QUALITY ASSURANCE IN EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION (UNIVERSITY OF DURRES CASE)

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Abstract

In this paper I would address the issue related to understanding of quality assurance in European Higher Education as an attempt to answer the question of competitiveness in the Aleksander Moisiu University of Durres, Albania. Different countries have evolved quality assurance models for their higher education systems as a necessity for their unique national contexts. Also in the University of Durres is operated within a national policy framework designed by the state to assure academic standards. Quality is a much used and least understood term. But, quality in higher education means the educational process that it ensures. Higher education will need to demonstrate that it takes the quality of its programmes and awards seriously and is willing to put into place the means of assuring and demonstrating that quality. As such, this paper is an attempt to explain some important issues related to some crucial questions as: What the role of higher education in society is; What the significance of QA is; What QA's relationship to Accreditation is. What is more, to defining quality assurance, and to explain the link between quality and Higher Education; Quality Assurance at a European and International level and its future. Also, a key issue that I would treat is the long term objective to develop a culture where everyone is constantly attentive to improve opportunities. The methodology that I would use is through literature review and quantitative data. Data collection was conducted through statistical office at University of Durres. Concluding, I would try to explain the role of quality assurance in higher education, the origins of quality assurance in higher education, the definition of quality, towards a culture of quality etc.

Keywords: Quality assurance, accreditation, competitiveness, higher education

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the last decades of the twentieth century assessment has become, globally, an institutional obligation in most developed countries. Quality as a concept is a 20th century phenomenon that has its roots in the industry and management in the Western world throughout the 1950's and in the early 1960's. In the area of higher education, the adoption of quality control has been superficial and diluted by the exercise of academic freedom (Largosen, et al, 2004). The increasing demands for good quality higher education by students and society imply that Higher Educational Institution (HEI's) now face similar pressures that the business sector has been facing for decades. These implications often become even more serious for HEI's who lack the finance and infrastructure resources and have recognition issues, as well as facing stronger competition from local, distance and international education institutions.

The need for quality has therefore proved to be the decisive factor in determining the success or failure of many products and services throughout the development of society, although it has often been implied rather than explicitly analysed and measured. There are of course advantages in applying more explicit measurements of quality. Among these is an increased ability to readily compare similar services and products, the development of common standards and of course wider information for the consumer.

What is the significance of QA?

Quality Assurance is a condition that leads to the achievement of transparency. It will ensure the quality of the *academic* (teaching, curriculum etc) and *structural* (buildings, computers etc) provision of courses and it will allow an objective review of their quality. The transparency should be dialectical, meaning that the quality assurance should make institutions transparent, but also that the quality assurance in itself should be transparent, allowing the outcomes to be shared by the participants (actors). The measuring of quality was seen by many academic staff as holding back improvement. There were those who argued that there was too much emphasis on getting a good result and that this made it more difficult to use assessments to bring about real improvements. Benefits also consist in the attention paid to real strategic decisions like hiring policy, restructuring, new interdisciplinary initiatives.

Just implementing an evaluation normally isn't enough to actually realise the goals that lay behind the evaluation. To actually realise these goals, further activities have to be undertaken. Thus, evaluating the way in which organizations apply the responsiveness principle offers explanations regarding the way in which they manage to achieve high performances, but also to offer a high degree of trust to beneficiaries regarding the services and products which are offered (Mark and Henry, 2004). Evaluating the implementation of the responsiveness principle offers organizations a comprehensive, adequate and more explicit knowledge of communities and different types of beneficiaries they serve.

Establishing a contextualized understanding of quality means including relevant stakeholders. Key stakeholders often hold different views and meanings of educational quality (Motala, 2000; Benoliel, O'Gara & Miske, 1999). Stakeholders should be an integral part of the institutional evaluation process. However, the quality of higher education is very important for its stakeholders. Notably, providers (funding bodies and the community at large), students, staff and employers of graduates are important (Srikantha and Dalrymple, 2003). Most individuals include parts of more than one perspective in their personal conception of quality. Therefore, when looked at on an individual level, there might not seem to be any significant differences between the way different stakeholders perceive quality in higher education. Also, combining each perspective with a particular group of stakeholders should not be taken to mean that every

individual in that group sees quality in exactly the same way, in every group there are pronounced individual differences.

Quality assurance is the responsibility of everyone in an educational institution, though the top management sets the policies and priorities. Thus, assuring quality should be a continuous and ongoing process. It should not be considered as a one time activity for accreditation alone. Real quality that is one that is assessed by self. Quality assurance is a conscious and planned process. *Good practice* for QA procedures requires an objective review to assess the quality of the inventory, and also to identify areas where improvements could be made. The inventory may be reviewed as a whole or in parts.

Defining Quality Assurance in Higher Education

The concept of quality assurance is not a new one, but the range of the terminology and methodologies which are now used to define, develop and apply it, are relatively recent. There are a great number of different perceptions of what is meant by quality in higher education. The terms efficiency, effectiveness, equity and quality have often been used synonymously (Adams, 1993). Definitions of quality must be open to change and evolution based on information, changing contexts, and new understandings of the nature of education's challenges. The most widely accepted definition of quality assurance in higher education is probably:

"The means by which an institution can guarantee with confidence and certainty, that the standards and quality of its educational provision are being maintained and enhanced."

