

The modern university has to respond to new data and meet new challenges that arise in our days. It must respond to the developments that determine the new conditions that are shaped within the national and international environment. New techniques in the field of information, the widening of research sources, the broadness of new issues, the need to avoid partiality of knowledge and the adoption of a documented multi-disciplinary approach are only a few parts of the components of the new conditions, to which a university has to adjust.

University's administrative and organizational services should support the goals and missions of the institutions to which it belongs. Academic support services such as Career Services have to be shaped by a new philosophy and emphasize the creation of two-way relationships between students and market stakeholders parallel with traditional programs, in order to be able to contribute to the planning of a curriculum of knowledge and practical training for their students. The participation of students and market stakeholders in such activities will create a "win-win" synergy, in practice and not only in theory, for the purpose of creating interactive relationships. Career Services function as a bridge between theory and practice and as a facilitator of career advancement for full-time employment in the future.

This paper describes the preliminary findings of a research project that is being currently conducted with the purpose of identifying effective practices in academic support services such as Career Services from both Greek Public and foreign Universities.

The research is based on a questionnaire comprising both quantitative and qualitative criteria, followed by: a semi-structured interview, collected documents from the corresponding administrator/directors, in order to identify and describe effective academic support practices, and web resources with an international approach.

Keywords: higher education, student services, career offices, Greek public universities, best practices

JEL Classifications: I2, I23

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Introduction

The modern university has to respond to new data and meet new challenges that arise today. It must respond to the developments that determine the new conditions that are shaped within the national and international environment. New techniques in the field of information, the widening of research sources, the broadness of new issues, the need to avoid partiality of knowledge, and the adoption of a documented multi-disciplinary approach are only a few parts of the components of the new conditions to which a university has to adjust.

Academic support services such as Career Services have to be shaped by a new philosophy and emphasize the creation of two-way relationships between students and market stakeholders in parallel with traditional programs in order to be able to contribute to the planning of a curriculum of knowledge and practical training for their students (Blanas, 2002). The participation of students and market stakeholders, in such activities, will create a "win-win" synergy, in practice and not only in theory, for the purpose of creating interactive relationships (Gummesson, 1997). These relationships introduce new schemes as vehicles for thought and more systematic ways of approaching relationship issues between students and market stakeholders. For example, internship is referred to as a useful tool for further evolution and management of students' careers. It also contributes to the positive work environment and to the socialization of the students (Brooks et al., 1995; Garavan and Murphy, 2001).

Cocco (2000) points out that internships and similar activities provide a "risk-free" method for companies to evaluate their future employees. In addition, internships allow students to directly access job sources, to impress potential employers, to build confidence in their job search, to establish their work values, and to hone and build social skills that are beneficial in employment (French, 2003; Smith 1996; Taylor, 1988). Research has shown that students that participate in internships before their graduation, perform better in their professional careers and especially with regards to their social work ethics (Callanan and Benzig, 2004). Career Services, function as a bridge between theory and practice and as a comparative advancement for full-time employment in the future.

This paper describes the preliminary findings of a research project that is being currently conducted with the purpose of identifying effective practices in academic support services such as Career Services in Greek Public Universities as well as practices from other foreign universities.

The main research objective of this research is to identify good practices in Career Service of Greek Universities. This is important since in most cases the function of these services, in the Greek contemporary context, lacks a theoretical perspective of excellence and is not disposed to using mechanisms to measure, evaluate and improve its quality. Consequently, field-research and comparative examination of the existing offices does not only help to portray the state of art in these services but also contributes to the recording of various innovative practices each one of which might be implemented by a different office. From this perspective, this research project acquires an added value since it serves as the common link of those services,

communicating good and effective practices and, thus, contributing to the diffusion of knowledge.

Methodological Approach

At the initial stage of the research, the organizational and administrative functions of the Greek Public Universities (GRPUs) were recorded. The recording was based on the electronic sources of the university websites and on the formal internal function regulations according to which each institution is organized, as published in the official Government newspaper (FEK). For the newly founded institutions, these functions were recorded with the guidance their founding laws, as they have been also exposed to FEK. Mail contact with the Ministry of Education facilitated the collection and exploration of this data. The research covers all 21 GRPUs (Appendix B).

