

CONCEPTUAL MODEL FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Annotation. Nowadays higher education and its institutions get lots of attention experience considerable pressure for improvement of their performance. The situation is not so simple as it may look from the first glance, as there are various and different efforts to achieve quality and the lack of agreed model for quality assurance system does not help to find a good solution. The aim of this paper is to present a general view and a brief literature review of the main aspects related to quality assurance in higher education and present a common framework for quality assurance at higher education institution. The introduce conceptual quality assurance model in this research can be a good starting point to address the service, education and implementation aspects synergistically.

Keywords: higher education; quality assurance; quality management; processes.

INTRODUCTION

Systematic and comprehensive quality management approaches have been placed on the contemporary agenda in higher education and now form an integral part of institutions' attempts to become more efficient, effective and client oriented (Sahney et al., 2010; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2002). Furthermore, great emphasis of quality in teaching and learning forms a strategic agenda in tertiary education all over the world in the current decades (Harvey & Williams, 2010; Enders & Westerheijden, 2014). The Bologna process in Europe gives clear guidelines for high education system introducing mechanisms for quality assurance and quality management.

The aim of Bologna process is to have European university system where degrees and learning outcomes can be compared. It also aims to motivate students and staff to increase mobility among EU higher education institutions (Teichler, 2012). These aims gave stimulus to higher education institutions to carry reforms and implement formalized external and internal quality assurance mechanisms (Bollaert, 2014). The most important mechanism that gives comprehensive guidance on quality standards is the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) approved by the Ministerial Conference in Yerevan in 2015 (ENQA, 2015).

Currently higher education and its institutions receive great attention on their performance and especially on their capability to assure quality of teaching and learning via implemented internal quality system and built up quality culture. Quality culture reinforces the fulfilment of the organizational strategy by putting more emphasis on prevention then detection of the problems.

Quality assurance is an excellent tool for higher education institutions in the endeavours for excellence. However, the challenge is great in order to meet both local and international standards of the study programs at the same time in many EU countries (Ryan, 2015). Therefore, in achievement of coherent assessment of study curriculum, design and teaching there is a need for uniform quality assurance framework (Puzziferro & Shelton, 2008).

With this research there is an attempt to present an outlook on the key points of quality assurance in higher education and to join them in a general model of quality assurance at higher education institution.

The argument of this research stems from the ambiguity of the concept "quality" as its understanding is under permanent debate due to applied different perceptions on quality by different people from higher education. With this research we try to give an overview different interpretations of quality concept that can lead to conceptual model of quality assurance model with the focus on stakeholder requirements.

Another important aspect for enhancing the quality assurance at higher education institutions is indicators that can give a clear view on the effectiveness of achievements of higher education institution and how its key objectives (strategy) are carried out. There are many quality indicators for higher education institutions, but the issue is how to adapt them that fit best for the specific institution and its goals alongside

with the convenient measuring instrument. The contribution of this research is a model giving an idea of internal and external quality assurance at higher education institution including indicators and other necessary elements for effective and efficient performance.

THE CONCEPT OF QUALITY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

By different stakeholders, quality is understood and interpreted differently (Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018) therefore, different quality assessment instruments and methods are applied judging about the performance of the higher education institution. Harvey and Green (1993) point out that the relativeness of the quality concept raises the issue of whose quality. Higher education and its institutions have many different stakeholders representing different spheres including students, teaching and non-teaching staff – considered as internal stakeholders, social partners, government, auditors, state governing bodies, community, different associations – considered as external stakeholders (Burrows & Harvey, 1992). Each of these stakeholders has a different view on quality, influenced by his or her own interest in higher education alongside with different expectations on higher education and its quality.

These are four different, if overlapping, conceptions of the purposes of higher education. Each of them has its own notion of quality and with a distinctive set of performance indicators that are associated with it. Common in these four conceptions is the view of higher education as a 'black box' (Tam, 2001). These four conceptions according to Tam (2001) are as follows: involvement of students in the process of mastering knowledge; development of students' autonomy and integrity; fostering the advancement OF intellectual abilities of students broader than one single discipline, and the development of critical reasoning.

Accordingly, Harvey and Green (1993) introduce five perceptions of quality in higher education: quality as exceptional, as perfection, as fitness for purpose, as value for money, and as transformative (meaning that students during the study process experience transformation in their knowledge and personality). These various perceptions of quality have influence on applied approaches for choosing indicators and performance measurement.

