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QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract: Quality, understood both as a standard of something as measured against other things of a similar kind or the degree of excellence of something, or even as a distinctive attribute or characteristic possessed by someone or something is one of the key concepts used in evaluating any product or service. Nowadays, quality became a notion almost as important as profit or market share. In the last decades, it became one of the key factors even in the process of evaluating educational institutions, and, among them those in the field of higher education. In our paper we intend to present the actual interpretations of our key notion and how it can be applied in the field of higher education. We also want to present the main techniques that can be used in the quality management of those institutions, with special regard to the European Union. And, last but not least, we want to show some potential trends in the field of quality management.

Keywords: Higher education, quality of education, accreditation

Introduction

In a society with a competitive market, to keep oneself in the market and to be prosperous, one must be competitive, that is, one has to meet customer requirements, to relate to the highest standards and to produce quality, since no one buys products or services lacking quality, no matter how attractive their price may be. Competitiveness is in fact the fundamental requirement for the success of any organization that aims at gaining and maintaining the market segment to which it addresses with products (goods or services) offered in a cost-effective manner. Organizations delivering products of the same kind are in a constant competition with ascending character, and cannot afford to lose competitiveness, as it would certainly mean bankruptcy and disappearance from the market.

Quality is a concept frequently used in all areas of activity, in which the competition of products and services in the market has skyrocketed. A manufacturer or service provider may exist and can develop only if it provides goods and services at a competitive quality level. Without quality there are no sales. Without sales there is no profit and without profit a business cannot survive. Thus, the quality of a product is an important feature of the competitiveness of an organization as well as its personnel, industrial activity, commercial activity and financial activity.

The Importance Of Quality

According to ISO 8402:1994 quality means a set of characteristics and features of an entity (product or service) that gives it the opportunity to satisfy expressed and implicit needs of some beneficiaries. Twenty years later, the ISO 9000:2015 adopts a much broader definition, according to which quality means the “degree to which a set of inherent characteristics of an object fulfils requirements.” (ISO, 2015) An organization is more competitive if the product quality is better, the industrial activity is more efficient, the staff is better trained and more engaged in the work process, the commercial, financial as well as other activities are carried out on the *just-in-time*

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principle, while securing and sustaining competitiveness is the basic objective of any management model. Moreover, today it is worldwide considered that one of the essential factors for achieving and maintaining performance of an organization is the quality of its products. Application of quality concepts in the field of industry and services is an essential step for any economic entity in order to improve its competitiveness under the competitive circumstances of the market economy and the globalization of trade. Therefore, it is important for their prosperity that organizations and institutions producing or providing services give due importance to the competitiveness and hence the quality of their products or services.

Education is not exempted from the need for quality either, especially higher education, because training successive generations of educables in order to cope with the multiple demands of the modern society largely depends on the quality of the educational offer and services in the academic world. In contemporary society, universities have both a cultural role played through intellectual creation, as well as one of an organization providing educational services. The products offered by the university as an organization providing educational services are knowledge and competence, which are provided to society in various forms: training of specialists in specific areas, research, counseling, expertise, involvement of the academic community in the life of the society. Or, all these products and services offered by the university to its customers (students) and stakeholders (society, companies, organizations etc.), which help them acquire the educational products mentioned above, are meant to be of quality in a free market where universities compete. Only the quality of services and educational products offered by universities as well as their continuous concern to improve quality will ensure the market success of universities and will make their existence permanent.

Higher education has an important role in the development of human society through the characters it forms and the models it promotes. Thus, the quality of education is reflected by the extent to which higher education institutions meet the requirements of internal and external *stakeholders* and, at the same time promote the development of individuals and societies as a whole. Higher education graduates are more likely to find a job than those with a lower level of qualification. However, higher education institutions often have difficulties in adapting to the changing needs of the economy and fail to anticipate or contribute to the modelling of the trends in the labor market.

Globally, however, the quality of higher education is in a process of decline. Concerns about the quality of university education programs are real in this context. Even the most developed countries are affected by this process of quality decline of education. Intensification institutional, national and international concerns regarding quality assurance in education is an indirect recognition of the fact that something disturbing is happening in this area.

In 2006 the European Parliament and the Council adopted the Recommendation on further European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education, which promoted the use of European standards and guidelines for quality assurance. (European Parliament and Council, 2006) This recommendation calls on EU countries to set up the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), an independent body that administers the register of quality assurance agencies in higher education. It operates on a European level and contributes to the development of the European dimension of quality assurance. In order to appear in the register, agencies must comply with the European standards in quality assurance.

The European Commission provides support to Member States and higher education institutions in the EU to modernize curricula so that graduates have a high degree of competence as well as sought and transferable skills, enabling them to adapt to a rapidly changing labor market.

