

A QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM FOR POST-GRADUATE EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents the experience of a Romanian center for continuing education and training in designing and implementing a quality assurance system.

A conceptual framework was designed as a foundation for a personalized approach of a quality assurance system, having in view the particularities of quality in higher education.

Based on that it was developed the quality assurance system comprising the following core elements: management statement, management responsibilities, management system, evaluating results. Each of these elements it was further developed and their key issues are briefly presented.

1. QUALITY ASSUMPTIONS UNDERPINNING THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE QUALITY MANUAL

The Romanian academic environment revealed in the last few years an ever greater concern for quality in education mainly generated, within the framework of the continuous changes from the economic and social environment, by:

- the general interest for better public services
- the higher competition on the educational market, in terms of attracting both material resources as well as students
- the everlasting tension between quality and efficiency.

Although education will never be a real "free market" the action of the contemporary market forces will determine a certain behavior, dominated by the competition for resources and students, competition in which quality plays a major role.

A central issue of the quality debates within the educational context is related to the possibility of transferring the quality related concepts from the production sector to the public sector. Productive organizations have different means of financing, different objectives and they relate to a different external environment.

An example of such a debate is the reaction of many people and institutions to the idea that students can be seen as "clients", an idea which influences a lot the interpretation of quality in higher education. But beyond these philosophical debates and the difficulties related to translating certain techniques and practices from the production sector to education, there are some proofs of such transfers. One example is related to the marketing techniques used for

attracting students, as well as for attracting funds necessary for certain activities. Also, related to the students it was developed the concept of “market share” in terms of potential applicants. And within the competitive markets quality is seen as a vital tool for those organizations which want to keep their market share and maintain their competitive advantage.

Although subjective factors such as “reputation” or “image” are important, organizations of any kind are searching more and more objective means to demonstrate their superiority, in terms of quality, over their competitors. In this view some quality management systems, based on TQM approaches or on ISO standards, have gained significant popularity. The interest for such systems is increasingly transferring from the production sector to the public sector, especially to education and health care systems.

But before designing specific quality management systems significant difficulties appear in relation to the definition of quality in higher education.

The general aim of the higher education is to support economic and social development through the production of graduates satisfying the needs of the labor force market from all the sectors of the economy and through developing ever increasing contribution to the knowledge by means of research.

Evaluating the quality of research is very difficult, taking into account that the research results can vary from technological transfers and marketable products to pure fundamental research. But evaluating the quality of the other activity is even more difficult and complex. However, before evaluating quality one must define quality.

Quality, like “freedom” or “justice”, is a concept very difficult to define due to the high degree of relativity of these concepts. Almost every person has an instinctive understanding of the quality concept but the perceptions are certainly different. The term “quality” has an intrinsic value connotation, being subjectively associated with something very good. For that reason it is often used to justify or validate an activity, without paying too much attention to the real meaning of the concept.

Considering the vast attempts to define this concept, some of these going to extreme opinions, it must be emphasized the relativity of this concept. Different beneficiaries of the higher education have different priorities and thus they focus on different issues.

Hence, since quality is not a unitary concept, maybe it would be more appropriate to define it in terms of “qualities” accepting the fact that a university can achieve a high quality level for certain activities and a lower level for others.

Ultimately it can be argued that quality is a philosophical concept. The existing various definitions reflect various perceptions, either of individuals or social entities, and ultimately one must accept the fact that there is not one best definition of quality that excludes all the others. Even if we choose one definition, its interpretation will be based on our own values and priorities.

2. OUTLINE OF THE QUALITY MANUAL

The quality manual, briefly presented in this paper, was developed by a team of academics from the “Gh. Asachi” Technical University of Iasi, Romania, within the framework of a Tempus – PHARE project with the support of three European partner universities: The University of Derby, UK – School of Management, University of Savoie, FR and \The Technical University of Crete, GR.

The structure of the Manual, extensively discussed with the Western European partners and based on a benchmarking approach against the best practices identified at European level, is presented below.

