

Quality Management Systems in Higher Education

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Quality management systems in Higher Education have been developed for a number of years to improve professional standards. Several attempts have been made to develop methods that would be modelled on ISO 9000 and TQM, but some of these models were developed to evaluate a business process in the quality field. Education is looking for a management concept that would direct the collective efforts of all managers and employers toward satisfying customer expectations by continually improving activities. One of the flexible and easy to implement models is related to the European Quality Award model and is developed by the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM). QMS and other quality systems in HE, required by the accreditation bodies in view of programmes accreditation are needed for the assurance of quality and management leadership.

INTRODUCTION

A quality assurance system in higher education has to incorporate several elements to be harmonized with the EU higher education system. These are: the formation of an independent agency; internal evaluations on the level of institutions or programmes; external evaluations from experts' commissions; involvement of students in internal and external evaluations; publishing of the results of evaluations; and international cooperation and networking of the agency.

Quality management systems (QMS) in higher education (HE) have been developed for a number of years to improve professional standards. Slovenian higher education is looking for a management concept that would direct the collective efforts of all managers and employers toward satisfying customer expectations by continually improving activities.

Being quality minded in higher education means caring about the expectations of students and other customers as well as all involved parties, and ensuring they are met. Students' perceptions thus provide important information for lecturers if learners' needs are to be fulfilled. An assessment of the quality of teaching programmes comes at a time when the concern for quality in higher education is probably at an all-time

high. All processes in any organization (higher education institution) contribute directly or indirectly to quality as the customer (student) defines it. This will determine whether students' needs have been met (Arcaro 1995). Quality systems in higher education have been important for decades. They help us improve professional standards by comparing them with international educational qualifications. Several attempts have been made to develop quality certifications in this field such as the method ISO 9000 and others that derive from the manufacturing industry (Dolinšek and Rupnik 1999).

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An international comparison of higher education systems is important. Slovenia can thus be more competitive in the process of becoming part of the European higher education area. Quality assurance of higher education institutions, their pedagogical, research and other activities, represent the priority of strategic documents, such as the National higher education programme in the Republic of Slovenia. Most European countries have established a quality assurance system that is coordinated by a national agency or suitable body on the state level. In Slovenia we have already begun to establish our quality assurance system, for the moment as a regular self-evaluation activity inside the higher education institutions and formal commissions (Kump 2003).

Barnett (in Kump 1994) restricted different comprehensions of quality assurance in higher education on three concepts:

- *Objectivistic concept of quality*, which includes an instrumental measurement of quality. This means that it is possible to identify and quantify several points of higher education. A methodology is used which is common to the whole higher education system and which is focused on results.
- *Relativistic concept of quality* excludes absolute measures that could allow us to evaluate quality. For a division of reality and a valuable insight into the same reality, there are no absolute evidences of validity. The relativistic view can be 'fitness for purpose', although the relativism of this understanding is only apparent; its real purpose is classifying and grading. All institutions are equal, but some of them are more equal than others. Barnett distinguishes the hierarchical form of 'fitness for purpose' (relation between different higher education institutions – 'different and unequal') and the parallel form

of 'fitness for purpose' (relation between different higher education institutions – 'different but equal').

- *Evolutionary concept of quality* is part of the internal culture of institutions. The evolutionary view, which is marginalized in until today discussions, represents the view of members of the academic community (employees and students). This does not mean that in self-evaluation they do not consider external interests of employers or professional bodies. In the self-evaluation process the institutions often invite external bodies for help. External advisers are included into the internal process upon the invitation of academic community members that want to improve the quality of their own work. This is the internal view to higher education quality, which is not imposed from outside.

According to the 2004 Supplement to the law of higher education, Slovenia has to establish an autonomous national agency for quality assessment in higher education. The responsible body for its foundation is the government that works in agreement with higher education institutions. The agency will have the role of an independent and neutral harmonizer of different interest groups from the higher education field. The roles of the agency are the following: it runs external evaluations, nominates commissions for evaluations of programmes and the higher education institution, collects and analyses self-evaluation reports, publishes reports of external evaluations, etc. A Council of RS in higher education gives an expert opinion about the quality of programmes and delivers the accreditation of programmes and the institution before the establishment of a higher education institution as well as renews their accreditation every seven years. In the higher education act supplement from 2004 it is already defined that until the end of 2005 the Agency will be established. This process has already begun.

The National commission for quality in higher education was established in 2000 as a predecessor of the agency. The Commission already prepared the first criteria for quality evaluation in higher education. Three areas that will be evaluated in a higher education institution according to these criteria are:

1. institutions,
2. programmes,
3. a scientific research work.

The proposed fields for evaluation in higher education institutions are the following:

- strategy, organization and quality management,
- teaching process,
- research,
- human resources,
- students,
- infrastructure,
- financing,
- cooperation and openness of higher education institutions to the surrounding environment and the world at large.

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Some of the agency's other assignments are: to organize few experimental external evaluations in 2005, analyse results of executed evaluations, prepare suggestions for changes in the area, criteria and procedures for an external evaluation.

To maintain and improve quality, higher education institutions have to evaluate themselves, which is the first step in the evaluation process. Once self-evaluation has been conducted, the institution has to analyse the condition and search for weak areas. As regards weaknesses, some goals are determined; once pre-determined goals are realized identified gaps can be eliminated. That is why every institution has to plan a corrective system of measures. Improvement is an internal process, which has to be implemented on universities and higher education institutions. The basic intention is to increase satisfaction of all stakeholders in higher education. The process of self-evaluation and improvement is basically a never ending process that has to be present in every life cycle of a higher education institution. So we assure that (together with external evaluations) the institution fulfils the required norms for the accreditation (Rozman, Stajnko, and Pauko 2001).