The most recent academic literature analysis carried out by Schindler et al. (2015) identified that the perceptions of quality did not experience great transformation and can be defined as purposeful, transformative, exceptional and accountable where notion of exceptional quality implies the highest possible level of achievement, accountability means taking care of different stakeholders and sustainability, and purposefulness implies conforming the standards and purpose of the organization. The notion of transformative quality is understood as positive advancement and change.

Alongside with the different perceptions of quality there are many relevant issues in decided who should set the goals of higher education due to a wide range of stakeholders (students, institutions itself/academic staff, government, employers). Different stakeholder can present different views and judge differently about quality of higher education and its representing institutions. Giving priorities becomes a challenge.

Having a clear view on what the quality is in higher education institution and what the stakeholders are of top priority, it is possible to design the model for quality management with the core processes in it.

Function of quality manager

From the quality management point of view quality manager's function focuses more on consulting and assisting of those who are responsible for the processes or/and involved in the processes (Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018). Consultations can be given on different levels – individual (teachers, administrative staff, top management) or group level (teams of teaching or administrative staff). Top management plays the decisive role in quality assurance at higher education institutions as its attitude and focus on quality of different functions, processes/procedures is of great importance and shape the direction of organization. Therefore, demonstration of leadership and commitment to quality assurance is inevitable for having viable, not formal, quality assurance system and the responsibility of the quality manager can be seen more as being intermediary among top management, administrative and academic staff.

THE FRAMEWORK FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE

Focus on quality assurance is not a new agenda for higher education. It is already a common practice in many EU countries to have institutions responsible for carrying out audits for evaluation and

accreditation of higher education institutions (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2007). The Analytic Quality Glossary (Harvey, 2004) defines quality assurance as ‘the collections of policies, procedures, systems and practices internal or external to the organisation designed to achieve, maintain and enhance quality’. Quality is responsibility of everyone, but paramount responsibility is of top management. Having quality assurance system at higher education means that everybody is involved in quality improvement of the educational services. All administrative and academic staff must be educated on quality concepts and philosophy, get training and guidelines how to improve the processes they are involved and step by step form the overall commitment regarding quality and excellence. Excellence becomes a part of higher education institution’s strategy. Teeroovengadum, Kamalanabhan, Seebaluck (2016), Harvey (2004), Gibbs (2010), Wilger (1997), Ryan (2015), Elassy (2013) claim that there are several dimensions important for higher education institution addressing quality issues and these are: meeting the needs and expectations of stakeholders, excellence, quality culture/values, process/product quality, administrative quality, teaching/educational quality, transformative quality. The problem is that it is very difficult to address all aspects of quality in one quality assurance model or structure. Quality assurance has a wider representation than only quality control and gives a wider perspective of the situation/performance at higher education institution. Alongside quality assurance allows not only to detect the problems but to work on preventative measures as well. And more emphasis of the quality assurance system is on prevention.

Quality assurance can be both an internal and external process. External quality deals with the elements that are important from the national perspective and consider international trends as well. These elements reflect management, studies, research and impact on regional and national development. The stakeholders’ needs and expectations are permanently advancing, therefore quality challenges stay all the time (Valeikiene, 2017).

Concerning internal quality assurance and its processes, the main aspiration is targeted more on study programs/fields and preparation for external audit (external evaluation).

There are certainly different emphases given to quality assurance. Several authorities claim that quality assurance is about assuring the achievement of the standard at higher education institution. However, some authorities focus on accountability, a term that is seldom defined with respect to higher education (Rosa & Amaral, 2014).

Broadly, quality assurance is a top down process, which can provide useful institutional data that informs quality improvement processes. Stakeholders’ interests there are that higher education institution assure the qualitative provision of educational services and research through quality assurance system that fits the purpose of the institution (Elassy, 2015; Gover & Loukkola, 2018).

What can be concluded up to this point is that quality of higher education institution is a process of causing student learning and development though generally it is supposed that the institution must take care of the executed programs/study fields taking into account the expectations of different stakeholders and continuously upgrade them (Chelimsky & Shadish, 1997). Seyfried & Pohlenz (2018) emphasise more the improvement aspects of quality assurance system. Improvement is carried out through analysis and evaluation of results and taking measures to advancement. In that way the academic community discover weaknesses of the program/study field, management, research or contribution to the region/society development.