2.1. Quality Manual - Introduction

- Declaration of the General Manager
- Scope and application
 - Scope: this Quality Assurance Manual is the document through which The Graduate School of Management of the Center for Continuing Education and Training, at the “Gh. Asachi Technical University of Iasi, defines and describes the QA policies, objectives and activities and ensures that these initiatives are understood, applied and developed within an institutional framework
 - Application: this Manual is for internal use only; It applies to all the activities directed towards accomplishing the mission of The Graduate School of Management (GSM - CETEX)
- Terminology – key terms are presented in table 1; other specific terms were presented in the annexes

TABLE 1. KEY TERMS OF THE QUALITY MANUAL OF GSM – CETEX

Terms	Definition adopted for the QA Manual
PRODUCT	The added value obtained by the students at the end of the program of study
PROCESS	The succession of necessary actions in order to obtain the added value at the level required by the student
CLIENTS	<i>Direct clients</i> – the students enrolled in the programs of GSM – CETEX <i>Indirect clients</i> – Companies, organizations, governmental institutions, local community, society in general
SUPPLIERS	Internal: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Main – academic staff • Secondary – support services; administrative services External: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • External partners; international educational projects • Support resources and logistics
MAINTENANCE	Current contacts in order to maintain the established parameters of the educational processes
CONTROL	Evaluation processes for activities and results

- Presentation of the organization:
 - GSM is the main component of CETEX which in turn is an independent, self-sustained and self-financed department of the “Gh. Asachi” Technical University of Iasi; the main activity of GSM is organization of graduate programs of study in Management and Business Administration and related fields, based on a modular structure and on the transferable credit system

- The mission of GSM is to develop the managerial capabilities necessary to build a new generation of managers by means of promotion continuing education in Management and related fields
- The overall functioning of GSM is based on the following core issues with a view to the development of the Romanian higher education as a key factor for creating a competitive Romanian economy within the global context of the third millennium:
 - Supporting the development of graduate education, as an integral part of the Romanian higher education system, by means of promoting high quality standards for the education process
 - Smoothing the connections between education, the business community and local community with twofold benefits as follows:
 - Improving the industrial activities through improved and stronger links with the latest academic developments in the field
 - Improving the quality of education by diminishing its scholastic nature and promoting the applicative and pragmatic approaches
 - Aligning the Romanian higher education to the Western European and North American standards
 - Developing the managerial capabilities absolutely necessary for governing the Romanian transition economy in order to contribute to the creation of the new post-industrialist / information society

2.2. Quality Manual – Management Responsibility

- Quality Assurance policies and objectives
 - Policies:
 - GSM – CETEX considers as fundamentals of quality in education the learning processes adequately sustained by the support processes
 - Consequently, quality assurance encompasses all the mechanisms and organizational procedures which certify at organizational level the conditions for maintenance and continuous improvement of academic standards (in teaching and learning)
 - Quality control refers to the managerial procedures through which the standards for academic activities are verified and guaranteed
 - In this view:
 - Quality assurance is a clear and systematic endeavor, involving quality control and a common effort for quality improvement from all the participants in the educational process
 - Each participant to the educational process has a significant contribution to quality assurance
 - Management's role is to ensure an effective and efficient functioning of all systems involved and has the primary responsibility for quality control
 - All the academic staff, regardless of their status or experience, are accountable for the quality of their work
 - Academic managers have the managerial responsibility for planning, financing and controlling the academic quality

- The QA system of GSM promotes a culture of continuous improvement
 - The academic quality and the quality of the teaching and learning processes are best observed, supported and evaluated where they take place
 - Both the QA system and quality control mechanisms must reflect the concern for process quality which underpins the quality of results
- QA objectives and strategic directions
- Excellence – continuous improvement of services provided to clients
 - Integration – developing strong connections between education, business community and local community with the purpose of meeting and exceeding the expressed clients needs
 - Institutional development – developing the infrastructure and university practices with a view to ensuring financial independence and promoting the competitive advantage in all activities
 - Internationalization – gaining a solid international reputation and aligning to the international system of values with a view to the international recognition of the program’s diplomas
- Organization – the organizational chart of GSM – CETEX (figure 1.)