Quality is often described as the totality of features and characteristics of a service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs. Quality also requires that higher education should be characterised by its international dimension: exchange of knowledge, interactive networking, mobility of teachers and students, and international research projects, while taking into account the national cultural values and circumstances.

The Role of Higher Education in Society and the relationship with Quality Assurance

The role of higher education in society cannot be abstracted from the most basic question: What is the purpose of higher education? The purpose of higher education institutions is active engagement with the pressing development needs and challenges of our societies.

According to the Human Capital theory (see Becker, 1964) education is an investment that increases productivity and consequently, in a competitive labor market, report higher wages. Other view thinks that the essential virtue of education is too select workers. From this perspective, formulated by Spence 1973), the educational system plays the role of a filter. In real world education serves both to acquire knowledge and to select individuals. If labor markets works properly wages differentials, attributed to differences in the amount of education, will serves as an incentive to stimulate young people to acquire higher levels of schooling. In 2000 the average duration of schooling were still widely disperse in the OCDE countries. The duration of schooling were increasing in all these countries without exception.

Higher education is the source or feeder system in all walks of life and therefore supplies the much-needed human resources in management, planning, design, teaching and research. Higher education also provides opportunities for life-long learning, allowing people to upgrade their knowledge and skills from time to time based on societal needs. Apart from its role to produce, disseminate knowledge, and form and cultivate the cognitive character of students, the second key role of higher education is to contribute to forging a critical and democratic citizenship. Upon entrance to higher education, students' mode of life has certainly to be regulated for them by the institution's rules; however, they ought to find themselves free to determine the method of their daily life with no more restrictions than the habits and customs that their society necessarily

imposes. Also, we could understand higher education as a complex system embedded in a political, cultural and economic context.

Universities have played a critical role in educating future generations, in disseminating information about sustainability, by training leaders, with the skills to solve local and regional from a global perspective and interdisciplinary (G8 University, Summit, 2008 by P. Jones et al, 2010).

The application of QA in the sphere of Higher Education, while having the same base objectives of defining and recognising quality, is somewhat complicated by the important socio-economic role that education plays in developing local, national and global societies. Quality is the distinguishing characteristic guiding students and higher education institutions when receiving and providing higher education. The integration of Quality Assurance principles into higher education have become a European wide issue since the need for a clear QA and Accreditation system was laid out as one of the aims of the Bologna Process. This move towards integrating QA into higher education has benefited institutions and students by setting out to achieve a model in the international co-operation in higher education, which improves the quality, transparency and comparability of degrees, and studies that have been involved in the process. The benefits that can be gained therefore by having a recognised quality assurance process at a course, faculty, institutional and national level is clear for the institutions and students, academics and society. National goals for education, and outcome statements that translate those goals into measurable objectives should provide the starting point for the development and implementation of curriculum (UNICEF, 2000).

Higher education institutions developed in this institutional environment and their organizational arrangements progressively generated an accountable and responsible behaviour for the study programs which were offered (Andreescu et al, 2012). Thus, the principle of responsibility refers to the way in which the higher education institution relates to beneficiaries by offering high quality and performed educational, cognitive and research services. The university can be accountable towards corporations which ask for professional qualifications services. The accountability principle refers to the relationship with the direct "client" and constrains the university to offer him the educational and cognitive services according to the specific parameters in the educational offer which was presented and agreed upon by the "client" (Weber et al, 2005).

II. Quality assurance in the European Higher Education: recent developments

The Anglo-Saxon countries were the first to apply instruments for measuring the efficiency and quality, and were rapidly followed by large international organizations. Nowadays, the State is questioned about its traditional role, since the emergence of the Anglo-Saxon accountability, whose benchmarking and best practices permanently transform the concepts related to educational administration and increasingly influence management and governance.

Five key developments have taken place in Europe over the past few years; The **Magna Charta Universitatum** (1988) which upholds university autonomy, must be the precondition for fostering the adaptability of universities to the ever-changing requirements of today's society.

The meeting of ministers at the **Sorbonne University** (1998) referred to the central role of higher education in the development of Europe through the creation of a European Higher Education Area.

The Bologna declaration (1999) by which the signatory states agreed to act in concert to increase the competitiveness of Europe through a range of measures aimed at creating a

European Higher Education Area. These include the adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, a system of credits and co-operation in Quality Assurance at a European level. The objective of such tools is to promote mobility, inter institutional co-operation and integrated programmes of study, training and research.

The **Salamanca Convention** (2001) of European higher education institutions considered quality as a fundamental building block of the European Higher Education Area and made it the underlying condition for trust, relevance of degrees, mobility, compatibility and attractiveness.