To improve the quality and relevance and to increase the number of students, there is a need for flexible and innovative methods and approaches. According to the Communication on Rethinking Education, one of the main modes of action is the exploitation of the advantages of information and communication technologies (ICT) and other new technologies having the purpose to enrich the teaching process, improve learning experiences and support personalized learning. (European Commission, 2012)

The reform and modernization of the European higher education depends on the competence and motivation of teachers and researchers. The recruitment of teachers has not often kept up with the increasing number of students, which has put an even greater pressure on the already limited capacity. There is a need for better conditions of employment, including transparent and fair recruitment procedures, a higher level initial teacher education and continuing professional development as well as a better recognition and reward of excellence in teaching and research in order that Europe can produce, attract and retain the high quality academic staff that it needs.

The High-Level Group on the Modernization of Higher Education published in 2014 a report with important recommendations for improving the quality of teaching and learning in the European higher education. (European Commission - High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education, 2013)

As the dynamics of social development is relatively difficult to predict, a resizing function at the level of higher education institutions was imposed, strengthening the idea that they are providers of educational services and knowledge. A quality and relevant higher education enables students to acquire the transferable knowledge and skills they need to succeed after graduation in a high-level learning environment that recognizes and supports advanced teaching methods. Ensuring quality inspires confidence.

The implementation of the quality management system in education is essential for the mission, goals and objectives of each institution of higher education. Each higher education institution should have strict internal quality assurance systems evaluated by specialized agencies. Introducing the quality management system must be analyzed as part of change management, for at least two reasons:

- higher education reform involves compliance with the aligning requirements of European education and worldwide recognition of diplomas;
- the objective that universities must reach in the immediate future is to use institutional management programs in order to promote performance in terms of quality.

The quality of a specialization in higher education is not defined only by matters of content and structure of the curriculum, but it also must be analyzed from the perspective of the entities to be addressed: students, graduates, academics, competent ministry, various civil society organizations, including future employees as well. As a result, the interpretation of the concept of quality depends on the party that represents the consumer, i.e. the client. Each of the above-mentioned entities sets its own objectives and therefore the concept of quality is defined accordingly. There are cases where the notion of quality has identical connotations in the situation where objectives set by various parties are similar, but one cannot deny that in many instances there is no consensus regarding the definition of quality. Thus, we can talk about the quality of inputs, the quality of the (teaching) process and the quality of outputs.

Quality is even more required in higher education, since in recent decades, in the social, political and economic context of the globalization process and the enlargement of the EU, in this system, there have been relevant changes that have manifested and are still manifesting themselves through a number of factors, namely:

- diversification of national universities;
- digitization of the educational process;
- emergence of virtual universities;
- spreading of transnational universities
- increase in the number of corporate universities;
- massification of higher education;
- universities have lost their monopoly over the production and supply of specialized knowledge and training;
- internationalization of the labor market;
- massification of student and teacher mobility;
- increase of competitiveness in order to occupy a well-paid job, which provides opportunities for personal development;
- the continuous nature of human learning in terms of an ever-changing world;
- democratization of education:
- at a system level (decentralization, autonomy of universities, etc.);
- at a process level (teachers' autonomy, the possibility of carrying out student training programs on individual tracks);
- humanization of education, focusing on the student, ensuring free development of his or her personality etc.

All these factors force the university to operate under the laws of the free market that is specific for postmodern society, demand and supply, economic efficiency embodied in profit, turning it into an institution that provides services for the society, and that is in competition with other education and knowledge service providers in order to obtain financial and human resources necessary for a proper functioning. On such a free market and in such a service providing institution, quality is a *sine qua non*.

Moreover, with the educational reform of the European higher education initiated in 1999 and named the Bologna process, which aimed to create a European Area of Higher Education by 2010, concerns related to the quality development and assurance in higher education have been a priority aspect of the European policy in this area.

Quality Assessment

Quality and performance evaluation should be analyzed in parallel with the implementation of the evaluation methods, aiming at increasing institutional autonomy as well as highlighting responsibilities. The introduction of the systematic assessment, the main purpose of which is a better use of the resources, helps to effectively achieve

the policy objectives set in the strategic management. If the distribution of quality is carried out on different levels, the same goes for the quality assessment procedure as well.

A first type of evaluation is performed by the market, a fact that is evidenced in two ways:

- orientation of students towards certain specializations within certain faculties;
- orientation of employers towards graduates with certain specializations within certain universities.

These guidelines confirm the quality of teaching in these institutions.

A second type of evaluation is the bureaucratic one. This can be that performed by the competent ministry and / or other authorities, based on formal criteria. The participation of international experts in the assessment procedure has the purpose to confirm or deny whether the audited program meets the quality requirement at a European level.

A third form of assessment is the self-evaluation that is carried out by the institution itself, which is a process that is meant to be the result of the strategic management of the university, under the conditions of an increasingly larger autonomy conferred to higher education institutions.