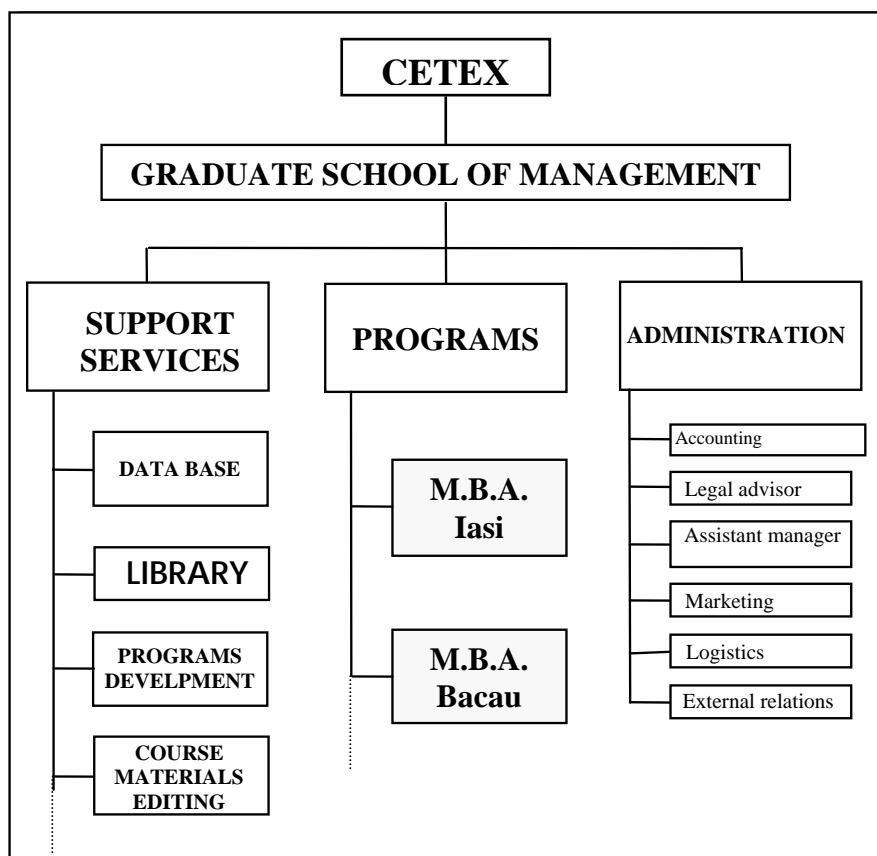


FIGURE 1. ORGANIZATIONAL CHART OF GSM – CETEX

- General organization: provides information about the structure of the academic activities, in terms of time frame and financing, about the governing

body of GSM – CETEX and about the relationships with other university structures

- Responsibility, authority and activities: are described for the main positions
- Quality Assurance Committee. Management review

2.3. Quality Manual – Quality Management System

- Quality System – the processes within the QA system are presented in figure 2
Quality Assurance is defined as the collective process through which GSM, in its role as academic community, ensures that the standards of its diplomas and the quality of the educational process are maintained at the pre-established standards

