

Jihočeská univerzita
v Českých Budějovicích
University of South Bohemia
in České Budějovice

Focus Group Meeting



For the purpose of achieving objectives leading to the “HR Award” and for internal use of the University in the HR area

University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice
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EVROPSKÁ UNIE
Evropské strukturální a investiční fondy
Operační program Výzkum, vývoj a vzdělávání



MINISTERSTVO ŠKOLSTVÍ,
MLÁDEŽE A TĚLOVÝCHOVY





Minutes of the Focus Group Meeting

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IDENTIFICATION DATA

Document name:	Minutes from the Focus Group Meeting For the purpose of achieving objectives leading to the "HR Award" and for internal use of the University in the HR area
Issued by:	University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice © 2018
Address:	Branišovská 1645 / 31a, 370 05 České Budějovice IČ: 60076658 www.jcu.cz
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Version:	11/2018
	 EVROPSKÁ UNIE Evropské strukturální a investiční fondy Operační program Výzkum, vývoj a vzdělávání  MINISTERSTVO ŠKOLSTVÍ, MLÁDEŽE A TĚLOVÝCHOVY

INTRODUCTION

The University of South Bohemia (USB) is currently implementing the project **Development of the USB - Capacity for R & D**, supported by Operational Programme Research, Development and Education. One of the main goals of the project is to set the strategic management of the University in line with the conditions for obtaining the **HR Award**. The HR Award focuses on key areas ranging from ethical and professional aspects, hiring new staff or working conditions, to education and training of staff.

In order to exercise self-reflection in the above areas, the views / experiences of its employers / students must be identified. This was done through a questionnaire survey which revealed specific problems within the USB which were subsequently discussed within the Focus Group.

There were 13 members of the Focus Group and their meeting was held in May 2018. The main facilitator was Prof. Dr. Jan Zrzavý, the Vice-Rector for Development, University of South Bohemia.



MINUTES OF THE FOCUS GROUP MEETING

Point	Description
1.	<u>Agenda</u>
1.1.	<p>The aim of the HR Award Focus Group was to gain views, ideas and attitudes in the area of development of human resources:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Topic 1: Ethical and professional aspects (freedom of research, information accessibility, interpersonal relationships, etc.)- Topic 2: Recruitment of new staff- Topic 3: Working conditions and social security (adaptation to new environment, job description, mobility, etc.)- Topic 4: Further education and training
2.	<u>Introduction to the meeting and summary of information</u>
2.1.	<p>Questionnaires were sent to all e-mail addresses within the University. The pilot analysis of the responses was provided by the facilitator to all members of the HW Focus Group. On the basis of the results, the discussion within the Focus Group (as recorded below) was focused on several major topics. They included information flow within departments and Faculties of the USB as well as between Rector's Office and Faculties; different (and often counter-intuitive) levels of contentment in various sectors of the USB staff and PhD students; or problematic interpersonal relationships that could create an atmosphere of fear indicated by some respondents. The individual topics were intertwined during the discussion and it was not always possible to categorize them precisely in one of the following categories.</p>
3.	<u>Disucsnion Recording¹</u> <u>Topic 1: Ethical and Professional Aspects</u>
3.1.	<p><u>Overall Contentment</u></p> <p>Satisfaction with the questionnaire is most common among people under the age of 30. On the contrary, the lowest level of contentment is among people aged 30 to 45. Why do doctoral students form the most content group when the media tends to say the opposite (i.e. they are poor and dissatisfied)? Why are people in the productive age the least contented group? Contentment is also higher for employees who have been employed at the University for less than 1 year and for employees in pre-retirement age. Differences in the degree of contentment can also be seen across professions within the University. To verify whether the University of South Bohemia (USB) is exceptional in the level of employee contentment, it would be necessary to compare it with similar social surveys carried out within other universities in the Czech Republic.</p> <p>Discontentment can be caused by a number of external and internal factors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- current economic situation in the Czech Republic (i.e. current trends in the labour market, etc.) – for example, in 2009 there was a higher level of contentment as people valued secure employment more, given the financial crisis and high unemployment;

¹ Discussion listed below is recorded quite **literally** so that the essence of the Focus Group members' opinion is not altered or modified



