

**Exploring human-related risks in the higher education sector:  
The case of marketing educators in Switzerland and France**

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*As a service activity, the higher education sector may suffer from human-related risks such as absenteeism, burnout, and lack of engagement or faculty turnover. Previous researches have shown that managerial reforms led to an increase of the work-related demands and a decrease of resources. An exploratory research was conducted in the French-speaking part of Switzerland and in France in order to assess the levels of motivation, stress and workloads of marketing educators and to discover possible explanations of the observed human-related risks. Our findings show that teachers are still motivated by teaching and research activities. Working conditions are deteriorating due to high pressure on the outcomes and burdensome administrative constraints.*

## **Introduction**

The education sector is very important in developed countries, in terms of the number of students and of public spending amounts. In Switzerland (7 million population), in 2017, there were 298.4K (4.6% of the total population) people studying at higher level spread over the universities and institutes of technology (144K), universities of applied sciences (89.7K) and advanced vocational training (61.2K) (Swiss Institute of Statistics, 2017). In France, there was, in 2014, a population of 2.4 million of students for a total population of 66.3 million (students representing 3.61% of the total population). In Switzerland, most of the universities and institutes of technology are financed by public spending. In France, public funding (78.6%) also financed the biggest part of the spending (EESR, 2017).

The education sector is also important for the R&D activities. Switzerland spent 3.2% of its GDP on R&D in 2012, which amounts to CHF 20 billion. The universities benefited of 26% of this amount. Switzerland is one of the most R&D-oriented countries in the world. At the same time, in France, the spending on R&D amounted to 2.2% of its GDP for a total of €46.5 million. The universities and research institutes received 35% of this amount. For comparison, in 2012, US spent 2.7% of its GDP on R&D activities (according to OECD 2017 figures).

As with every service activity, human resources play a key role in the education industry. We assumed that there were many changes undergoing in the higher education sector and there was a lot more pressure put on the educators. Former studies showed that in hectic times,

collaborators might lose their bearings (see Dubosson et al., 2016 for the banking industry). Rapid changes in today's marketplace require improved monitoring of organization factors to prevent the potential risks associated with this turbulence (Sauter and Murphy, 2004).

Employees have to meet new constraints while meeting demanding customer expectations. At these times, organizations have to face higher human-related risks which comprise the uncertainties and potential damage that are caused by people (Fragnière and Junod, 2010). Moreover, employees tend to pursue in priority their own personal objectives instead of organization's objectives (Ferrary, 2009). Not only do collaborators create problems, but they also may not act correctly to recover from them.

The objective of this paper is to investigate the human risk factors leading to higher levels of unhappy in the peculiar context of the higher marketing education sector in two French-speaking countries, France and Switzerland. The research question that we want to address in this paper is the following: Do marketing educators experience human risk factors measured by indicators such as demotivation and stress? What factors might be associated with higher levels of demotivation and stress?

The authors of this paper conducted an exploratory survey in November and December 2017. The questionnaire was sent by email to 53 marketing educators in France and in the French-speaking area of Switzerland. We received a response from 17 respondents (response rate of 32%). The institutions were randomly chosen based on the availability of a list of faculty members and their email addresses on their website.

Our results showed human-related risks might hinder institutions from reaching their objectives. Marketing teachers in France and Switzerland experience some excessive workloads, pressures and stress. For the time being, they still feel motivated by their core activities, i.e. teaching and research. Managerial reforms have led to overly complex administrative processes and an excessive burden linked to these procedures and to a tendency to measure every single activity with quantitative indicators.

This paper is organized as follows. In Section 1, we present a brief literature review essentially concentrating on the notions of human risks, focused on the academic sector. In Section 2, we explain the methodology based on semi-directed interviews, which was employed to understand the human risks related to marketing education in the higher education sector in France and in the French-speaking area of Switzerland. In Section 3, we present a synthesis of the results. In the last section, we conclude and indicate further research directions.

## **1. Literature review**

In this section, we present the scientific literatures related to our interdisciplinary research question. We begin with the notion of human risks in service organizations and focus educators' stress related researches.

### ***1.1. The notion of human risk in service organizations***

Human risks have been defined as the risks to mental, physical and social health arising from conditions of employment, and from organizational and relational factors likely to interact with mental functioning (Inserm, 2017). As such, they are also labeled as psychosocial risks. They correspond to a subset of operational risks, which have been defined by the Basel Committee (Bank for International Settlements, 2001) as "the risk of direct and indirect loss resulting from inadequate or failed internal processes, people and systems or from external

events.” Even though operational risks are considered as a risk of human origin, unfortunately no specific category is assigned to human risks.

