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PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN SCIENCE BETWEEN INSTITUTIONALIZATION AND INDETERMINACY: THE ITALIAN CASE

Academic paper

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Background – Public Engagement (PE) in science has been defined as a set of: “activities pursuing a dialogue among researchers, citizens and other stakeholders and searching for a democratic participation of citizenship in decision-making process” (EC, 2015). Public engagement corresponds to the need to establish a dialogue between scientists and the public, and the need for questions, opinions, expectations and values of citizens and different actors to reach decision-making bodies, in this case about the development of science and technology. It also recognises the desirability of citizens' effective participation in the process of science, with participation being a democratic right and duty (EC, 2015). While in the past the relationship between scientists and society was mainly considered as a one-way, top-down communication process in which the scientific community tried to inform and educate the general public about science, in the latest twenty years PE has been growingly conceived as a bi-directional interaction process, where, for scientists, it becomes fundamental to dialogue with public through practical experimentations and social reflection about the meaning of science for society (Van Est, 2011). The interaction between science and society, therefore, has become a collaboration with the aim to answer to the values, needs and expectations of society (Mejlgaard et al., 2018). The adoption of a Triple Helix (TH) perspective (Etzkowitz, 1993) can offer some insightful contributions to the debate on PE as an interacting process. In fact, PE activities tend to involve not only interactions between the University and the Business institutional spheres in specific scientific fields, but also interactions between University and other-than-business audiences in a wider set of disciplinary fields. Governmental institutional bodies have a legitimate interest in facilitating PE as a knowledge-sharing interaction process, since it has been recognized as a key element in research and innovation (R&I) policies in Europe. Furthermore, national and regional policy agencies have an important role in regulating and structuring the PE activities, thus favouring the process of institutionalization of PE as a legitimate and relevant activity within the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) systems. PE is currently under institutionalisation in many European countries and the role of regulatory institutional spheres is paramount in structuring better PE activities. In fact, although the role of PE as a driver of social innovation practices in the innovation is widely recognized, there still remains ambiguity in the use of PE concept. Indeterminacies in PE definition and the related fallacies in Universities' PE strategy may inhibit the performance of PE interaction practices, thus limiting the effectiveness and the extension of TH innovation models. This is particularly relevant at the regional level, where PE activities of Universities are mainly offered to local third parties.

Purpose – The aims of this research are twofold. We want to qualify how the indeterminacy factor affects universities' PE performance by pointing out inefficiency elements. Secondly, we propose some insights for universities to reduce the indeterminacy of PE policies and, in this way, to improve efficiency in PE implementation and performance as active promoters of public participation with science in the society.

Design/methodology/approach – The study adopts a qualitative approach and develops the case study of PE institutionalisation process occurred in Italy within the academic context. The service

productivity perspective (Gummesson, 1995; Grönroos, & Ojasalo, 2004) is applied as theoretical framework in order to frame PE as a knowledge-based service and find suitable indicators of productivity and performance. Furthermore, the analysis uses primary data obtained through interviews to a set of 26 privileged informants on PE and secondary data referred to policies and regulations on PE.

Findings – Through the analysis, some indeterminacy elements are identified in policies and regulations produced in the institutionalisation process. The effects of indeterminacy are studied in relation to the reception of the PE concept and the development of PE practices within the Italian academic environment, as testified by the voice of privileged informants. In particular, the indeterminacy is related to too wide definitions of PE, too heterogeneous PE's typological activities as well as not well identified application field. Then, based on the results of the evaluation conducted by the Italian agency on PE performance and on interviews, inefficiency elements linked to the indeterminacy factor have been identified. Many ways through which the indeterminacy factor affects PE performance of universities in terms of inefficiency have been identified (presence of PE activities that were not PE activities; presence of PE activities that were not aligned with the general TM strategy of the assessed university; presence of PE activities missing a clear organizational level of performance). Negative repercussions indeed are visible in the unalignment between strategies and practices on PE, at several organisational levels or in lacking operational processes utilising inadequate resources as well as in autoreferential dissemination activities.

Research implications – The paper highlights the connection between the indeterminacy factor that affects the PE notion and the inefficiency elements that characterizes the PE performances in Italian HEIs. This implies that to improve PE performances and to increase PE service productivity, universities have to face and solve the PE definition issues still open, to adapt their policies to this refined notion of PE, and to ensure a good level of integration and alignment between their PE practices and PE policies as defined in the European framework. Further, at institutional level, it could help to use upstream strategic models to complete downstream assessment models in order to avoid risks in terms of gaps and biases in understanding and in applying PE as a new type of public goods and service for knowledge sharing and co-production.

Originality/value – Few empirical studies in the scientific debate have tried to investigate the effects of indeterminacy of PE conceptualization on performance and its explaining factors.

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