	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- poor communication (contradictory and inaccurate information - there is insufficient or no information made available to many USB employees);- inappropriate concept of Doctoral studies;- age-specific personal problems and life situations – e.g. providing for a family financially, which is usually not a top priority for doctoral students and pre-retirement aged people, as opposed to people in the middle age;- full time employees are also dissatisfied with the remuneration which is much lower compared to the state non-profit sphere (the reported median is 80-90%);- lack of career prospects for administrative staff – there is no reliably expected professional or personal growth;- in the past, salaries were increased for young employees (as a motivation element) and for staff who attained higher academic degrees (this created a sort of a vacuum in the middle section) – pay rise was available through habilitation, full professorship, and further education;- academic staff and researchers can reach higher salaries through their continuing education or by participation in a particular grant (they can make this choice themselves unlike the administrative staff who do not have this option);- the new wage rules introduced has brought the problem of splitting workers into several groups. Thus, there is also the problem that it is impossible to unify the amount of money available to Faculties for their employees from the University level;- the situation can be improved by a Project Office that would motivate and encourage academic staff members and researchers to perform certain activities so that the financial situation of the Faculty / University improves (e.g. through implementation of grants and projects) - unfortunately this creates further gap between the academic and administrative staff. It is also necessary to monitor the ever increasing demands on those members of staff who have already realized some projects;- emphasis should be put on the USB's efforts to educate experts among the administrative staff - the idea being that academic staff concentrate on teaching and research and the administrative employees become experts in other activities – this would diminish amateurism, and the growth of expertise could lead to an increase in salaries of both the administrative and academic staff, which would be likely reflected in the growth of contentment;- maintaining or increasing competitiveness through higher salaries could lead to an increase in contentment;- discontentment among academic staff and researchers is also influenced by the level of their duties - with an increase of duties, career growth, length of employment and professional expertise, there is a reduction in the ability to manage one's time (there is also an increase in overtime and various positions/function)- the degree of their contentment can be influenced by the private lives of staff members.
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3.2.	<p><u>Interfaculty Relationships and Information Flow</u></p> <p>There is a great deal of hostility between the constituent parts of the University, which is partially due to the distribution of finances. A major drawback can also be seen in the dissemination of essential information not only to the outside, but especially within the University. This problem was, for instance, illustrated during the communication concerning the objective of the HR Award questionnaire survey - the intended output was poorly communicated and presented to potential respondents, resulting in some irrelevant or no responses.</p> <p>The current state of inter-faculty relationships and information flow has been caused by several aspects and could be improved by a number of possible solutions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- information could be disseminated by improving the websites or through another marketing tool - focus on quality or quantity;- appropriate use of tools approved by experience of other companies - such as centralized documentation, which guarantees that the up-to-date version of the document is stored in only one place, i.e. appropriate management of formal information flow; this, however, carries the risk that it will initiate partial resistance from the staff members who are afraid of the traceability and hence the higher "visibility" of individuals and their activities - here, too, is the ultimate role of the Labour Code, which is binding for all and must be observed;- it is necessary to provide information on updates of various documents;- at the USB there is currently no description and definition of "what and how should something be done and who is responsible for it";- improvement of informal relationships which plays a very important part in formal relations (i.e. "removal of hard boundaries"). This can be helped by informal gatherings of employees which are at the moment rare at the USB (as opposed to the meetings of students enabled by the Student Union, regular meetings with the Dean of the Faculty of Science, or meetings of the Faculty of Fisheries and Protection of Waters in their cultural centre) - for example, cultural events, sport days, hog roasting, BBQs, etc. The claim that it is impossible to organize a whole-university gathering is an excuse. However, it is necessary to ensure that such joint gatherings of staff do not end up as a formal assemblies listening to a lecturer's speech;- the question of obtaining relevant information depends on the will of the particular person: that means that if somebody wants to find certain information, they seek and find it and, on the contrary, people who show no interest should consider a change of their workplace;- currently there is no feeling of pride among the employees of the USB, which could be described as a lack of the "alma mater" attitude.
3.3	<p><u>Paranoia and justified / unjustified fear</u></p> <p>There is a problem with categorisation of paranoia. Certain manifestations of paranoid behaviour occur in some the departments of the USB constituent parts). The paranoid behaviour arises on the basis of previous experience or as behaviour copied from others, mostly professionally older employees. Within the USB, paranoia seems to increase with the age of the employees and could be caused either by the general climate on the constituent parts or by the self-confidence of the staff.</p> <p>Proposed solutions to the current situation:</p>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the fear affecting employees has also influenced the response rate to questionnaire aiming to address a number of important issues. This includes the fear of losing anonymity - people are worried that someone will be looking into who responded which way – the proposal of carrying out the questionnaire survey through external agency was put forward (although it is not certain whether this way would encourage people to respond more truthfully). Another proposal was not to use the USB bulk email sender to send the questionnaires (this sender address is generally perceived as associated with to the Rector’s office and generally viewed with negative emotions); - there was fear not only connected to completing the questionnaire but also to participating in the Focus Group meeting to evaluate the questionnaire results. This was demonstrated in the concern of accepting an invitation to participate in this Focus Group – this could have been caused by the fear of losing anonymity as well as by poor communication of the aims of the questionnaire survey and the Focus Group meeting; - at the University, the evaluation of academic staff is obligatory for students. They can tick the "I do not know" option and therefore not really evaluate - this evaluation system works, so why could it not be used for employees? - the results of th students’ evaluation differ markedly according to the constituent parts; - one solution may be providing an anonymous problem-reporting box or establishing a position of an “Ombudsman” - there was even concerns that the mailbox could be placed in near proximity of security cameras, or that the Ombudsman could be under the authority of the Rector or other biased people (i.e. concerns whether the Ombudsman would really be independent). The position of an Ombudsman is generally rather rejected; staff do not seem to think that they would be a trusted person; - PhD students are constantly facing situations when they are accused of not attending various meetings on the one hand but, on the other hand, they are not adequately invited to them (that is, there is no invitation at all or it is delivered only orally and informally or delivered with negative comments or remarks) - this is primarily an issue of poor communication and, secondarily, of fear caused by the uncertainty of the PhD students not knowing what will be caused by their attendance / absence; - it is crucial that superiors pass undistorted information to their subordinates in a timely manner, which will increase information flow / awareness of the issues being dealt with, thus reducing paranoia - the conclusion here is that if information does not get to its intended receiver, a human error was involved as an important factor; - it is necessary to correctly communicate the outcome / aim of any intent (e.g. what is the aim of a questionnaire and what will be the outcome) - staff should identify themselves with the aims / outcomes - it is common abroad, that there are generally more respondents to a questionnaire as they consider the issues important and view responding to questionnaire as something that improves the processes at the University (given the current 18% response rate to the questionnaire, this probably did not happen).
3.4	<p><u>Bullying and discrimination</u></p> <p>The current personal relationships at the constituent parts reflect the described paranoia. It is necessary to appropriately identify what is only perceived as bullying or it is real bullying (for example, the superior may be putting justified pressure on their subordinate but the subordinate views this as bullying).</p> <p>How to deal with the issue of bullying and discrimination:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - there seems to be bullying from the ranks of lower managements; - a possible solution could be a person (i.e., an independent and trustworthy person) the employees could contact to help resolve individual problems (that person would have to have sufficient powers and competences to deal with problems). At the same time there could be a committee to deal with individual cases (however this committee would not communicate with the person affected) - in principle, the position of an Ombudsman would be helpful, but only in the long term – it is hard to find such a person; - in the US exist so called "mediators" who are hired solely to deal with cases of this type. The hospital of České Budějovice employs a "Patient and Employee Satisfaction Manager", who has gradually gained trust and everyone can approach them (the position is part of the hospital management). The State Ombudsman and the Labour Inspectorate play a similar role, but in general, state institutions do not provide a solution to this situation;