Service companies arise in an environment that is favorable to the emergence of human risks. Mistakes are part of every service, as they are an “unavoidable feature of all human endeavors” (Boshoff, 1997). In the service context, companies have to handle mistakes and mitigate human risks, meaning that they should be able to prevent problems and recover from them.

As a service organization, higher education institutions are subject to human risks such as absenteeism, faculty turnover, burnout or lack of engagement. Therefore, universities have to manage human risks in order to ensure the best performance and to reach their objectives in terms of teaching quality, student enrolment or publications. According to job demands-resources model (JD-R) (Baker and Demerouti, 2008), performance is determined by the level of employee engagement, which is impacted by the work-related demands (e.g. work pressure, emotional demands) and the resources (e.g. autonomy, social support, supervisory coaching).

### ***1.2. Human-related risks in the academic environment***

The feeling of being able to achieve their objectives makes the academics satisfied. A research conducted in Australia found that research-oriented academics with high productivity are more likely to be satisfied with their job (Åkerlind, 2005). Academics dissatisfaction associated with job stress is correlated with high turnover, bad performance and lack of engagement (Shin and Jung, 2014). A research conducted in the engineering field showed that job stress negatively influences university outcomes through poor decision-making and health problems affecting academics such as cancer, obesity, heart attack, or stroke (Goh, Bullen, Zhou, Davey, 2012). According to this research, unhealthy academics are more absent (9 times more sick leave) and are less productive (three times less). While remaining in the academic world, we can legitimately assume that such observations would also be valid in the field of marketing

According to Rudow (1999 as cited in Laugaa *et al.*, 2008), 30% of European teachers suffer from symptoms of burnout which is defined as a state of physical and emotional exhaustion. It occurs only when stressors overwhelm a person’s coping resources (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984 cited in Singh, J., 2000). When employees feel that they are unable to bridge a gap with the requirements or expectations placed on them, it may reduce their effectiveness at work and cause health trouble (Toderi *et al.*, 2015). According to Singh *et al.* (1994), job burnout is a good indicator of the level of dysfunctional job-related stress or occupational stress. Another major issue regarding burnout is that it often affects the best personnel, namely the employees who are usually skillful and take the initiative in the case of service failures (Pines *et al.*, 1981).

The most stressful service jobs involve “a relationship of assistance and care”, a material or physical risk or a “moral responsibility” (Cherniss, 1980; Truchot 2004). According to Laugaa *et al.* (2008), teaching fits to some of these characteristics and can be considered as a very stressful job.

### ***1.3 Work-related demands and resources in the academic environment***

The nature of academic work is changing due to managerial reforms going towards more corporate-like leadership style. It implies more paperwork, more teaching hours and more community activities (Anderson 2008 as cited in Shin and Jung, 2014). It intensifies work

pressures in order to increase publication volume and/or quality (e.g. top journals objectives) (Juric, Polonsky, Mankelow, 2003).

Internationally, work pressure is increasing and this undermines the difficult balance between work and family life (Shin and Jung, 2014). Academics spend a lot of hours working, ranging from 46 hours to 55 hours per week in average, depending on the country where the research was conducted (Baker and Erdogan, 2000; Heztel, 2000; Polonsky and Mankelow, 2000; O’Laughlin and Bischoff, 2005; Juric, Polonsky, Mankelow, 2003). Consequently, academics feel that they “do not have enough time to do the required tasks to as desired quality” (Juric, Polonsky, Mankelow, 2003).

As work-related demands keep rising, are resources also growing to compensate for this increase? The answer seems to be negative. In Australia, academics are generally dissatisfied because they think that there is a lack of institutional support and reward for research and teaching (Åkerlind, 2005, Juric *et al.* 2003). This lack of support is associated with increases of stress and workload. Moreover, the increase in workload is accompanied by a sense of loss of control over work and the perception of greater intrusion of parasitic activities. Altogether, Australian academics feel that the working conditions are getting worse and worse (Åkerlind, 2005).

The feeling that conditions are deteriorating is a general feeling at the international level (Shin and Jung, 2014). Some authors labeled this deterioration as the academic proletarianization understood as the deterioration of economic and social conditions. (Bryson, 2004; Locke and Bennion, 2013 as cited in Shin and Jung, 2014). As a consequence of this phenomenon, we can assume that universities have to face a lack of engagement from their faculty members. Disengagement refers to negative cynical attitudes and behaviors towards one’s work in general (Bakker *et al.*, 2004). When organizations do not provide rewards or job resources, the consequence is withdrawal from work and reduced commitment as a self-protection mechanism to prevent future frustration from not being rewarded or not reaching goals (Bakker *et al.*, 2004).