The next step is external evaluation, which includes a visit of the external evaluation commission that issues a report with recommendations. The purpose and goals of the external quality assurance system in higher education is the following:

- to establish a quality assurance system,
- to support a higher education institution on improvements,
- to enable minimal standards of quality.

Tasks of the external evaluation commission will be: to overview the contents of the self- evaluation report, to visit the higher education institution, which is the object of external evaluation, and to form an evaluation report with recommendations. A dialogue between the evaluators and the evaluated institution has to be present. Competent and balanced members of the external evaluation commission will be demanded. Because of the restricted Slovenian higher education area, foreign experts will probably take part in the evaluation commissions. A close cooperation between the commission and student representatives will be obligatory. The external evaluation report will be public.

In order to maintain its credibility, the national agency will have to be involved in a wider international environment. The European dimension of quality assurance is evolving in the direction of mutual acknowledgment of agencies for quality assurance in higher education, and mutual recognition of accreditations, study programmes and diplomas. These are the reasons why the agency will have to become member of the ENQA (European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education). Even on the European level, school ministers address ENQA to develop a set of standards, proceedings and directions for quality assurance, and to investigate paths for implementation of an adequate fellow survey system for agencies or institutions, responsible for quality assurance and/or accreditation. All this in collaboration with the EUA (European University Association), the EURASHE (European Association of Institutions in Higher Education) and the ESIB (The National Unions of Students in Europe).

And finally, the quality assurance system should not serve to:

- control an efficient and effective use of resources,
- give any type of financial reward because of the achieved quality.

QUALITY SYSTEMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Although they may differ slightly, quality models worldwide are based on fundamental concepts that underpin them. These values and concepts are embedded beliefs and behaviours found in high-performing organizations. They are the foundation for integrating key organizational requirements within a results-oriented framework that creates a basis for action and feedback. In the higher education sector, these fundamental concepts like: visionary leadership, customer driven excellence, people development and involvement, continual learning, innovation and im-

provement form the basis of the vision and mission of many education institutions.

There exist many models that were already proposed for the use in higher education. The European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) Excellence Model in Higher Education Version 2003 is one of them and it was developed on the Sheffield Hallam University in Great Britain.

A comprehensive overview of the EFQM is available on www.efqm.org. The EFQM was introduced at the beginning of 1992 as the framework for assessing applications for The European Quality Award. It is the most widely used organizational framework in Europe.

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Some of the benefits of EFQM Excellence Model in the higher education institution are: to understand and anticipate students' needs and expectations; demonstrate visionary and inspirational leadership; involve staff; develop beneficial relationships, etc.

Numerous studies demonstrate that the Excellence Model is complementary with tools like ISO, Balanced Scorecard, Charter Mark and Investors in people. Further information can be found in the publication *LLinking the EFQM Excellence Model® to other Management Models and Tools* (Higher Education Funding Council for England 2003b). According to the comparative study *Good Management Practice* (Higher Education Funding Council for England 2003a):

- the EFQM Excellence Model includes basic elements of the Balanced Scorecard model. Especially the Results criteria are a form of balanced scorecard,
- the use of the Balanced Scorecard as an approach within the EFQM Excellence Model can provide a strong overview for strategic management and the development of an integrated measurement and management framework,
- key performance indicators in the higher education sector are in a relatively early stage of development. The reasons are partly in the lack of understanding students' experience. Most universities now carry out students' satisfaction surveys and not only employees or wider communities perception surveys.

Different quality tools and standards can be used on their own or together. The mix will depend on the needs of the organization and its particular strategic focus.

The most restrictive factors against the blind bureaucratic transfer of

industrial quality management system models to higher education institutions are:

- the autonomy of universities, which is a condition for the ability to change,
- the right to academic independence with performance of teaching and research.

CONCLUSIONS

The Faculty of Management Koper has been implementing self-evaluation for several years now. The reports include a series of quantitative and qualitative data regarding quality assessment: regular questionnaires of students' assessment (candidates informing, inscription policy, mechanisms of selection, average duration of study, fluctuation, mentoring, monitoring students and help them solving problems, mobility of students, employment of graduates), employees surveys (employment, advancing, mobility of professors, bibliographical publications), study schemes and programmes, research and scientific work, work on international, national and internal projects, programmes description and goals, methods for lecturing, teaching and knowledge testing, international cooperation, cooperation with industry and public services etc.

But self-evaluation, certification and accreditation only, can not improve the quality of the higher education institution. This is only the beginning of a process that has to evolve and include international participation, cooperation and networking. And finally, a communiqué warns about the necessity to develop a set of standards, procedures and orientations for quality assurance and a suitable system of peer review for agencies or bodies, competent for quality assurance and/or accreditation (*Realising the European Higher Education Area 2003*).

We have already established a Centre for quality and evaluation, which purpose is the establishment of a quality management system at the Faculty of Management. The most important tasks are: to analyse and compare different QMS, suggest a suitable QMS for the faculty, prepare elements for the faculty's quality management handbook, monitor work on the research area (define elements, measurement modes and ways of reporting) and on the education area (reports of the efficiency of study, analyses of satisfaction surveys). Our representatives contribute to the work of the university commission for quality assessment, the National commission for quality in higher education, the Council for higher education and other institutions, which concern is quality assessment. And

most important, we have strong commitment of our management for any organization, that is struggling for quality improvement, and that is closely involved in QMS implementation.

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