

ASSESSING QUALITY AND TOTAL QUALITY IN ECONOMIC HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract: Nowadays, there are countries, systems and cultures where the issue of quality management and all the items implied are firmly on the agenda for higher education institutions. Whether a result of a growing climate of increasing accountability or an expansion in the size and diversity of student populations, both quality assurance and quality enhancement are now considered essential components of any quality management programme.

Key words: higher education, quality management, total quality management

Higher education for the masses and a growing climate of increasing accountability (Oldfield and Baron, 1998; Eriksen, 1995) are frequently cited as the rationale for a greater emphasis on quality. Accordingly there has been a good deal of research into the subject of quality in higher education, with well-recognized contributions from the UK, Australia, Norway, and the USA, amongst others. Among the particular environmental forces imposing the need for effective quality management, were underlined:

- a growing climate of increasing accountability;
- an expansion in the size of student populations;
- an increasingly diverse student population as a result of widening participation initiatives and targeting international markets;
- diminishing resources by which to deliver programmes of study;
- greater expectations of students as paying customers;
- more flexible educational provision at both undergraduate and postgraduate level;
- an increase in collaborative provision between institutions.

Some of these forces demand that institutions have quality assurance procedures that are both rigorous and transparent to external stakeholders. Others however, clearly require that quality enhancement initiatives are firmly embedded into any quality management programme, and that continual efforts are made to enhance the quality of provision. As Avdjieva and Wilson (2002) suggest, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as organisations of learning are now required to become learning organizations, where internal stakeholders also interpret and assess the quality of higher education provision. As a result, at the European level many institutions have worked towards the adoption of total quality management (TQM) practices in order to achieve these goals. However, critics of this approach suggest that a wholesale adoption of TQM without adaptation to reflect the particular characteristic of higher education is unacceptable (see for instance Yorke, 1994). It has even been purported that the practice of TQM in higher education is deteriorating into managerialism because of the disparity between TQM techniques and

educational processes, as well as the lack of shared vision within institutions or educational fields (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2003). Despite the progress that has been made through research and debate, there is still no universal consensus on how best to manage quality within higher education. This paper therefore seeks to evaluate current approaches used to assess quality within higher education. It begins with a brief review of relevant literature on quality management in higher education to develop a framework for analysis afterwards six key criteria for analysis being identified and proposed.

Quality and total quality in higher education

Defining quality in higher education has proved to be a challenging task. Cheng and Tam (1997) suggest that ‘education quality is a rather vague and controversial concept’ and Pounder (1999) argues that quality is a ‘notoriously ambiguous term’. At the broadest level, education quality can be viewed as a set of elements that constitute the input, process and output of the education system, and provides services that completely satisfy both internal and external strategic constituencies by meeting their explicit and implicit expectations (Cheng and Tam, 1997). If higher education is viewed as a system, then any quality management programme must therefore assess inputs, process and outputs. Cheng and Tam (1997) also identify both internal and external stakeholders in the quality management process. Current students and front line staff are internal constituents whereas employers, government bodies, institutional management, prospective students, and professional bodies are external. These stakeholders might have disparate definitions of quality as well as different preferences for how quality is assessed. While Hughes (1988) suggests quality indicators may differ for internal and external stakeholders, Cheng and Tam (1997) further argue that expectations of the different constituencies may be not only different but contradictory. According to Cullen, Joyce, Hassall, and Broadbent (2003) the challenge is to produce a performance evaluation framework that permits the equal expression of legitimate voices, though they may conflict or compete in some ways.

Harvey and Knight (1996) suggest that quality can be broken down into five different but related dimensions: quality as exceptional (e.g. high standards), quality as consistency (e.g. zero defects), quality as fitness for purpose (fitting customer specifications), quality as value for money, and quality as transformative (an ongoing process that includes empowerment and enhancement of the customer satisfaction). While the authors advise that quality as transformative incorporates the other dimensions to some extent, it can also be argued that different stakeholders are likely to prioritize the importance of these different dimensions of quality according to their motivations and interest (Owlia and Aspinwall, 1996). In some quality initiatives therefore, there may be a preference for the monitoring of some quality dimensions at the expense of others. What is apparent from this discussion is that the concept of quality in higher education is complex and dependent upon different stakeholder perspectives. While Pounder (1999) suggests that we should be looking for another more appropriate concept than quality to benchmark performance in higher education, in reality quality remains the key focus within higher education provision and continues to be assessed in a number of different ways by different stakeholders.

Traditionally external stakeholders have been associated with quality assurance procedures. Quality assurance refers to the 'planned and systematic actions [deemed] as necessary to provide adequate confidence that a product or service will satisfy given requirements for quality' (Borahan and Ziarati, 2002). For higher education institutions this requires them to demonstrate responsible actions in their professional practices, be accountable for public funds received and demonstrate the results they achieve with the available resources (Jackson, 1998). Elton (1992) refers to these as the quality 'A's: Accountability, Audit, and Assessment' and suggests these are concerned with the control of quality and the people who control quality. The particular mechanisms for assurance are usually imposed by external bodies, such as university management and most commonly include accreditation, external examiners and quality audits (McKay and Kember, 1999). As a control tool therefore, the focus is predominantly on the extent to which the procedures and conditions that are perceived to result in appropriate levels of quality are followed within institutions or programmes and are effective in meeting their purpose (Jackson, 1996).