A literature review followed in order to specify the exact functions to be included in the best practice dataset. Five services, which constituted the main body for the examination of best practices, were selected. These services were: 1. Library, 2. Research Committee, 3. Information Technology, 4. Career Services and 5. Department of Public and International Relations.

Following the first stage, a study was conducted in order to investigate the current state of affairs in the five chosen functions for all GRPUs. The research is based on a questionnaire comprising both quantitative and qualitative criteria, followed by a semi-structured interview and collected documents from the corresponding administrators in order to identify and describe effective academic support practices as well as web resources from other universities.

The questionnaire for the evaluation of the importance and application rate of the quality criteria by the selected university functions were constructed. For the determination of the evaluation criteria both quantitative and qualitative university evaluation criteria were employed (Table 1). This criteria is drawn from the international review of literature, such as the Education Criteria for Performance Excellence of the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award (MBNQA), the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) and the Balance Scorecard (Kaplan and Norton, 1996, O'Neil, et al 1999).

Each qualitative criterion is subdivided into a number of sub-criteria, the *evaluation factors*. For each question, two figures were measured, both on a 1-5 scale: the extent to which the service regarded this criterion as important, also termed the importance rat, and the extent to which the service administrator believed that the service applied this practice (termed application rate). Factors are actually questions of evaluation deriving from EFQM and Malcolm Baldrige models, and aim to explore the degree of application and importance of each criterion. High score achievements in evaluation factors suggest measurements of excellence and indicate high performing practices rightfully qualified as best practices. Qualitative criteria and evaluation factors are common for all services allowing score comparisons, not only between similar but also between dissimilar services. The best practices uncovered by these comparisons will be considered in more detail in order to explore their prospective application in a variety of services within GRPUs.

A pilot study for the questionnaire was implemented, during which: a) It was observed that there was a reluctance by most functions' administrative head officers to participate in the project in the form of being submitted to evaluation in order to record best practices, b) It was observed that there were difficulties in understanding the questionnaire by most people in charge, as they were completing it. For the above reasons the first questionnaire was regarded not appropriate for the evaluation and the identification of best practices and that it should be used only for an explorative recording of the current situation in quality management matters.

A second questionnaire was developed which accompanies the interviews for each Director of department, so as to identify and record best, good or effective practices of the chosen services. The second questionnaire was more qualitative in character and consisted of more descriptive questions. More specifically, Career Service Directors were asked about the exact functions of the services and were encouraged to describe practices which although not necessarily intended to be so, consisted of efficient functions that were not implemented by other analogous services. Given the aforementioned difficulty in assessing and measuring best practices, only in-depth interviews, in a semi-structured form implied by the second questionnaire, could help identify good practices. Indeed, as is also demonstrated above (in the part of the empirical findings), this qualitative technique of face-to-face interviews yielded various practices that would have remained concealed if only the first questionnaire were to be used. It is important to note that the practices under review did not correlate with the definitions of best practices as defined by O'Dell, and Crayson, (1997) and Alstete J. (1995), but rather were selected for review based on experience and the subjective judgement of the research group and the personal experience of the participants.

The scope of the interview was twofold: to help Career Services Directors identify and describe possible good or effective practices that might apply, and to examine which evaluation processes - if any at all - they adopt. On the other hand, official service documents or other type of texts (questionnaires, internal regulations, strategic planning) were collected so that a more comprehensive picture of the academic support service's functions could be obtained.

The first questionnaire has been sent by mail to all GRPUs Career Services Directors via the Rector's office.

Visits and interviews to various GRPUs have been made. These interviews took place with Directors and representatives of the Career Services, with the aim of collecting the appropriate information for the examination of effective practices.

The first questionnaire¹ had been translated into English and had been sent to relevant functions of foreign universities which were to participate in the research solely for research purposes rather than for comparison.