As very few studies were conducted in Europe, especially in the marketing education sector, we wanted to investigate human risks associated with marketing educators as perceived by some of them. The methodology used in our study is explained in the next section.

## **2. Methodology**

The main objective of our study is to understand how occupational stress, as a special case of human risk, can become a source of service disruption within the French and Swiss marketing education sector. Therefore, we believe that an inductive approach (Voss *et al.*, 2002) is the most suitable for our research to get an understanding of the perceived consequences of the deep structural changes in the marketing education sector following the managerial reforms and the decrease of public funding.

The research process followed different steps:

- We conducted a literature review to determine the state of the art of research related to human risks in the academic sector.
- Based on this literature review, we generated a priori hypotheses.
- We conducted a survey made with open questions mixed with closed-ended questions.
- The collected data was analysed using content analysis and statistical methods (with SPSS).

Our survey was conducted in November and December 2017. The questionnaire was sent by email to 53 marketing educators in France and in the French-speaking area of Switzerland. We received a response from 17 respondents, 9 from Switzerland and 8 from France (response rate of 32%). The institutions chosen based on the availability of a list of faculty members and their email addresses on their website. The sample comprises professors (13) two lecturers, one adjunct professor and one assistant professor. The vast majority were working full time for their institutions (13) and the remaining were working part-time (20%, 50%, 70% and 90%).

The semi-structured interviews were designed to provide the respondents with enough freedom to address the most important issues to them and to encourage them to share their experiences. The questionnaire was also measuring the perceived levels of stress, of workload, engagement (through motivation) and time available to do the work.

In the next section, we present the synthesis of the main quantitative results obtained from the interview transcripts.

### **3. Quantitative results**

Since the sample size is very small, we mainly opted for descriptive analyses. In addition, we have chosen to do some correlation analyses, knowing that the results must be taken with caution and cannot be generalized.

On average, on a five-point Likert scale, the marketing teachers in the sample describe themselves as motivated ( $M = 4.0$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ ). However, they are much more neutral on the following issues: time available to do the work (I have sufficient time to carry out the work properly  $M = 3.1$ ,  $SD = 0.9$ ), the perceived workload (I have to carry out an excessive amount of work  $M = 3.4$ ,  $SD = 0.7$ ) and perceived level of stress (I feel stressed  $M = 3.1$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ ).

In terms of workload, two teachers work less than 25 hours per week but they are work part-time (20% and 50%). Eight of them work between 36 and 45 hours per week (which can be considered normal). And finally, 7 teachers work far more than expected (4 between 46 and 55 hours per week, and 3 more than 55 hours per week). Therefore, about half of them work more than they should according to their contract. Half of their time is dedicated to teaching and preparation of classes (in average 51% of their time). The rest of their time is almost equally divided between research and administrative work, in average.

With regard to correlations, any potential association has yet to be confirmed with a larger sample. Indeed, statistical significance depends on the sample size (Capel, 2013). According to the criteria proposed by Cohen (1988) for judging the significance of the size of the effect, a correlation will be considered as low below .20, average between .20 and .50, and high if the correlation is greater than .50.

The results of the correlation analyses suggest some relationships between the variables measured through the questionnaire. Workplace motivation is positively correlated with the time available to do the work correctly ( $r = .67$ ,  $p < .05$ , 95% CI .28 to .87). On the other hand, motivation is negatively correlated with the measure of perceived stress ( $r = -.67$ ,  $p < .05$ , 95% CI .28 to .87). An excessive workload is very strongly and negatively associated with the time available to do the work properly ( $r = -.77$ ,  $p < .05$ , 95% CI -.91 to -.46). The time available to do one's work is negatively correlated with the measure of perceived stress ( $r = .64$ ,  $p < .05$ , 95% CI -.86 to -.23). Finally, the activity rate has no statistically significant association with the other variables. Table 1 hereunder summarizes these results. For ease of reading, significant correlations at  $p < .05$  are in bold.

**Table 1.** Correlations between questionnaire variables

	Motivation	Time available	Perception of stress	Excessive workload	Activity rate
Motivation	-				
Time available	<b>.67</b>	-			
Perception of stress	<b>-.67</b>	<b>-.64</b>	-		
Excessive workload	<b>-.47</b>	<b>-.77</b>	<b>.37</b>	-	
Activity rate	<b>.07</b>	<b>.21</b>	<b>.23</b>	<b>-.04</b>	-

n=17

Finally, we investigated whether there is any difference between the Swiss and French samples. On average, teachers working in Switzerland are more motivated ( $M = 4.2$ ,  $SD = 1.3$ ) compared to their French colleagues ( $M = 3.7$ ,  $SD = 0.9$ ). A possible explanation could be that the French teachers have more time to perform their work correctly ( $M = 3.4$ ,  $SD = 0.7$  against  $M = 3.2$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ ). Finally, French teachers feel more stressed ( $M = 3.2$ ,  $SD = 1.2$  vs.  $M = 2.9$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ ) and think that they have an excessive workload ( $M = 3.5$ ,  $SD = 0.5$  vs.  $M = 3.3$ ,  $SD = 0.9$ ) compared to Swiss teachers. However, by testing the averages, differences are not statistically significant.