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - there is a new methodical guideline at the USB on dealing with bullying - is it effective? Do the employees know about it and do they know how to use it if necessary? - Only about 10% of the participants of the Focus Group knew how to proceed if they had to deal with bullying; - those who are bullied are usually not people of very strong nature (perhaps they only hold lower positions) and it is unlikely that they would initiate dealing with the situation - they are not in a position to win such a confrontation; - the possibility of introducing annual appraisals of subordinates (and of superior by them), and personal interviews monitored by the HR Department as an impartial and independent observer. If a problem occurred, this would be passed onto the management directly which may discourage potential "bullies". Such interviews would bring the advantage of having the opportunity to express oneself and receive information, but it would be necessary for the participants to be honest and truthful (in general, it could be said that such system would not work at the USB at the moment) - people who are afraid, will not complete any evaluation of their superior and will choose to lie; - the library is seen as a neutral ground within the university where specific issues could be addressed or some meetings could be held (the so-called forum that would discuss all general problems).
4.	<u>Topic 2: Recruitment of new staff</u>
4.1	<p><u>Selection Process</u></p> <p>It is inappropriate to select a person for a position without holding a selection process, as it is not transparent and employees do not receive such practice positively, however it often happens like this. This is necessary to change! It is also advisable to take into account the issue of gender, which can contribute in many ways.</p> <p>What are the problems with the Selection Process and how to improve the situation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - people appreciate more new colleagues who are labelled as good and wants to taking responsibility for them rather than when a formal selection process is organized and everybody knows in advance who is going to win – in the first case these people are accepted better. - the selection procedure is often just a game pretending that we are transparent (for example, a selection process for a Czech-speaking anthropologist – it could be known in advance who is going to apply as there are not many of them in the Czech Republic - it is difficult to pretend that there is transparency); - the USB is generally considered to be a non-transparent organization – there are regulations that force us to be hypocritical in a way - why do we keep them? It would be better if the regulation enabled superiors to choose whether to select a person for a position directly themselves (i.e. the superior knows somebody who would be suitable and the superior is then fully responsible for the result) or to organize a transparent selection process; - the title of a position can be coined (by mistake or intentionally) in such a way that no one would want to apply, or on the contrary, so that everyone would apply. - in general, a presence of an external person who would guarantee that the process is objective is always helpful
5.	<u>Topic 3: Working conditions and social security</u>
5.1	<p>Employers can improve employees' satisfaction by their choice of benefits they provide to them. Possible problems, or discontentment, may result from the misunderstanding between two separate worlds present at the USB (academic staff and support /administrative staff), as they do not understand what the other one is doing.</p> <p>Which benefits are perceived as important at the USB for the increase of contentment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - among the best benefits, the employees considered to be for example: subsidies to a pension scheme, sport and culture allowance, higher value of meal vouchers, home office and flexible working hours - most of these benefits are of a financial nature - employees feel they lack a lot of benefits and want to incorporate them into the Collective Agreement; - a problem lies in the difference in the working hours of the administrative/support staff and the