¹ The whole questionnaire is readily accessible both in Greek and in English at the following internet link <http://www.uom/bestpractices>

The Delphi approach was used in order to construct the Presentation Form of Effective Practices (Appendix A).

Finally for the identification of international practices, research mainly focused on top-quality American universities. More specifically, investigation included the following institutions: University of Wisconsin (STOUT) (Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award winner), University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). All information about general practices in foreign universities' Career Services comes directly from their electronic sources on their WebPages (<http://www.career.ucla.edu/>, <http://web.mit.edu/career/www/employers/careerfairs.html>, <http://www.uws.tout.edu/careers/rezfuizion.shtml>).

Data analysis

The research is based on a questionnaire comprised of both quantitative and qualitative criteria, followed by a semi-structured interview and collected documents from the corresponding administrators in order to identify and describe effective academic support practices.

Thus far, 8 out of 21 questionnaires have been completed (38 %). This percentage is somewhat lower for the in-depth interviews, since we have already implemented 11 (53%).

Table 2 displays the effective practices that have been identified and recorded until now. These practices stem from the analysis of the interviews that have been hitherto realised.

This analysis also resulted in the two tables. Table 3 shows the evaluation criteria that these services employ for their practices and Table 4 shows the quality tools that are used by the services.

Data coding, entry and analysis from the first questionnaire is made with the Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS 13). The empirical findings are presented below. It needs to be mentioned that there seems to be some gap between the extent to which services regard the quality criteria as important and the degree to which they apply them. In particular, contained in total sixty items, the questionnaire includes measures for six quality criteria:

- Leadership (12 indicators)
- Strategic planning (9 indicators)
- Users' satisfaction (8 indicators)
- Personnel (13 indicators)
- Processes (9 indicators)
- Resources (9 indicators)

Table 5 displays descriptive statistics from eight Career Services. The analysis here is confined to the average measures of all universities. Yet, no significant differences are noticed between each of the Career Services. Further more, other substantial problems inhibit inference based only on this table. In many instances serious difficulties in the understanding of the questions were noticed. For instance, application rates are obviously overrated and this is due to the Directors' tendency to evaluate each criterion according to the extent to which they satisfy it. That being said, useful patterns can still be inferred

by the table. First, the criteria people seem to regard as most important are those of leadership and resources, whereas the least evaluated criteria are users' satisfaction and personnel. A similar pattern is observed in column 3, which depicts the mean values of the extent to which Directors think that they satisfy those criteria. As it can be seen, the average impression given by the Directors themselves is that they do a lot to accomplish all criteria. No serious differences are observed in the ranking, since all values are only somewhat lower. As the last column shows, although these differences seem to be quite small, almost all of them attain our selected (admittedly somewhat generous and chosen due to the small number of cases) level of statistical significance (.10). It can thus be safely argued that although people still tend to overestimate their practices, at the same time, they recognize that there is still room for improvement.

Services applied by International Universities' Career Services

Career Services of American universities share a common practice. Contrary to European tradition, they all pay equal attention both to the supply side (employers) and the demand side (students) of the job market. Some examples of good or effective practices employed by these universities are offered below. For the identification of these practices, research mainly focused on top-quality American universities. More specifically, investigation included the following institutions: University of Wisconsin (STOUT) (Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award winner), University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

All Career Services divide their practices between those referring to employers and those applying to students. Regarding the first, Career Services are frequently advertised in local press so that a close relationship between the local community and the university is established. Furthermore, seminars and presentations are hosted by the universities' Career Services where various companies communicate their general needs to students and have the opportunity to inform them about the type of qualifications they look for. Apart from that, the Office's electronic database shows all vacancies published by enterprises with which it collaborates. Authorised users are, thus, always in position to search for a job by simply browsing the vast list of opportunities which is frequently updated by the Career Services. Moreover, all three universities have a specific space where employers can add posters and advertise their vacancies to the students. STOUT, in particular, has been organising, every February, a conference entitled *Professionalism: Work and social environment* where various companies' representatives communicate their interests and discuss with students the possibility of collaboration after the end of their studies. Employers also consult students about their future careers by establishing regular contact with students' elected representatives. To be certain, all universities coordinate a period of one or two weeks in which all interested employers can conduct interviews so that they can then recruit personnel according to their specialised needs. It is indicative that STOUT, for example, hosts during these seminars more than 200 companies. Lastly, STOUT's Career Mentor Program facilitates cooperation with employers by helping them present their services and

their needs in specific area studies and by giving instructions to students on how to design their CVs.