#### 4. Qualitative analysis

In this section, we conducted a content analysis in order to discover possible explanations of the stated motivation, and of an excessive workload and/or stress.

Teachers are motivated by student-related activities. They enjoy passing on knowledge or a vision of marketing, and supervising them in their final year work. In addition, they appreciate updating the course material, for example, creating new content in connection with digital. Teachers are also motivated, but to a lesser extent, by their research activities and relations with their colleagues. Apart from student-related activities, Swiss teachers are much more dispersed in their motivational factors, which include such diverse elements as academic freedom, business mandates, building infrastructure or the organization of events.

The main disincentives for teachers are administrative constraints (for nine of them). They regret the cumbersome processes, malfunctions, ambiguity and time pressure that accompany them. Not only do they have to deal with more administrative tasks, but also the administrative staff do not provide the support they need, or even add a layer of complexity. Computer tools are also an element of unnecessary complexity.

*"I am demotivated by too many administrative burdens, with more and more documents to provide, more and more items to look for here and there, with unreasonable deadlines." – Senior Lecturer, France*

Swiss teachers agree on the administrative complexity factor. French teachers report many different demotivating factors in addition to the administrative constraints they also agree

on. They mention, for example, the lack of management support, exam markings, unjustified and unfair promotions or lack of recognition.

Teachers complain about the deteriorating working environment and conditions. They must work in a toxic environment where there are cases of denunciation, unrealistic or ambiguous objectives, tolerated incompetence, communication problems or poorly defined rules. A professor in Switzerland reported that he was aware of burnout cases in his institution. The deterioration in the work atmosphere is also the result of pressure on teachers. Managers justify this pressure with budget cuts, quantitative indicators of research outcomes or the need to maintain close relations with industry and therefore with practice.

*"They require professors to produce research. If there is no outcome (it does not depend on us but on the response times of the journals), the sanction: 30 extra hours of teaching. This means that teaching assignment is a punishment. The one who teaches a lot is marginalized and considered as unprofitable, bringing little value to the school, even if his or her pedagogical performance is excellent. A pure nonsense."* - Professor, Head of research institute, France

Overall, marketing teachers believe that working conditions have deteriorated over the past 10 years. This deterioration is due to three main factors: administrative aspects (as already mentioned), pressure in terms of quantitative results and technology. French teachers are more negative about the evolution of their working conditions as every activity becomes a question of profitability and objectives to be achieved. According to respondents, there is an imperative for profitable courses, ambitious financial targets, customer satisfaction rates with less time allocation for tasks to be performed. Finally, technology is a factor of deterioration for many teachers. The use of technology has changed the behavior of students with a difficulty in paying attention to an issue over time and the behavior of colleagues who prefer to work at home which makes it difficult to have good relationships with them. Only two teachers underline the contribution of technology.

*"Marketing is itself in full swing, e-marketing is omnipresent and this has led to a significant change in the course content. Marketing teachers are forced to master all the new techniques. It's motivating."* – Professor, Head of school communication, Switzerland

## **5. Conclusion**

An exploratory study conducted in French-speaking Switzerland and France revealed worrying elements for higher education institutions. Marketing teachers, even if they say they are motivated, express much more mixed opinions in terms of stress or workload.

These mixed opinions are consistent with the findings of the literature review and opinion expressed in the open-ended questions of the questionnaire. Teachers are demotivated to spend too much time and effort in administrative activities. On the other hand, their core business, namely student activities and research, are their real motivators. They are also demotivated because working conditions continue to deteriorate because of the pressures brought about by the introduction of management methods closer to those prevailing in the traditional business environment. To succeed in their transformation, schools need to be aware that the notions of motivation, time available and stress seem to be significantly correlated. They must also take into account that if they do not adequately manage human risks, the objectives may never be achieved.

It is obvious, however, that these correlations should be confirmed with a larger sample. Further research should be carried out in the context of higher-level marketing education in Europe, but also in other fields with the same characteristics. For instance, the study might include other fields that require updating of content in response to a constantly changing environment, such as strategy or technology management.

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