Quality assurance from ESG perspective

Bologna Process and Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) are key documents for quality assurance in higher education. Bologna process seeks coherence of higher education in Europe and encourages cooperation of forty-eight European countries through European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Especially the emphasis is given on quality of teaching and learning in order to be appealing and competitive in the global labour market.

The decisions of Ministerial Conferences include further developments of EHEA and commitments by its member countries. Currently the most important document for quality assurance is the revised ESG (2015) which gives guidelines of internal and external quality assurance of higher education institution encompassing the most important elements of higher education. These elements include learning and teaching, research and innovation, policy and government (ENQA, 2015).

Quality assurance as seen by ESG contains main features as follows:

- Higher education institutions bear the main responsibility for quality;

- The four-stage model applies: internal evaluation, external evaluation by peers, publication of reports, follow-up procedure;
- External quality assurance procedures should deal with the processes' effectiveness of internal quality assurance; and
- Involvement of stakeholders, students in particular in all the steps of the development of quality assurance processes (Rosa & Amaral, 2014).

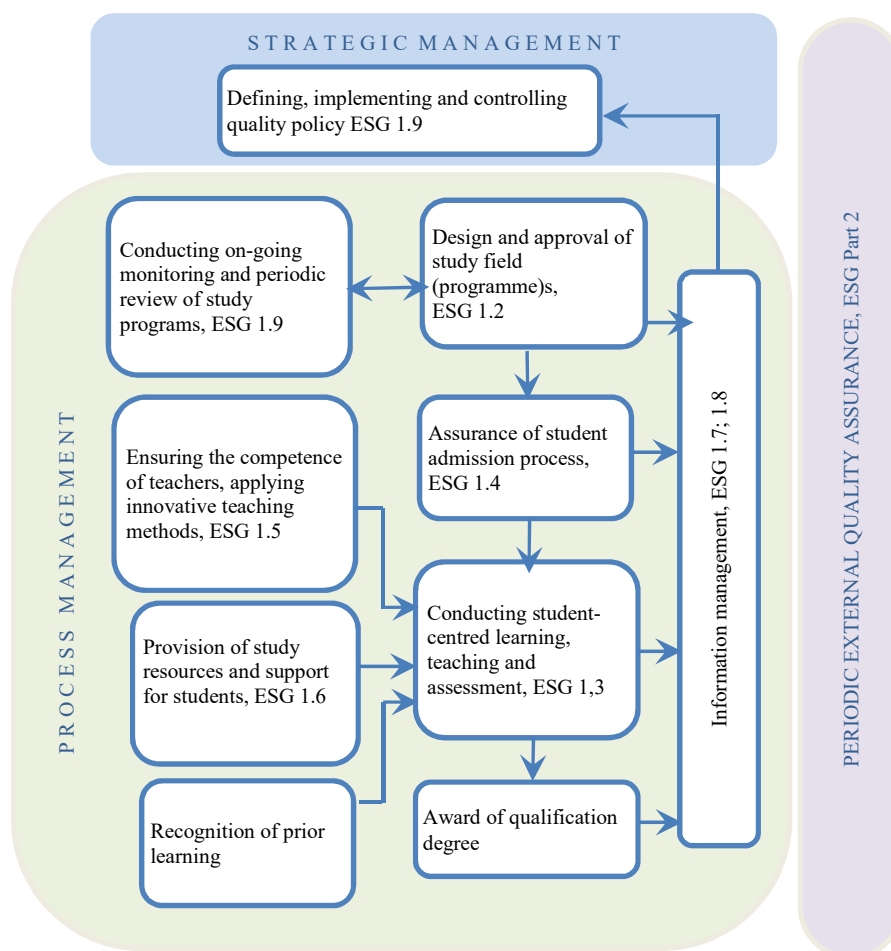


Figure 1. Internal quality assurance framework at higher education institution from the ESG perspective

According to ESG (2015), the internal quality assurance consists of nine elements:

1. Policy for quality assurance;
2. Design and approval of study field (programmes);
3. Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment;
4. Student admission, progression, recognition and certification;
5. Teaching staff;
6. Learning resources and student support;
7. Information management;
8. Public information;
9. On-going monitoring and periodic review of the study field (programmes).

All these elements must be reflected in uniform framework integrating the strategic and process management of HEI (see Figure 1).