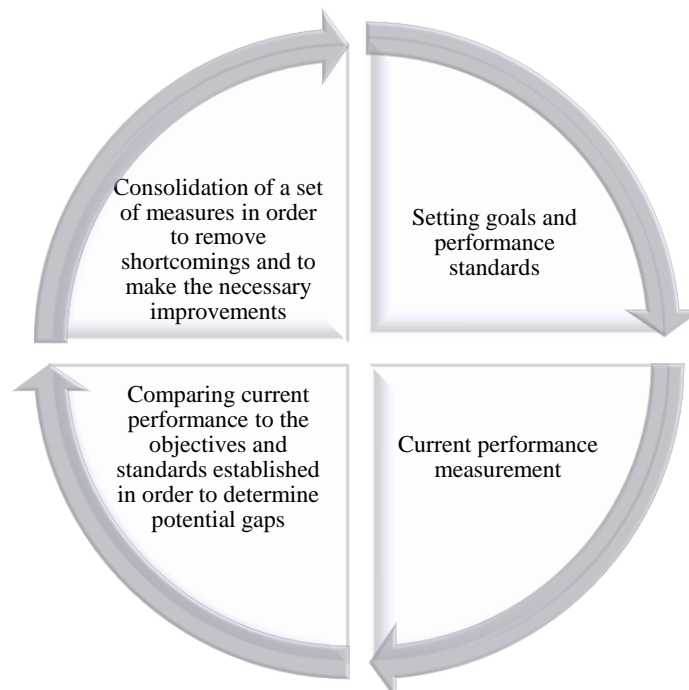
The relation between universities and control authorities can be established on several points of view:

- free market approach: universities, as service suppliers are addressing certification institutions;
- technological approach: universities, as production units have to fulfill some technical specifications and a central quality auditing institution controls periodically their activity;
- classical approach: assuring quality is a matter of academic autonomy and universities have to assure the quality management.

Evaluation is most important connection to the process of quality assurance. The most important points to be covered in the performance evaluation are the following:

- setting goals and objectives:
- their clear definition,
- verification of their need,
- establishment of a consensus in their interpretation,
- assessing the extent to which objectives have been met:
- identification of problems that may occur,
- establishment of certain mechanisms to control inputs, outputs and the whole process,
- identification of the factors that may hinder a satisfactory achievement of goals,
- assessing the extent to which objectives have been achieved:
- definition of the methods for a systematic collection of information,
- identification of the performance indicators.

As a result, the quality assessment is a continuous process that involves several steps, as shown in the next picture:



The factors that usually influence performance assessment and the establishment of the indicators it determines are on the one hand the, often discouraging, costs of obtaining information, on the other hand the principles for establishing scientific prestige, that are often vague, subjective, restrictive and that do not often overlap with the principles of quality management.

When assessing higher education institutions one must make a clear distinction between accreditation and quality assessment. Accreditation is based on a static assessment of the situation in time of the assessment, which is designed to verify the fulfillment of the minimum conditions so that the institution is entitled to issue diplomas of higher education, recognized by the state.

In contrast, the evaluation of quality is aimed at a dynamic assessment aimed at establishing trends for a certain period of time, in contrast to the determination of levels, such as in the case of accreditation. For this reason, quality assessment does not (or should not) lead to the ranking of institutions, but it is an instrument for guiding the universities towards a continuous quality improvement of their processes.

The application of the continuous measurement procedure involves, on the one hand, strengthening of the concept of quality, and, at the same time, makes it possible to improve it by several mechanisms, such as:

- assurance regarding the fact that the customer's requirements (employers, employees, students) have been fulfilled,
- ability to set a number of goals and to track their achievement,
- establishment of certain comparative standards for a continuous improvement of the process,
- imposing transparency and establishing a schedule for monitoring individual performance level,
- identification of certain shortcomings in the standards of quality and prioritizing the elimination of these deficiencies,
- justification for resource utilization,
- obtaining feedback on the efforts to identify weaknesses and eliminate them.

In order to avoid compromising the measurement process, the indicators used to assess quality must meet certain conditions, such as:

- measurability: indicators, such as quality and quantity of results, costs, etc., must allow the achievement of the objectives that are measurable;
- relevance: indicators must serve the establishment of a link between different areas of responsibility and individual performance goals, and must describe the expectations specific for each position or function;
- significance: indicators must be defined for each area of responsibility, as oriented towards activities with a significant impact on the individual results, the results of the department or institution.

Conclusion

In the context of European integration the introduction of quality management systems in the field of higher education has become, as part of the Bologna Process, a priority goal not just for the academic communities of the Union, but also for those of the aspiring countries. In this very complex process higher education can largely benefit from the experience gathered in decades of quality management in the business sphere.

Assuring quality means building up confidence in the national higher education systems, showing that they do comply with the customers' expectations, they spend public money in an appropriate way, efficiently, for sensible purposes. The reason to introducing quality management into education in Europe, and not just there, are related to the above mentioned factors: the new status of the universities in the era of mass education, the systemic convergence of European higher education and the globalization of labour markets.

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