Prioritized dimensions of quality (as above, Harvey and Knight, 1996) therefore include quality as consistency, quality as fitness for purpose, and quality as value for money. As these external stakeholders also assure that a minimum threshold of quality is maintained, quality as exceptional is also a relevant dimension. To this extent, external quality assurance mechanisms have a pertinent role to play in quality assessment practices for a number of stakeholders. However, the processes adopted are by nature summative providing only a snapshot of 'quality' and therefore McKay and Kember (1999) argue that quality control measures in isolation may have limited impact if not accompanied by appropriate educational development initiatives. In addition, the legitimacy of these approaches for quality enhancement purposes has been questioned (see for instance Roffe, 1998) as the use of external change agents does not imbed quality into the culture of programmes. Furthermore, there may be a tendency towards 'gaming the system' (Bradach, 1998) where what gets measured gets done or fixed in the short term in order to meet assessment targets. Internal stakeholders, on the other hand, are more likely to be concerned with quality as transformative (as above, Harvey and Knight, 1996) where it is an ongoing process that includes empowerment and enhancement of customer satisfaction. The emphasis for these stakeholders is therefore not only on quality assurance, but additionally on quality enhancement which aims for an overall increase in the actual quality of teaching and learning often through more innovative practices (McKay and Kember, 1999). Elton (1992) suggests that this approach focuses on the quality 'E's: Empowerment, Enthusiasm, Expertise, and Excellence'. McKay and Kember (1999) report that initiatives for quality enhancement tend to be less clearly defined and are often more diverse than quality assurance initiatives. Mechanisms adopted by internal stakeholders are likely to include self-evaluation practices and student surveys. As students are viewed as an integral part of the learning process (Wiklund et al., 2003) this approach tends to be more formative in nature and therefore more likely to lead to continual quality improvement efforts. The involvement of internal stakeholders is also more likely to result in a culture of quality being embedded within programmes. However, these measures are representative of a comparatively limited number of stakeholders and where self-

evaluation practices are employed there can be a tendency to paint a rosy picture especially when linked to appraisal or tenure decisions.

The actual measurement of quality is also approached differently by various stakeholders. While some prefer to utilize quantitative data to produce quantitative ratings, others prefer to adopt a qualitative approach. There are, of course, pros and cons to both approaches and benefits to be gained from either. While quantitative ratings facilitate performance comparability especially on a longitudinal basis, they generally fail to provide any clear explanation as to why certain ratings are given. As such they may be more suitable for quality assurance initiatives. Qualitative data, on the other hand, often provides richer data (Powell, Hunt, and Irving, 1997), which can more readily inform decision making for quality enhancement purposes. However, it may prove less beneficial when benchmarking performance. A quality management programme that utilizes a mixture of both types of data would seem most appropriate for both quality assurance and enhancement purposes (Brookes, 2003).

Colling and Harvey (1995) argue that external scrutiny should adopt an approach that ensures accountability, enhances quality, is practical, is efficient, is effective and offers a degree of autonomy. They also suggest that quality enhancement requires that external scrutiny is linked into a process of continual quality improvement. For this to be achieved, external scrutiny must therefore be reviewed and acted upon within internal quality enhancement processes. O'Neil (1997) purports that no amount of external exhortation can compensate for local ownership and individual responsibility in a change process. Jackson (1997) argues that the demands of trying to fulfill both internal and external expectations for accountability are not always consistent with expectations of development, improvement and innovation.

There have been various attempts to utilize the quality dimensions of Gronroos, Garvin and Parasuramman (see for instance Owlia and Aspinwall, 1996) and the balanced scorecard (Cullen et al., 2003) to develop quality assessment models for higher education. However, the tool most frequently drawn upon (see for example Motwani and Kumar, 1997; Eriksen, 1995), is that of Total Quality Management (TQM), defined as:

‘A management approach of an organization, centred on quality, based on the participation of all its members and aiming at long run success through customer satisfaction and benefits to all members of the organization and to society.’ (ISO 8402 in Wiklund et al., 2003)

The rationale for adoption is that TQM has the potential to encompass the quality perspectives of both external and internal stakeholders in an integrated manner, and thereby enable a comprehensive approach to quality management that will assure quality as well as facilitate change and innovation. However, there have been a number of limitations identified in the wholesale adoption of TQM to higher education. Roffe (1998) suggests that while there are a small number of quality indicators in industry, these are more numerous and complex in higher education and therefore more difficult to assess. Similarly Yorke (1994) advises that accountability relationships are more complicated, and Roffe (1998) indicates that while the accountability emphasis of TQM in industry is on a team, this tends to lie with individuals in higher education. Harvey (1995) further argues that the emphasis of quality in industry lies predominantly with the customer whereas in

higher education there is a continued debate regarding who the customer actually is. As a result of this debate, Hewitt and Clayton (1999) recommend that a model of educational quality that is different from, but capable of being related to, commercial models is beginning to emerge, however, it is not yet complete. This brief literature review suggests there is as yet, no definitive model to evaluate quality within higher education, however there do appear to be certain key constituents of an analytical quality framework to assess current quality management practice within higher education. For the purposes of this analysis these have been identified as:

- the degree to which inputs, processes and outputs are assessed;
- the degree to which different stakeholder perspectives are taken into account;
- the degree to which the different quality dimensions are considered;
- the extent of formative versus summative assessment inherent in quality assessment practices;
- the extent of quantitative versus qualitative assessment inherent in quality assessment practices;
- the balance of quality assurance versus quality enhancement practices, and the extent to which these processes are interlinked.

From the above literature review it can be observed that quality management in education is a rather complex topic. What makes it such is the number of the parties involved as well as the intensity of changes in modern life.

What is positive about the Romanian educational system is the ISO 9001:2000 certification of some universities, compliance with European standards and guidelines, and its relative accessibility due to lower tuition costs compared to other European countries.

The fact that there is no Romanian university in the top rankings of European higher schools is a serious signal for corrective actions. In the highly competitive knowledge sphere only the fittest, best prepared and adaptable universities will survive.

If educators apply TQM principles they would plan more accurately, perform better, estimate their achievements and take all necessary actions in order to prosper and stay focused on excellence.

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