As it was mentioned above, the ESG only deals with quality assurance of teaching and learning at higher education institution, but how to plan and organize all the processes from a system approach is the responsibility of institution itself.

Quality assurance indicator system of higher education

Higher education institutions receive not only supervision from external bodies, but they also need to maintain quality via having quality assurance system and involving/motivating everybody, especially internal stakeholders, to be accountable for quality of teaching and learning. Involvement and contribution of everybody is of great importance for successful performance. Therefore, there is a need to have certain tools, procedures and indicators for self-assessment of the effectiveness and efficiency. The accountability of academic staff and students, administrative staff and management at all levels creates a positive change and continuous improvement. Procedures, tools and indicators of the quality assurance system assist them in measuring success.

Indicator system measures performance of higher education institution. The indicators must be closely linked to the goals and objectives of the strategic plan. The indicators are monitored through periodical collection of information. This allows to decide about success of implementation of strategic plan.

Higher education institutions can be treated as organisations producing an array of outputs from various inputs. Efficiency occurs when outputs from education are produced at the lowest level of resource (Johnes, Portela, & Thanassoulis, 2017). The authors name the following data that is necessary to collect and monitor for higher education institutions:

1. the produced outputs;
2. the inputs for the producing of these outputs;
3. quantitative criteria to measure inputs and outputs.

It is worth mentioning that uniform indicators of inputs and outputs at national level allow to compare higher education institutions. Usually higher education institutions' performance indicators and their elements are set by policy makers. Indicators consist of a variety of measures that generally are related to the strategic mission of the institution, quality and efficiency, and guide to resource allocation and reform direction. The indicators usually reflect the performance at two levels: institutional and study field (program).

MODEL EMPHASISING QUALITY ASSURANCE AT HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION

Quality assurance in higher education institution can be observed from two core functions: service and education. The services relate to the general administrative activities. The focus is mainly on the student body to provide support for academic (for example, enrolment, library) and amenities (for example, cafeterias and recreation) areas. The processes relating to education address teaching, research and community service areas. It is possible to devise a general quality assurance model incorporating the features of different models.

To get a holistic view of quality assurance at higher education institution, all important elements, activities and processes should be considered to make it fit for specific internal and external purposes (see Figure 2).

A conceptual framework for QA model is seen as the issuing of outputs. In this view, the quality of the system is understood in terms of its “performance” as captured in performance indicators, and effectiveness is assessed in terms of its efficiency. Operational processes are fundamental and deals with the core values of the activity and create the value chain. Through this process HEI delivers its services to its stakeholders. Management processes are the processes that oversee operational processes, i.e. ensure that the operational processes are conducted appropriately, including corporate governance, budgetary oversight, and employee oversight. They do not add values to the stakeholders but are more orientated towards monitoring and analysing activities. Support processes are the processes which create an environment that is suitable for the primary processes to function smoothly.

PDCA (Plan-Do-Check-Act) or Deming cycle, is a methodology for achieving continuous process improvement. It is an iterative, four-stage approach that gives a feedback for improvement. First it is necessary to establish how the process operates as-is, then to figure out what improvements should be carried out, and finally, implement the changes. This is a perfect way to improve the quality and effectiveness of processes in order to satisfy stakeholders need.