The number of services corresponding to students is even greater. Job research via the universities' webpage is facilitated by the use of keywords and the classification of opportunities to various scientific fields. A large database, for example in STOUT comprises 11 million companies enhances students' chances of finding a job. Even more vacancies are provided by the office in CD format. An advanced system of electronic search helps students apply for a much greater number of vacancies, which have not even been published, and thus the existing problem of a significant number of posts going unpublished is overcome (according to analyses by STOUT experts, 85 per cent of work offers is not published). Special attention is paid to foreign students who apart from receiving useful information regarding administrative and other legal matters (potential problems about their stay and work permit or documents needed to get recruited), also gain access to enterprises which might need personnel from particular nationalities. Besides, most universities provide students with the option to work even during the first years of their studies, either as trainees or volunteers, so that they can have experience in the professional sector of their interest. Finally, students are fully prepared for their job exploration by attending courses provided by many universities on how to make their CVs, how to complete application forms and how to write all types of professional letters. More interestingly, tips about how to react and behave in the interview, as well as interview simulations, are offered. These aid students in this important task. CVs can be placed in the university's electronic database and thus they are directly accessible by the employers.

Conclusions

It must be noted that this research is still ongoing. However, from the preliminary results we have concluded the following observation initial.

The Career Services began their function at the Greek Universities on March 1997, and were financed by several research projects especially by EPEAEK. They are still in the beginning of a long process towards excellence of achieving. Several obstacles still need to be overcome. The most important of these is the small and certainly insufficient number of personnel and the exact type of working contracts that they have. As it can be seen in tables 6 and 7 from the already small number of employees, hardly any of them work as employees in the public sector. To this point we have to add that Greek universities are tuition-free public institutions and thus no direct comparison can be made with foreign universities, since competition is dense. In contrast, career services in other contexts, as for example in the U.S., have a key role in student recruitment and contribute to the university's reputation.

The necessity of their function is constantly observed in a time where the labor market is changing and the problem of professional employment of university graduates is very intense.

These services could be considered part of the student affairs or student services, as they are usually called at foreign universities.

These services create the necessary conditions for a better student environment and solve almost all the problems they face (Balderston, 1995). The student services consist of the initial goal of the universities and especially with the needs that new technology and globalization create. The administration of these services is considered very important and at the same time, competitive among the universities.

Expected changes at the student services and foundation of new strategies are considered necessary for the universities and especially for the staff, so as to respond to the changes of the times. These are: technology, knowledge as capital, changes in the learning environment, response to the market, globalization, the multi-nationality of students and the social responsibility.

Administrators from academic support services such as Career Services are not well experienced with quality and evaluation issues and need time in order to respond accordingly. Directors of Career Services in almost every Greek University are professors, which are project directors, as Career services are not included in the University framework. However, effective practices (Table 2) which are identified in Greek Career Services are similar to foreign universities practices. It is worth-noting that all Career Services use self-evaluation procedures and user satisfaction questionnaires.

Personal communication and the small number of students in some Greek Universities especially in peripheral campuses, are optimistic signals for the services that they offered. The research team, during the interview process, had additional personal experience from the majority of the HR staff at Career Services. The passion and the responsibility displayed in order to service their students were extremely high in almost every office. Cooperation between project directors and staff was observed as well. Another observation is that funding these services from EPEAEK project requires strategic planning for the next funding period and this planning must work accordingly. Technical documentation and reports served as quality assurance mechanisms and were submitted every six months. The publication of the services offered by Career Services is in their web site and this was used many times for comparing methods or benchmarking between services.

