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QUALITY ASSURANCE APPROACHES IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION

PŘÍSTUPY ZAJIŠTĚNÍ KVALITY V OBLASTI VYSOKÉHO ŠKOLSTVÍ

Abstract

Contribution monitors the situation in the field of quality management improvement in the higher education institutions represented by VSB-Technical University Ostrava, Czech Republic (VSB-TUO) and Queen Mary, University of London, United Kingdom (QMUL). Obtained data are processed and evaluate to identify different quality assurance approaches and structures leading to same aims, thus to create functional quality management system.

Abstrakt

Příspěvek monitoruje systémy řízení kvality v oblasti vysokého školství v zastoupení univerzit Vysoká škola Báňská – Technická Univerzita Ostrava, Česká Republika (VSB-TUO) a Queen Mary, University of London, Velká Británie (QMUL). Získaná data jsou zpracována a vyhodnocena za účelem analyzovat přístupy zajišťování kvality a struktur na vysokých školách vedoucích ke stejnému cíly, tedy vybudování fungujícího systému řízení jakosti.

1 INTRODUCTION

Quality management systems (QMS) in higher education (HE) 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 Total Quality management (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. [1]

2 QUALITY ASSURANCE APPROACHES IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION

2.1 VSB-Technical University Ostrava, Czech Republic (VSB-TUO)

At the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, VŠB – Technical University of Ostrava, Czech Republic, quality management system was certified in the year 2005. The next step has been done with the application of the system Total Quality Management (Excellence System), according to the EFQM Excellence Model in the year 2006. The benchmark project was realized with many technical

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faculties from the Czech Republic and other countries as one of important steps for improving faculty management. An orientation on a complex quality system and the use of the EFQM Excellence Model has improved university life, its processes and efficiency. Achieving official recognition for the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering from the Program of the Czech Republic National Quality Award 2007 and Manager of the Field 2006 award for our dean have been promoted by the other faculties of the university. The results have been obtained during the completion of Specific Research at the Universities with student participation, supported by the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports.

2.2 Periodical questionnaires

A set of questionnaires during last three years were developed for ascertain opinions of students, graduates and also employees. The main questionnaire is focused on student satisfaction with individual subjects and teachers. This questionnaire has been used since the year 2003, in electronic form and obtained data are yearly summarized, (see Fig. 1). The meaning of individual criterion is evident from the questionnaire form, available on the faculty web: http://www.fs.vsb.cz/ dotaznik/dotaznik1.asp. The decreasing number of respondents is very embarrassing (Fig. 1 left), in spite of the massive promotion done by the Student Chamber of the Faculty Academic Senate in the year 2006. The presented results show some fluctuations (Fig. 1 right), but the gradient of all criterion is positive. To increase student interest in this questionnaire, the deans' answers and comments to students' questions are published in the discussion forum, part of faculty web information system.
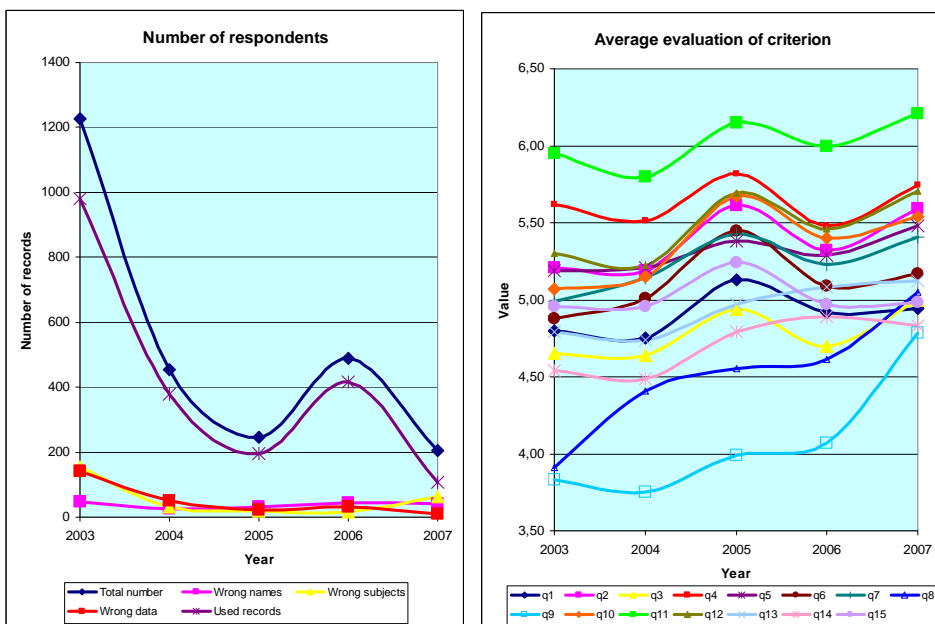

Fig. 1 Results from the student satisfaction questionnaire

Much more successful are other questionnaires, realized in standard paper form, during last three years and focused on:
  ➢ Freshmen students' thinking and expectations.
  ➢ Graduates' opinions and assessment.
  ➢ Reasons for unsuccessful students' failure.

