

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE ROMANIAN UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT:

The quality of education is relevant to the future of the society. Education is the first structural element of the European and international integration program. The educational process is deemed a quality service of the university organization offers to the society.

In this context education requires an analysis of the fundamental concepts on quality assurance within the university system (general terms, quality terms, quality system) as well as of the elements referring to instruments and technique (costs, loss, patterns, assessments, audits, etc.).

1. INTRODUCTION

The specialists unanimously accept that education represents an act of conscience upon the quality of which the future of our society depends. It is the first chain link for the European and international integration, because of the development of its communication instruments: foreign languages, computer sciences, culture, new technologies, management, economic cooperation etc.

The results of the investments in education are visible only in the medium and long term, the educational system representing an inertial system - what we realize today will be quantified in several years, the judgment on our activity being the judgment of our children.

Using performance indicators, e.g. student entrants, non-completion rates, proportion of graduates with high marks, numbers of graduates moving into the labour market, amounts to judging education in terms of values dominant in the wider society rather than those internal to the enterprise of education.

In so far as performance indicators can be rendered numerically, they convey a flair of objectivity and neutrality[6].

The underlying assumption is that certain important aspects of education can be identified and quantified, and furthermore, that the same assessment can be accorded to all courses or all institutions.

The idea is that performance indicators tell us something not only about the quality of a given achievement, but also about this achievement in relation to other achievements, or about institutions in relation to other institutions.

2. QUALITY ASSURANCE

From an economical point of view at least, it must be deemed necessary to account for the vast sums of money that go into education. Historically, when the expansion of education has reached the level of universal primary education a growing political pressure to account for the gains is often encountered. The "value for money" approach to quality is particularly visible in times of financial austerity. On the other hand, disillusion often comes in the wake of educational expansion. In developing countries, but not only there, people tend to think that they automatically get a job when they have an appropriate educational certificate. This is not so any longer. As educational opportunity expands, the result is often an inflation in educational requirements on the labour market. Educational inflation frequently coincides with claims about declining standards and a growing concern about educational quality. But the state is only one consumer of education, albeit an important one.

The state's favoured approach to quality assessment might be described as one in which achievements are assessed in relation to (national) standards or norms; which allows comparisons across schools and perhaps even across nations[5].

There are two sets of criteria by which the quality of education is usually assessed. He contends that what he terms instrumental criteria, of which performance indicators provide an example, tend to be used by politicians, economists and employers because they see education as a means to an end external to the education process. This view is not exclusive to these consumers of education. Parents frequently share this view, and probably the students, too. A high quality education thus becomes an education that provides you with certain personal or positional advantages.

The different approaches to quality reflect different claims to what education should be all about. The use of the word "quality" obliges us to take a value stance and view some things and activities as more worthwhile than others.

There are many ideas as to what quality assurance in higher education should be all about. One is that education is a human right, but we know that in practice education is unevenly distributed according to economy, geography, gender, age and race. Education is linked to the enhancement of the possibilities for people to make choices about important matters in life.

If you take the parents as the consumers of education, the picture looks a bit different. It is a well-known fact that some parents see education as a means to a good, secure job. On the other hand, it is an equally well-known fact that some parents fear that education takes their children away from the place and culture they grew up in, by imparting knowledge that is deemed useless and irrelevant in that particular context.

There is a distinction between quality and standards. Quality is taken to be the totality of attributes bearing on the student's experience (the needs are not wholly those articulated by the student, and include those that might be anticipated for the student), whereas "standards" refers to the expectations set for the student's programme of study (and which therefore have a bearing on the quality of the student experience) as well as the levels of performance achieved by the student.

The distinction between the usage of the term "quality" and "standards" is of importance because of its implications for quality assurance. Looking at the situation from the perspective of a national government, the whole institution is likely to be the unit of analysis: rarely would a government be happy with an excellent programme in an otherwise unsatisfactory institution. In other words, a government or governmental agency will "sum" across the various programmes on offer in coming up with an opinion about the reputability of an institution, and institutional accreditation (where practiced) will be based on both this summation and a consideration of how the institution itself manages the business of assuring both quality and standards.

Some private institutions are of very high standing, whereas others have yet to establish a good reputation. In a nation in which the supply of higher education is expanding rapidly, developments may take place more quickly than the establishment of monitoring procedures, with a consequent threat to quality and standards. Where an institution is involved in a collaborative arrangement with an overseas institution whose quality assurance system is demonstrably robust, a government may feel able to trust with some confidence that the strength of the inter-institutional link is sufficient to act as a guarantee of quality and standards.

3. QUALITY SYSTEMS

Higher education is complicated and cannot be changed overnight but university programs such as vocational and technical education can be improved by implementing the quality criteria. Quality systems in higher education have been important for a number of years in order to improve the professional standards and to be comparable with international educational qualifications. Several attempts have been made to model the ideas of methods like ISO 9000 and total quality management (TQM). TQM concepts may be used to improve qualities of an educational system. The TQM motto in education is learn what the students need and constantly improve the educational processes to deliver it consistently. Some authors claim that students become better thinkers, problem solvers, and team members. Student perceptions of an institute should be sought actively by all levels to ensure that as much as possible is being done to enhance educational experiences within available resources.

Customers have long been concerned regarding quality in the administration of higher education institution. Quality standards in academic administration, teaching, and research are essential to higher education and of prime importance in satisfying goals.

The Baldrige Award, the Deming Prize, and the ISO 9000 standards are new frontiers in quality management and can be utilised in educational settings. McCammond stated that quality awards and standards will help students and faculty work as teams and Alexander stated that teams are the main structure of many TQM organisations. TQM student-faculty partnerships make it easier for students' voices to be heard. Teamwork may provide friendly environments for more productive educational experiences.

