From Quality Management to Excellence in Higher Education Institutions

by
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Abstract. Quality management specific principles are globally adopted by organizations and institutions deploying various activities and belonging to all domains as they prove the permanent focus on clients’ requirements and needs, continuous improvement and trust. The sector of higher education makes no exception to it. Still, around the world critics rise in connection to the real benefits the quality management system brings to universities and higher education processes. Such critics refer to bureaucracy, strict control and standardization, as from the teaching point of view, these are not adding value aspects. Due to the fact that there are still ongoing efforts related to the harmonization of education, and there is a keen competition between the numerous universities across the world, acting globally, various criteria for assessing the quality have been proposed. Yet, a unique methodology for assessing the quality of higher education is not available. The present paper aims to bring in discussion the various facets of educational quality, leading towards excellence of higher education institutions.

Key words: quality management, higher education, standards, constrains
JEL classification: I23, L15

1 Introduction

International Standards Organization has created a series of standards addressing the important issue of organizational quality. Among these, the ISO 9000 series is the most popular and its continuous growth is reflected in the number of certificated organizations from all economic sectors. Thus, as the latest reports available show, in 2013 there have been counted 1129446 official certifications, an increase with 3% compared to the number registered in 2012 (ISO, 2014).

One explanation may be related to the fact that it encompasses general principles leading to quality management in all types of organizations and domains. In this series, ISO 9000:2005 is the international standard defining the special terms used for implementing quality management systems; here quality is defined as the “ability of a set of inherent characteristics of a product, system, or process to fulfil requirements of customers and other interested parties.” (ISO 9000:2005).

Starting from the structure and principles stated in ISO 9000 series, specific quality management series have been developed for the particularities and constrains of various industries (food, automotive, aeronautical etc.)

Similarly, as a response to the great number of educational systems developed across the world and to the various internal quality standards developed and used by training and education providers, International Standards Organization has created the quality framework ISO/IEC 19796 in learning, education and training sector. Quality in higher education is a matter of markets and “customers” specific requirements, the educational context and the culture playing an important role in perceiving the value and the benefits of the educational services.

Thus research show that across nations and cultures the overall higher education quality is seen as a cumulus of various variables. However, the common ones, constantly appearing in the construct of quality, are those related to the transfer of information and skills which has to be in accordance with the promised levels in the advertising campaigns.

(Arambewela and Hall, 2006 )

The issues of clarity, comparability and responsibility need to be taken into account...
when discussing about the quality of the university education. The clarity is required because the requirements and questions of the stakeholders have to be consistent with the designed solutions and answers given by university management pursuing quality. Comparability is the basis of continuous improvement, as the higher education institutions compete on a market and they compare one with another in terms of added value, skills and know-how transferred to their students, prices, integration in the labor market and other facilities. In the same time, the university targeting the quality in the offered education should always compare its current performances with the past ones and with the educational standards. Responsibility is required because the educational standards that set a certain acknowledged level of quality have to be carefully designed and implemented, taking into consideration the needs of society. (Brink, 2010).

2 The perception of quality in education

Research about how quality is perceived by the academic stuff reveals that, while “quality” is pursued in the research and teaching processes, the bureaucratic administrative activities associated to the quality management system implemented in the higher education institutions are negatively perceived. Moreover, the bureaucratic procedures, required by the management, may threaten the very quality of the research and teaching due to their time consuming specificity (Anderson Gina, 2006).

Other research based on the opinions of teaching staff belonging to higher education institutions winner of teaching Excellence Awards from United Kingdom reveals that the concept of quality is associated to transforming learning. On the other hand, the same research shows that students taking part in the courses link the quality of education with the obtained results and also with the manner of teaching, rather than with the experience of transformative learning. The manner of teaching is, at its turn, influenced by several factors among which: a wide knowledge of the matter, the academic approach, good communication skills, the existence and the efficiency of the feedback system, various learning opportunities for the students and exchange experience. (Cheng, 2011)

2.1 Quality variables in higher education

Higher education institutions are not just simple places where professors and students are meeting for making possible the know-how transfer. Indeed this is ultimate goal of a higher education institution: train students for the necessities of the market and transfer the latest know how to them. However, in order to achieve this, a synergies of other processes is required and, as Tan et al (2010) researched, students’ evaluations regarding learning quality services affect the know-how transfer processes. The study thus confirms that quality management, quality assurance and trust are the most important dimensions when evaluating the quality of educational services, as they influence positively the knowledge transfer from professor to students. Other studies reveal that the issue of quality has to be regarded in the context of global policies aiming the increase in the number of people attending higher education programs. As such, continuous improvement of quality management systems and maintaining highly educational standards have to be aimed. Clear criteria and procedures must be defined and applied, taking into account not only the students satisfaction, but also the access to educational programs, students’ participation and involvement, as well as students’ retention. These criteria should be set as such so that the academic high standards and the quality may also be kept. (Shah et al, 2011)

External objective evaluation of higher education management best practices, reveal that the centralized university with management showing a strong leadership and clear
managerial strategies, capacity to react to changes, the university with a powerful institutional culture and identity, promoting its competitiveness globally. These criteria should take into consideration aspects such as university management, financing schemes, strategies for development and relationships with stakeholders and society, research, international cooperation, teaching processes, quality culture, facilities and resources as well as the admission of students’ procedures (Rosa et al, 2011).