These questionnaires are distributed and collected by Study Affairs Department staff during standard activities like student registration, the final exam process and other times. Thanks to this staff's active approach we can obtain answers from more than 60% of interviewed respondents.

2.3 Queen Mary, University of London, United Kingdom (QMUL)

At QMUL are frameworks for quality management informed by the following objectives:

High academic standards, as featured in:

> ➢ the academic level of courses and the award(s) to which they lead;
> ➢ the content of programmes and courses;
> ➢ the extent to which the aims and learning outcomes of programmes and courses are met.

A quality 'learning experience', as featured in:

> ➢ effective approaches to teaching and learning;
> ➢ interesting and relevant courses designed to develop students' knowledge, understanding or competence to the required level;
> ➢ the management of programmes and their individual components;
> ➢ support for students and staff from academic support services and the College's administrative infrastructure.

Opportunities for student achievement, as featured in:

> ➢ formal assessment and student progression;
> ➢ students' personal level of satisfaction during their studies;
> ➢ the achievements of graduates in securing employment on completion of their studies. [2]

2.3.1 Principles underpinning quality assurance

The objectives outlined above form a quality assurance framework that is underpinned by a set of principles:

- **Responsibility and accountability**

All staff is responsible for the assurance and enhancement of quality, as individuals and through their departments and faculties or divisions. Students themselves have a responsibility for quality through their representation on student-staff liaison committees and other committees of the College. There must also be clear lines of accountability. This is demonstrated in the process of self-monitoring, review and report that is one of the main characteristics of the College's quality assurance framework, within the College's committee structure and externally to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA).

- **Communication**

The requirements of the quality assurance process should be communicated to all staff via Quality Assurance Handbook, formal and informal advice and support is available from the Quality Assurance Unit. Decisions and requirements for action should be communicated clearly and quickly.

- **Quality assurance as a process**

Quality management is not sporadic but a continual process of reflection, evaluation, report and feedback. This process is framed within a college-wide system of agreed quality assurance procedures, specifications and pro-formas, the aim of which is to promote transparency and a shared understanding of the basic requirements. This shared understanding, together with coordination via

the Quality Assurance Unit and senior officers should in turn promote consistency of standards and procedures.

- **Quality improvement**

    Within the resources available, the aim should be to provide the best possible student experience and to foster quality improvement wherever possible. Good practice within the College – at departmental, faculty/division or college-wide level – and at other institutions should be shared. The College's quality assurance framework itself is subject to regular monitoring and review and aims to take account of changing needs within the College and the higher education sector.

- **The involvement of external peers**

    The involvement of external peers is vital in assuring and maintaining standards. External peers are involved in approval of new programmes, Internal Review and External Examining.

- **The views of students**

    Student opinion is key if quality assurance is a continual and "bottom-up" process which assures and improves academic standards, the learning experience and opportunities for student achievement. Students are represented on most major committees at Queen Mary, they participate in Internal Reviews and departments or programme areas are required to have in place mechanisms for obtaining student feedback.

2.3.2 Programme development

The purpose of these procedures is to ensure that all proposals to develop new programmes of study or to change previously approved programmes are scrutinised thoroughly on academic grounds. This scrutiny should ensure that each programme of study offered by Queen Mary is designed to the highest possible academic standards and offers students the best possible teaching and learning experience. It should also ensure that resource implications are identified and resolved at the earliest stage.

2.3.3 Programme monitoring

The annual report process is a key component of the College's quality assurance framework. It is based on the belief that academic staffs, and their self-evaluation of their own work, are central of the process of continuous quality improvement and the maintenance of academic standards. The annual report process provides those responsible for the delivery and management of programmes of study with a focus for reflecting on quality and improvement at programme level and is also the primary way in which accountability is demonstrated at departmental, faculty/school and College level. [3]

2.3.4 Student Feedback Questionnaires

The purpose of this procedure is to ensure that there is systematic collection of students' views on the education provision that the College provides.

This procedure covers all Queen Mary based taught undergraduate and postgraduate programmes plus courses that the College contributes towards intercollegiate programmes. It does not cover research degrees or non-award-bearing continuing education, although it is considered best practice to systematically gather research students' views on their experiences, usually as part of their annual review.