We note that the common responsibility of the universities is to establish, enhance and disseminate institutional quality culture. The university activities often permeate the local economic, social and cultural environment.

Greek Universities are legal entities under public law, with full self-administration under the supervision of the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs (YPEPTH), in accordance with article 16 of the Constitution. The Greek Government has established a National System for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (Greek Law 3374/2005 - Greek Government paper Issues (FEK) 189/August 2, 2005). This Law will be enacted this academic year (2006-2007). Taking into account that in Greece the implementation of Quality Assurance is in its early phases, the responses of GRPUS to this research was very positive.

The admittedly small number of completed questionnaires constitutes a serious caveat in the analysis since any inference from these results

would be very risky and could lead to unjustified conclusions. That said, several points need to be made. Firstly, as stated before the analysis presented here is only preliminary and for that reason is purely descriptive. Secondly, the main purpose for this analysis is to explore the general trend and thus the results have only indicative meaning. The findings provided above should by no means be taken at face value. Thirdly, although eight questionnaires is in absolute terms, an inadequate number to come to definitive conclusions, since the entire population of Greek Public Universities represents only 21 institutions. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to make use of these results in order to see whether some pattern can be drawn. And, indeed, a general pattern can be noticed. First, people tend to overestimate the degree to which they apply their practices. Yet, as can be seen, although in most cases the mean differences between the application and the importance rates are small, these differences are statistically significant - a conclusion which cannot be an artifact of small N since this would impede the emergence of statistically significant differences.

What cannot be argued with any degree of certainty is perhaps the most interesting question. The ranking of the criteria is again only indicative and although a general trend can be seen (for instance that users' satisfaction is constantly considered to be less important than other criteria such as leadership or resources), less ambiguous inferences can be made once more questionnaires are completed and analyzed.

The research team believes that the results of this research project (Table 2, 3 and 4) and especially the presentation of effective practices (Appendices B) and the ways that these practices can be adapted and transferred (Jarrar and Zairi, 2000), will contribute to the improvement of the practices of the functions of the universities. Also this information will be beneficial in order to create a healthy communication system, exchange of knowledge and collaboration, aimed at improving these procedures. Although all the results of this research are very optimistic, further output and performance indicators need to be published in order to identify best practices.

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URLs

- <http://www.career.ucla.edu/>
- <http://web.mit.edu/career/www/employers/careerfairs.html>
- <http://www.uwstout.edu/careers/rezfuizion.shtml>

Appendices

A. Best Practice: Career Office of Democritean University of Thrace

Practice reported by:	Name: Dimitrios Tsitsis e-mail: tsitsis@duth.gr Πανεπιστήμιο: Democritean University of Thrace
Source to the practice:	Career Office, Democritean University of Thrace
Name of services that apply practice:	Career Office of Democritean University of Thrace Γραφείο Διασυνδέσεως, Δημοκρίτειο Πανεπιστήμιο
Contact person for practice:	Dimitrios Tsitsis
Title for practice:	Integrated information system
Key words:	Feedback, e-learning, e-mentoring, software
Practice focus on:	Facilitation of communication between employers and students
Short description of practice:	Due to the use of suitable software, Career Service of Democritean University hosts an electronic database in which both students and companies have access. Only by entering a password, users of the service can add to the database their CV and place it to the professional category they think it belongs. Once entered, users' CV is directly accessible by the enterprises cooperating with the office, since they can directly access this database. This is a very fruitful and effective way to improve and ameliorate collaboration between the supply side and the demand side of the job market within the university. Two further services are hosted in this system. The first called <i>e-learning</i> constitutes an electronic database with information and advice about how to make a CV, how to write professional letters and how to complete application forms. There one can also find advice about how to react in a professional interview. The second called <i>e-mentoring</i> refers to an initiative by the university to collaborate with at least one professor from each faculty so that s/he can contact and consult students about various issues regarding job searching in her won scientific field.
Practice focus on:	Students, graduates and companies
Short description of practice:	Increase of visits to the office and rapid increase of visits to the service's webpage
Results and benefits of practice:	Participation and collaboration by all members of the personnel and willingness to find working solution to potential problems that might appear
Transferability of practice:	Yes
Key success factors:	Know-how, adequate software, coordination of the project by the leadership, effort to inform users and sufficient number of employees.
Reference materials:	Web page: http://www.career.duth.gr Direct contact with the service