Deming encouraged educators to create environments in which strong relationships of mutual respect and trust replace anxiety, suspicion, and separation. He believed that the leadership of faculty, administrators and policy makers could empower students as front-line workers in quality education. This will make for continuous improvements in the work they do together. ISO – 9000 is a method based on procedures in order to fulfill some criteria to maintain some required quality specifications, to improve operating efficiency, productivity, the quality-*imago* and the internal organisation. It is a quality system assessment based largely on traditional quality control theory. In 1992, ISO issued an updated guideline to the standard known as ISO 9004-2, which focused on the service sector. An example of a service sector to which the standard is applicable is higher education.

Concepts of industrial quality practices are being accepted by higher education at a very slow rate. Universities will not accept TQM with open arms. Some faculty or administrators continue to resist TQM in education. Resistance may be attributed to unwillingness to change old systems. In higher education, academic decisions have traditionally been made through peer processes and collegial bodies. Dominance of academics in decision making about quality is now being directly challenged by the quality movement's emphasis on customers.

Successful implementation and execution of an industry-based quality management system

for administration and faculty can accomplish the quality objectives of education. Results indicated that quality standards were effective and substantial improvements were noted and documented.

Industrial teacher educators have the opportunity to facilitate change to TQM environments. TQM concepts should be basic to administration and course content of technology teacher education programs. The implication, of course, is that staff and educators must themselves exemplify the value system implicit in these concepts.

One of the flexible and easy to implement models are related to the European Quality Award model and developed by the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM). The major input for quality improvement in this model is the philosophy of Total Quality Management and the dynamics of the PDCA cycle (Plan-Do-Check-Act). Performance indicators like: leadership, management and customer satisfaction is some of the criteria in this model. The EFQM model is not a standard, but a framework, which integrates ISO 9000 and TQM. The EFQM model was launched in 1991 and has been proven to be a valuable management tool and has been used in thousands of organizations world - wide. This EFQM model is a non-prescriptive framework that recognizes that there are many approaches to achieving sustainable organizational excellence.

Common for all these systems is the requirement for implementing: there is a commitment of the management of the organisation. There should be a quality manager who can get support of the professionals in the organisation. It is the responsibility of the quality manager that the goal to be implemented system is clear for all the involved persons of the organisation, they should come a clear implementation plan, who is responsible for what activity, how the reporting activities and communication will be arranged.

Education has to be about excellence. If it is not about quality, then all our effort, all our expenditure will have been for nothing because we will not only have lighted the lives of our students, but damaged our ability to compete and survive in a world which does not owe us a living. We cannot have a world-class economy and a world-class living standard without a world-class workforce. And we cannot have a world-class workforce, without world-class education.

In order to be long lasting and credible, it is considered that any higher education institution must:

- assure the satisfaction of certain minimal standards for every one of its activities;
- provide information about the quality and the standards of performance for its activities;
- continually improve the quality of all its activities, by promoting the new ideas and their adaptation to its own institutional profile;
- assure a total transparence.

The basic objective of such a unitary system must be to maintain and improve the quality of the educational process in the Romanian higher education system, in the interest both of the internal beneficiaries and of those external to the universities. The accomplishment of this objective entails recognition and acceptance of qualitative standards by the higher education institutions (both at the individual and institutional levels) determined in last instance by high professional performances imposed to the members of an academic community. The process of quality assurance must not be realized only in view of receiving the formal recognition necessary for the institution's existence (for instance, currently at the level of minimal criteria this aspect is realized by the N.C.A.E.A.), but must be accomplished in view of improving the professionalism[6]. If until recently most of the higher education institutions served the local interests and most of the funding was received from the budget, currently all this changed because of the necessity for the development and the formation of a global education from the viewpoint of the market economy.

At the same time the emergence of constraints such as the decrease of the funding from the

state's budget for the universities both in the East and in the West, with the obligation for the institution of searching other financial sources and the improvement of the qualitative level of the education and formation by promoting the concept of quality assurance, determined a new approach of the educational system. In the context of the higher education reform in Romania, the decrease of the specializations' diffusion, the priorities' shaping, the reduction of the exaggerated costs and the encouragement of quality-oriented performances are genuine correctives in the school-society relation which will gain support and will determine new structural, content- and method-based, and management solutions. Significant personalities in the field of quality (Joseph M. Juran, Edwards W. Deming, Philip B. Crosby) have shown that the quality system implemented in industrial and business domains can be successfully implemented in higher education with positive effects concerning both the reduction of the costs and the growing clients' satisfaction[6].

The quality of the educational act includes specific dimensions:

- a. The educational software;
- b. The educational hardware;
- c. The educational manware

Generally we can claim that the educational act is considered a service of quality that the higher education institution offers to the society. The result of the service is the formation of the future specialist in his double capacity of beneficiary of the results of his own formation, and of asset of the society, which benefits from the quality of his work[1]. Competition, in a market economy system in which the university transforms itself into a business, determines the necessity for the development of a system that would allow for the quality assurance of the entire educational process. Universities may be considered as cybernetic systems with multidimensional interdependencies between input and output quantities, realized through an extensive specific process of transformation. For the continual consolidation and improvement of the institution's reputation and performance as provider of quality products, it is essential that each person will adhere to the institution's quality policy and procedures and that the educational system be oriented towards excellence and quality such that it will be capable of gaining long term benefits. An active participation and thorough engagement is needed, beginning with the top of the organization's hierarchy.

The implementation of the quality assurance system in Romanian higher education becomes an objective and urgent necessity in view of assuring the compatibility with the higher education trends in developed countries, creating the basis for cooperation with these in the fields of education and scientific research, as well as for the realization of the first fundamental step towards international integration.

4. REFERENCES:

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