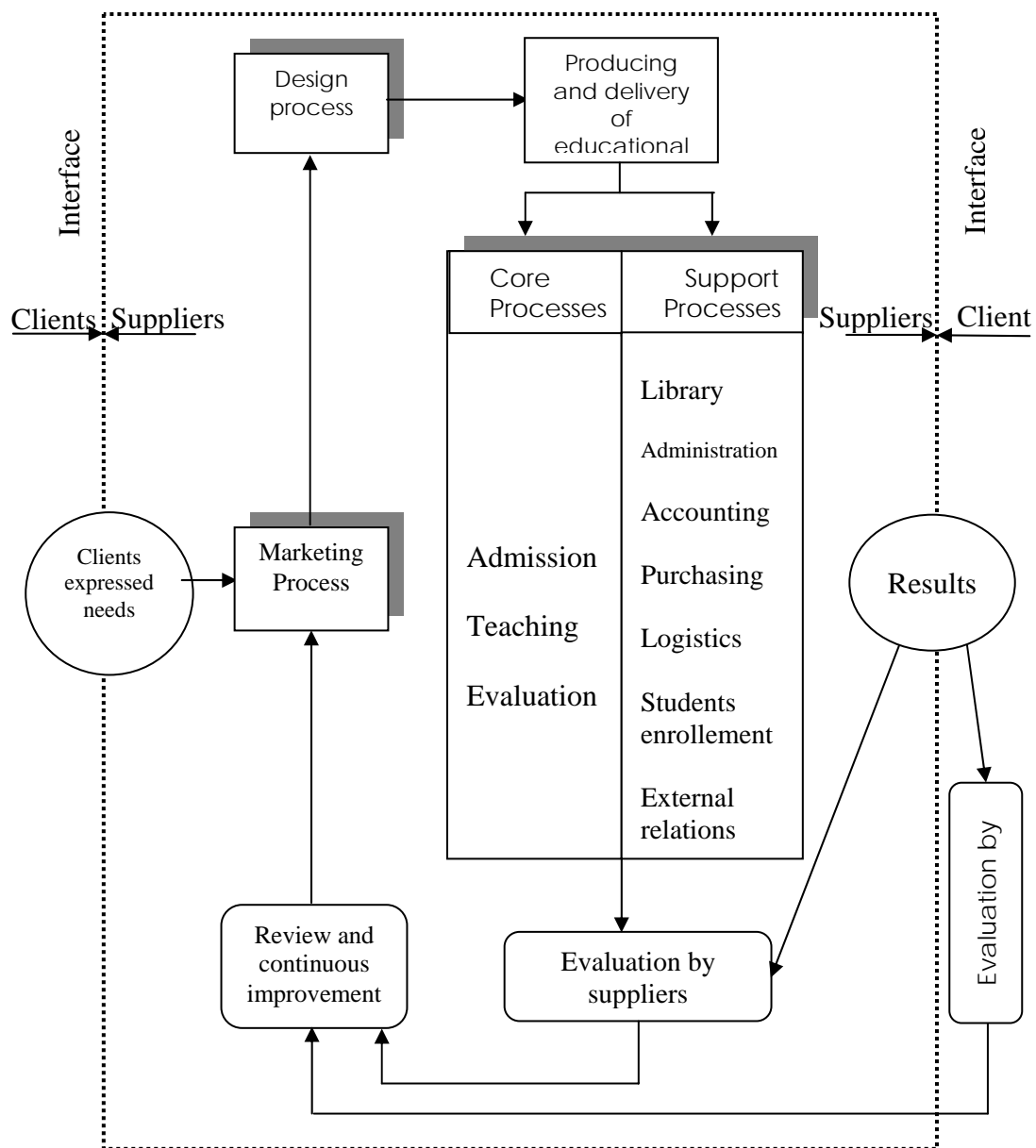


FIGURE 2. PROCESSES WITHIN THE QA SYSTEM

Through its QA endeavor GSM is capable to assure itself as a organization and also all the external stakeholders that:

- Its diplomas are at the standard level defined by its own regulations for educational programs
- The objectives of its courses are adequate in terms of the expressed needs of the clients
- The means choused and the resources available for achieving its objectives are adequate
- Its academic activity complies with the academic and professional standards in terms of the academic national and international community
- Is sustaining a continuous effort for improving the quality and the standards of its academic activity

The QA system of GSM stipulates specific regulations for quality control. Quality control defined by all the processes through GSM is assuring that:

- The means choused for achieving the objectives are actually implemented
- The means choused for achieving the objectives are both effective and efficient

- Requirements of the Quality System

- Introduction
- Components
- Areas of responsibility
- Marketing
- Students contracts
- Equal opportunities
- Course design, planning and development
- Responsibility for activities
- Curricula evaluation and modification
- Documentation approval and publication
- Documentation review
- Purchasing

- Requirements of control processes

- Identification and traceability
- Selection of human resources
- Courses scheduling, review and teaching approaches
- Support services for students

2.4. Quality Manual – Results Evaluation

- Evaluation and testing systems
 - Inputs testing and evaluation (of clients / students and materials resources)
 - Process testing and evaluation
 - Final testing and evaluation
 - Recording the documents related to evaluation and testing
- Consistency of evaluation and testing methods
 - Clients
 - Materials resources
- Control of non-conformities

- General rules
- Students performance
- Educational processes and corresponding support processes
- Materials and equipments directly used in educational processes
- Corrective and preventive actions
 - General rules
 - Responsibilities
 - Actions
- Internal evaluation
 - Scheduling
 - Responsibilities for corrective actions
 - Evaluation reports

3. CONCLUSIONS

The Quality Manual is the document which describes and explains how the organization applies its quality policies. It could be referred to as a management manual since it explains the operating mode of the management systems of organization in order to achieve its aim and objectives. It describes what needs to be done and also indicates where can be found, in due time, the detailed operating procedures.

Generally, the quality manual presents in a succinct, well organized and accessible manner the general policies, procedures and practices of an organization.

Despite the large amount of literature available in the field there is no one best standard format for developing such a document, since it take into account the specific policies and procedures of the systems to which it refers.

Consequently, the model presented in this paper describes a customized approach to developing a quality manual for an educational institution and thus the document developed by GSM – CETEX reflects its “spirit”.

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