The Head of Department, or equivalent, should ensure that there is in place a systematic and formal procedure for giving students the opportunity to feed back views of the education provision offered by the Department, e.g. through the use of evaluation questionnaires.

Although feedback is gathered by a variety of means, including informal staff/student discussions, focus groups and Student-Staff Liaison Committees (SSLC), the use of questionnaires is one of the most effective. Questionnaires are used to gather student feedback on every recently completed course of study, although a systematic method of gathering feedback on whole programmes from recent graduates is also considered good practice. The purpose of gathering feedback is to monitor, from the students' perspective: the quality of teaching and course organisation on individual courses; the level of resource allocation and students' commitment to their course/programme. In order for students to fully engage with the process, they need to feel that expressing their views will make a difference to present and future provision. Hence summaries of their feedback as well as responses to any concerns raised are available to them via departmental notice boards, on the web and through the SSLCs.

Student feedback is an integral part of the new QAA review procedure and the QAA and HEFCE have indicated that they expect students' views to be a part of the information on courses and programmes published on Higher Education Institutions' web pages. [2]

2.4 Outcome

It is essential that feedback is provided quickly and in sufficient detail to support the department area and enable any recommendations for improvement to be implemented. Feedback is given in three ways:

> ➢ oral feedback to the department area immediately after the close of the main meetings with staff and student representatives;
> ➢ a written summary of this feedback;
> ➢ a full written report.

The oral feedback outlines the panel's conclusions and any recommendations, and normally takes place at the end of the Internal Review meeting. If any areas requiring further action are identified, these are specified as essential or advisable and according to a timescale. Essential recommendations require serious address. The department then considers and drafts a response. This response should take the form of a detailed and time bound action plan which gives an initial response to any issues raised and outlines how any recommendations will be addressed. The action plan should normally be no more than six sides of A4 paper and should be lodged, electronically, with the Secretary to the Panel 3 months after receipt of the final version of the Internal Review report. The action plan response is circulated to all panel members. [2]

The written feedback on the panel's conclusions and recommendations forms the basis of a written report of the Internal Review.

The Internal Review panel agrees the content of the report and it is then sent to the head of department area for comments on factual accuracy. The report is finalised once any comments on factual accuracy are agreed by the Chair (and other panel members as necessary).

It is recommended that departments areas discuss the Internal Review report and consider the implementation of the action plan within the relevant departmental area committee/s. Departments areas are also encouraged to discuss the report and action plan with their Staff-Student Liaison Committee/s and to keep students informed about action and progress in relation to issues raised by students in their discussion with the Internal Review panel. [3]

The confirmed Internal Review report, and action plan, is considered by the relevant Faculty Board/Education Board and the Quality Enhancement Committee. A twelve month progress report is lodged with the Quality Assurance Unit for consideration by the relevant Faculty Board/Education Board and Quality Enhancement Committee. The Committee reserves the right to request further progress reports if it deems necessary.

3 CONCLUSIONS

This paper presents data regarding quality assurance system with a view to the VSB-Technical University Ostrava, Czech Republic and Queen Mary, University of London., United Kingdom.

At the QMUL, same as at all the higher education institutions in United Kingdom, academic standards are established and maintained by higher education institutions themselves using an extensive and sophisticated range of shared quality assurance approaches and structures. Standards and quality in institutions are underpinned by universal use of external examiners, a standard set of indicators and other reports and by the activities of the QAA (Quality Assurance Agency) and in professional areas by relevant Professional and Statutory Bodies. This ensures that institutions meet national expectations described in the FHEQ (Framework for Higher Education Qualifications): subject benchmark (character) statements, the Code of Practice and a system of programme specifications. QAA conducts peer-review based audits and reviews of higher education institutions with the opportunity for subject-based review as the need arises. Accuracy and adequacy of quality-related information published by the higher education institutions is also reviewed. QAA reviews also cover higher education programmes taught in further education institutions.

At the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, VŠB – TUO, Czech Republic is closely established the TQM system and the self-assessment process. The first achievements were oriented on improving the university staff satisfaction. The university is in a rapid development of quality control systems. This institution of higher education must especially observe, analyze, find out new solutions, apply adequate changes in structure and management, and above all observe and verify the influence of our decisions. One of the principal features EFQM Excellence Model is the possibility to compare the achieved results with other participants in the Program of the Czech Republic Quality Award, including industrial companies; it means our partners and also very important customers.

Quality management in education is a rather complex topic. What makes it such is the number of the parties involved - universities, students, government, society, companies as well as the intensity of changes in modern life, which the university needs to reflect flexibly.

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