B. Greek Public Universities

National & Kapodistrian University of Athens
National Technical University of Athens
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki
Athens University of Economics & Business
Agricultural University of Athens
Athens School of Fine Arts
Pantion University
University of Piraeus
University of Macedonia
University of Patras
University of Ioannina
Democritus University of Thrace
University of Crete
Technical University of Crete
University of the Aegean
Ionian University
University of Thessaly
Harokopio University
University of Western Macedonia
University of Peloponnesus
University of Continent Greece

Table 1: Questionnaire Evaluation Criteria

QUANTITATIVE	QUALITATIVE
Y Financial and other resources	Y Leadership
Y Customers-users	Y Strategy
Y Personnel	Y User satisfaction
Y Processes (function-specific)	Y Personnel
Y Society	Y Processes
Y Other data (not included in previous categories)	Y Resources

Table 2: Effective practices from Career Services of Greek Public Univ.

1. Integrated information system 2. e-learning, e-mentoring 3. Mapping of job and professional grounding opportunities 4. Diffusion of information for public sector vacancies
1. Electronic recording of the office's daily activities for MIS 2. Electronic member card
1. Promotion of university students and graduates by organising several activities, publishing newsletters and distributing leaflets in various places in Greece
1. Function of faculties and services aiming to inform students about their professional opportunities 2. Realisation of job seminars and workshops 3. Tele-consultancy
1. Small concentrated research for the identification of certain fields where graduates can find a job 2. Invitation of companies' representatives to present their professional plans and offer opportunities to the graduates of the institute 3. Organisation of Seminars in collaboration with European Poverty Network for graduates' education in subjects of a social science following the ILO methodology so as to combat these problems 4. Particular efforts by business consultants for the information of students on issues of self-employment and business activities

1. Questionnaire and comments for the improvement of provided services (whether users are satisfied or not)
1. Service provision effectiveness via: Y Service evaluation based on specific indicators, Y Evaluation of users' needs by conducting specialised research and Y Recording of the office's work results per year and as a whole
1. Consulting support of people with particular needs for professional success

Table 3: Evaluation criteria employed for best practices

1. Satisfaction of users
2. Increasing number of users
3. Simplicity criterion
4. Simple and friendly handling
5. Number of interviews students/company
6. Total IDO Number
7. Change of participation rates in seminars or conferences organized by the office
8. Rate of increase in website visits (and to particular issue-links)
9. Rate of increase in personal visits to the office

Table 4: Quality tools used by career services

1. Users' satisfaction questionnaires
2. Simplicity criterion
3. Internal Regulation and Recorded processes through the code of ethics of horizontal networking of Career Services Offices
4. Efforts to invent appropriate and special ways of alumni absorbance for better results.
5. Internal regulation
6. External evaluation (by external examiner)
7. Written processes
8. Total IDO Number
9. Enterprise participation in Career Week and interviews
10. Visitors' Book
11. Seminars' Feedback
12. Assessment bulletin

Table 5: Mean values of quality criteria in Greek Univ. Career Services

	Importance rate (1-5 scale)	Application rate (1-5 scale)	Difference between application and importance rate	Statistical significance (t-value from difference of means)
Leadership	4,29	3,97	.26	1.89*
Strategy	4,16	4,09	.07	.783
Processes	4,11	3.83	.28	1.86*
Users' satisfaction	3,77	3,44	.33	1.82*
Personnel	3,96	3,79	.17	1.23
Resources	4.29	4.09	.20	2.80**

*p<.10 **p<.05, N=8

Table 6: Total number of staff

Career Services in GRPUs	Total number of staff
1	4
2	5
3	7
1	9
1	8
Total:	33

Table 7: Number of permanent staff

Career Services in GrpUs	Number of permanent staff
5	0
1	1
2	2