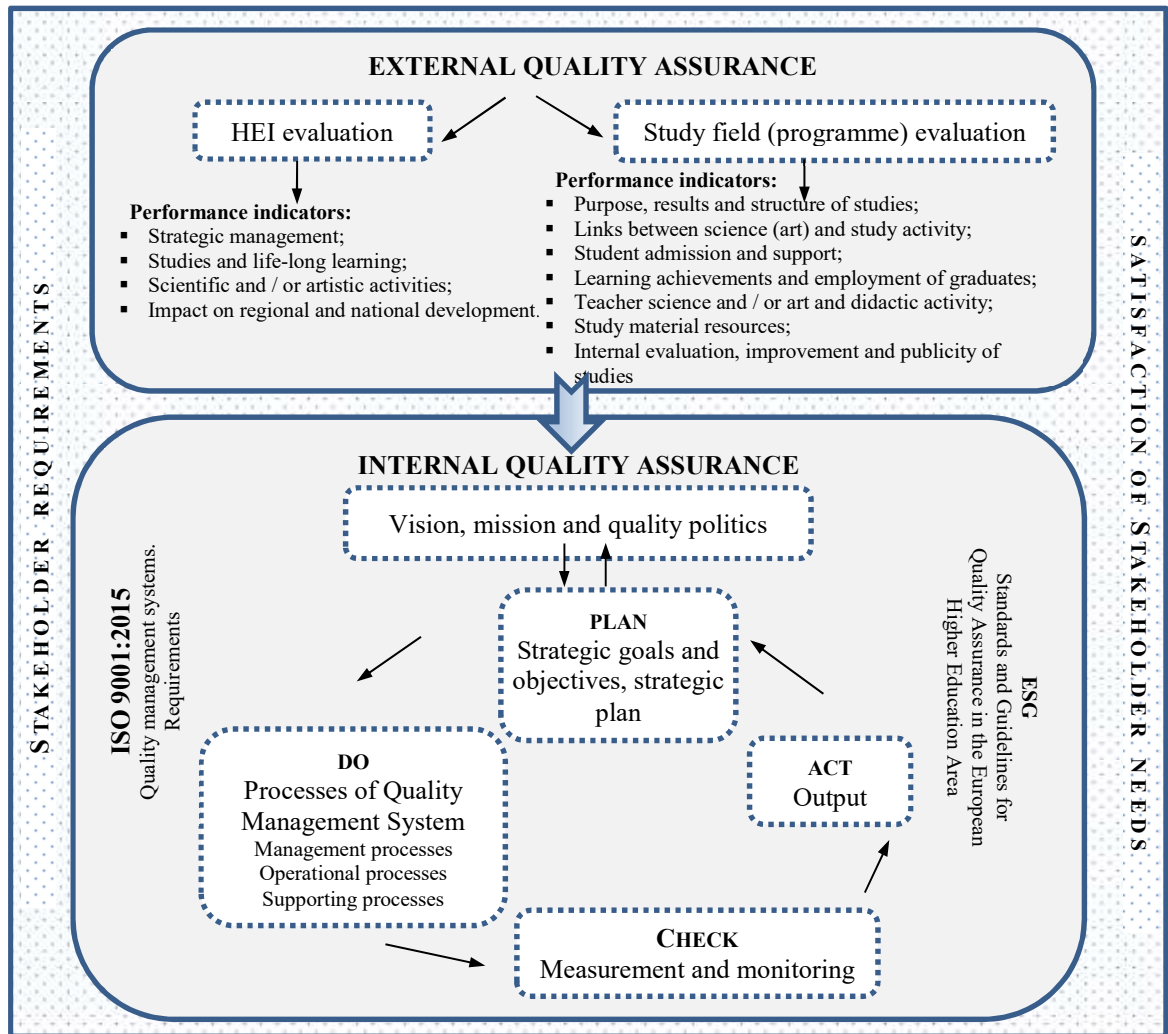


Figure 2. The model of quality assurance at higher education institution

The literature on quality emphasises an organisation's responsiveness to the needs of those whom it serves (Yorke, 2003). In serving their various stakeholders, higher education institutions gain reputations for quality according to perceptions of their performances in these fields.

CONCLUSIONS

It is rather challenging to agree upon one concept of quality in higher education and to find a tool for measurement of it keeping in view all stakeholder needs and requirements. Furthermore, it is more challenging to find the agreement not only nation wide but EU wide as well. Dealing with quality assurance at higher education institution and having a tool to measure the effectiveness of its performance, it is always very important to keep in mind that primary goal of higher education is maximisation of student learning and development.

As higher education institutions begin to take the initial steps towards the framework for a model for quality assurance, a pool of experience begins to build up on which effort can be focused to critically explore and clarify the details and enhance the model. Bringing efforts together to build up a model for quality assurance at higher education usually produces a synergetic effect in linking educational and organizational areas. From the holistic approach, it is not enough to meet external requirements without a comprising approach to quality assurance.

It is also necessary to consider that quality assurance and their processes are not the target itself that all quality assurance system must be employed and assist the implementation of the strategic goals of higher education. The effectiveness of quality assurance system must also be judged from different contexts and levels: institutional, national and global. The variety of factors and elements make the system rather

complex, but this is more opportunity than threat as the synergetic effect can be achieved from different players, elements, and experiences. The introduce conceptual quality assurance model in this research can be a good starting point to address the service, education and implementation aspects synergistically.

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