2.2 The influence of online learning over overall perceived quality

As today’s society relies largely on the internet and ITC applications (Dina and Sabou, 2012.), it is natural that universities adapt their curricula to the demands of students for a flexible, mobile, digital education. Nevertheless, e-learning based study programs must also be evaluated from the point of view of the offered quality, as well as the involved specific processes. The efficacy of those is influenced by the organizational academic status of the online courses, the designed structure as well as by the teaching staff and the technological facilities for learning. Despite the fact that online programs are based on similar curricula with campus based programs, the university quality management system has to be designed with focus on the specific processes happening in the two environments of learning (Jara and Mellar, 2009).

3 Pursuing the excellence in higher education

In its essence, the quality management aims to control the activities within organization in order to reach the set objectives and satisfy customer requirements, as well as to continuously improve the system (ISO 9001:2008). As some research indicate, the quality management activities designed to improve the overall quality are positively regarded by the personnel, while the control related activities are negatively perceived. Also, research shows that management activities influence directly the activities that aim quality improvement; overall quality management has a benefic effect upon educational services in higher education institutions. (Kleijnen et al, 2011)

3.1 Benchmarking for continuous improvement

Because quality is expressed through the degree of satisfying customer requirements (ISO 9000:2005), benchmarking is one of the key instruments universities need to apply in order to keep the pace with the dynamics of a continuously improving market. This instrument may be applied inside university, throughout departments in order to grasp the best practices and the most efficient common processes (internal benchmarking). Comparing the organizational academic structure and skills, the procedures, the academic programs and the curricula with those belonging to other higher education institutions competing in the market (competitive benchmarking) gives the premises for achieving global excellence (Ilie et al, 2011). The results of conducting cross-evaluating benchmarking analyses are essential for identifying improvement opportunities of the academic curricula, as well as of the university administrative specific processes. (Kettunen, 2010)

3.2 Lean Six Sigma for neat educational processes

The processes within universities that highly impact the perception of quality may be split in two categories: teaching and learning related processes and administrative related processes. The processes of teaching may be excellent from the point of view of the training and the skills of the professors involved. However, these are not sufficient, as they need the appropriate infrastructure and support for learning (informative materials, rooms, libraries, ITC devices and software, practical learning internships, facilities within universities etc.). Both teaching and learning - their management within university, along with the general management processes (comprising here the
departments in charge with stakeholders’ relationship management, programs and curricula accreditation management, financial management, marketing, supply and logistics etc.) need administrative processes. From this point of view, Lean Six Sigma may be used as an excellence oriented approach intended to enhance the quality of higher education systems (Boddy et al., 2010). By rethinking both the administrative and teaching-learning processes there could be obtained a higher satisfaction of the professors, of the students and of stakeholders in general, while reducing the wastes of time, resources – be them human or material. The overall objective of using a Lean Six Sigma approach is to design in such a manner the administrative and educational processes, so that they may be measured, optimized from the point of view of the used resources, with minimum or zero waste. These improvements would be related to quality objectives such as the decrease of drop-out rate, the higher number of students that get employed in the studied field in the first year after graduation, the decreased time academic staff and students need to spend for various bureaucratic tasks etc.

3.3 Excellence in education: Baldrige Model

The excellence models are built around a logical flow: through leadership, the policy and strategies are set; these are put into practice by university both teaching and administrative personnel, with appropriate resources, and processes. The purpose is to obtain the set results and to satisfy the customers (students and society as the ultimate beneficiary) There are several excellence models, their aim being the maximization of the efficiency and effectiveness of universities resources, so that students receive the assumed know-how and skills. As it can be seen in figure 1, there are presented the core issues to be measured and improved in education institutions, according to Baldrige excellence model.

Reports indicate that students belonging to institutions that fulfill the core values of excellence, obtain better learning results and skills (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2015). As a matter of fact the results – and especially students’ outcomes, are the most important in assessing the excellence of an educational services provider (table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories and Items</th>
<th>No. of points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Leadership</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Senior Leadership</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Governance and Societal Responsibilities</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Strategic Planning</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Strategy Development</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Strategy Implementation</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Customer Focus</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Voice of the Customer</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Customer Engagement</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 (cont.)
The successful fulfillment of the quality criteria and the pursuit for excellence strongly depends on several essential integrated factors, such as leadership, strategic planning, customer and market focus, measurement, analysis and knowledge management, academic and administrative staff focus, process management, business results.

4 Conclusions

Quality, understood as conformity with customers’ necessities and expectations, is universally sought by organizations belonging to the various areas of socio-economic activity. The educational sector makes no exception from it and, despite the fact that there are still differences in the higher education systems and in the way nations acknowledge the quality of the education, there is an ongoing effort towards a global harmonization. To this purpose, higher education institutions have implemented various quality standards, the most popular being ISO 9001. Besides the obvious advantages brought by a quality management system such as customer satisfaction and continuous improvement in pace with the market, there have been signaled and negative aspects. The critics aroused by the implementation of ISO 9001 in universities refer to bureaucracy and, in consequence, to the diminished time dedicated to teaching and research. Understanding quality in higher education requires taking into account a series of factors and perspectives: professors, students, society, administrative staff, as only a unified vision will bring excellence. In the pursuit for excellence, universities may use a series of instruments and tools, such as Benchmarking, Lean Six Sigma and the objective assessing excellence models. Unlike the ISO 9001 quality management system standard which addresses mainly the issue of efficacy, these instruments focused on concrete results help universities to obtain quality within efficiency - excellence.

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Baldrige%20Education%20Criteria%202013%20-%202014.pdf on 22 February 2015


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