	<p>academic/research staff - some administrative/support staff have to clock in and off electronically or in writing, while the academic staff members can arrive and leave as they wish;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - if it is necessary and both parties are willing, it is always possible to come to an agreement (about absence on a particular occasion etc.) – regulations regarding working hours or home office are necessary only in situations where people are unable to communicate well and find solutions (hard and strict regulations can bring other problems and not solve anything); - there is a regulation for the use of the home office but it is only applicable until there is a problem - it is already outdated as it was created in 2011 - at present, home office is used mainly by mutual agreement, because although some issues are formalized in the regulations, not everything is well regulated there; - the supervisor always determines the rules, that is, for example, imposed overtime, which the employees cannot choose to compensate for in the form of a compensatory leave, the flexibility of the working hours must be set separately for each workplace; - across the constituent parts there are different rules concerning working hours - for example, the employee is required to be at their workplace from 8am to 2pm and otherwise it is up to them how they set their working hours; - the academic staff members do not realize that there are many administrative/support staff at the USB who deal with problems that the academic staff members do not have to concern themselves with (these two worlds are also divided by separate regulations) - it is, however, necessary to realize: if there were no students, there would be no need for academic staff and administrative/support staff, and if there was no academia, there would be no need for administration
6.	<u>Topic 4: Further education and training</u>
6.1	<p>There is a variety of awareness of training opportunities at the USB – the academic staff members are generally more aware of them than the administrative/support staff.</p> <p>How are further education and training options perceived:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - at the USB there is general satisfaction with the possibilities of further education and training - if someone is interested and requests a training, this is usually granted. The question is whether employees are aware of this option of "requesting training": are they aware of the possibilities of lifelong learning? Is the offer of courses broad enough? Do employees receive information about training opportunities? And does the training/course provide what was expected of it? - an obstacle to the provision of further education and training is usually the limited budget of the given constituent part (some Faculties include this in the budget, but this is not the situation at all constituent parts) and also the problem of substituting for the person attending a training, so that people are not able to participate in the training due to their duties; - it would be good to create a list of training and further education opportunities which an employee at a certain position should complete (for example the Deans should be aware of many areas so that they can effectively manage them) - these parameters of prior knowledge should not be set before the selection process, as this would result in an even smaller number of possible candidates and would be discriminatory - the disadvantage of this would be that the training offer would have to be customized because the requirements for the knowledge at certain positions is not precisely set; - it is advisable to update training for particular areas of expertise for lower-level employees, including lower management - for example, to set up training for middle and senior management which would be repeated in regular intervals - e.g. every 4 years; - there is a concern of the employees would be made to participate in a particular type or number of training courses (e.g., some general group training that they are not interested in).
7	Conclusion
7.1	<p>Out of the invited 15 people 13 arrived at the meeting. During the meeting, 10 people discussed the issues and 3 remained silent. In general, the active Focus Group members feel that at the USB there is the problem of two parallel</p>



	<p>worlds - academic staff members and non-academic staff members. Each of these worlds is entirely different (they have different intentions, needs, etc.), but they have to cooperate. Also relationships among USB's constituent parts (Faculties) and between USB top management and Faculties are considered highly problematic.</p> <p>The aim of the HR Award is perceived as possibility to do something meaningful for the future University.</p>
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Focus group meeting:

Intended for internal use of the University.

Issued by: Jihočeská univerzita v Českých Budějovicích
Address: Branišovská 1645/31a, 370 05 České Budějovice
www: www.jcu.cz/o-univerzite/rozvoj/hr-award-hrs4r
Editorial: team of authors
Photo: archive of the USB
Published: November 2018