Similarly, the **Prague Communiqué** of the European education ministers (2001) regards quality as a major factor in determining the competitiveness and attractiveness of European higher education. Since the Prague meeting in 2001 the E4 group, consisting of ENQA, EUA, ESIB and EURASHE, has met on a regular basis to discuss respective views on the Bologna Process and European quality in higher education. This cooperation at the European level has proved constructive. The four organisations have therefore agreed that a European Consultative Forum for Quality Assurance in Higher Education will continue to exist building from the E4 group. The "E4 Group" proposed the European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance, adopted in 2005. Since the Berlin meeting in 2003 the E4 meetings have had as their major focus the implementation of the mandate of the Ministers on quality assurance in higher education.

The European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) is the major new body in the European quality assurance architecture. It was set up by the E4 Group as a new legal body in 2008, with the support of the Commission, in response to the 2007 meeting of Bologna Ministers in London and in line with the principles set out in the 2006 Recommendation. The Register is open to agencies operating in the EHEA on condition that they demonstrate their compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines.

There are now quality assurance agencies in almost all countries of the EHEA, although they are quite heterogeneous in terms of size, scope, statute, focus and international capacity. Many are small, newly created with only limited experience and European/international exposure. The Commission is supporting the European Association for Quality Assurance (ENQA), created in 2000. It has increased membership quickly to 48 full members from 23 different countries. The ENQA Survey 2008 indicates that whilst most agencies have a national 'remit', this is not always the case. In some countries different parts of the higher education sector have different agencies. Most quality assurance agencies are in a period of change, driven by the Bologna Process and the international context. Another major development is the increasing involvement of stakeholders in quality assurance issues. All countries have some kind of quality assurance mechanism in place, although they differ significantly in terms of purpose, focus and organisation. In many countries there is an obligation for universities to have their own quality evaluation system and a body at national level responsible for the organisation and stimulation of this process, e.g. in Portugal, Spain, Germany and Iceland. However the majority of countries have a quality assurance agency also carrying out external evaluation functions. Most were created or restructured in the 1990s. Some operate as single national agencies in unitary or integrated systems (e.g. in the UK, Norway, Sweden and Romania) or in binary systems (e.g. Denmark and Estonia). Other countries have an agency for each sub-sector of a binary system, e.g. Poland and Ireland. In countries with decentralised or federal structures in higher education some specific features exist; in Spain, some communities like Andalucía and Catalonia have their own quality assurance system and agency that follows the same principles as the national level. In Germany the Federal Ministry is funding a special project operated by the *Rectors' Conference* for the sharing of information and experience concerning quality evaluation between the federal states.

In the UK there are two agencies, one for Scotland and one for the rest of the country. A few new quality assurance agencies were set up or are in preparation. In Italy the 1999 reform laws required all universities to re-organise their self-evaluation and replaced the former "observatory" for university evaluation by a new, independent *National Committee for Quality Assurance* which can set standards and produce reports.

The Future Development of Quality Assurance in Higher Education

In recent decades, institutions of higher education have attempted various means of reform both on the institutional and the individual levels in response to changes in the higher education environment such as increased economic pressures, collaboration opportunities, and competition (Walvoord, 2000). At the institution level, research universities are focusing on undergraduate students and learning (Murray & Summerlee, 2007). At the individual level, reformers have sought to redefine incentive systems for professors (Edwards, 1999). Given the entrenched position of academic departments and their pre-eminence within the university structure, it is no surprise that efforts to change their standing have been met with resistance.

In recent years, higher education has developed an entrepreneurial as well as an interdisciplinary dimension at both the institutional and individual faculty levels (Clark, 2004; Etzkowitz, 2001). While these are significant changes at both the institutional and individual levels, they have had little effect on the "deep structure" (Gersick, 1991) of institutions of higher education: the academic department.

The developments of Quality Assurance like the process itself are continuous and thus a periodic review of development needs to be carried out by all those involved in the process. This does not however preclude us from examining the possible development over the next five years especially within the context of the Bologna process that is set to achieve its goals in 2010. Indeed, with the run up to the Berlin conference in late 2003 the new targets for higher education will be laid out. There are three major thematic areas, which seem to be worthy of particular examination in the run up to the *Berlin Conference* and future of the quality assurance in higher education. These three areas are Quality Culture, Global Quality Label and QA.

III.   Toward a Quality Culture and the University of Durres case

The internal quality culture that has its origin in a range of factors that have prompted universities to become more pro-active in this area. *Quality Culture is the creation of a high level of internal institutional quality assessment mechanisms and the ongoing implementation of the results. Quality Culture can be seen as the ability of the institution, program etc to develop quality assurance implicitly in the day to day work of the institution and marks a move away from periodic assessment to ingrained quality assurance.* The focus of general QC techniques is on the processing, handling, documenting, archiving and reporting procedures that are common to all the inventory source categories. Quality Culture envisages methods of evaluating and establishing high levels of quality which can be undertaken by the institution or department itself and which, if correctly managed, can increase the quality of the education without requiring the over involvement of external Quality Assurance procedures. Many HEIs in Europe have been building up their "quality culture" and internal quality assurance systems, mainly through inter-institutional cooperation, mutual assistance and benchmarking. The term Quality Culture (QC) has recently gained considerable ground within QA circles and is currently the focus of a joint EUA-European Commission project that is seeking to examine the establishment of quality culture within several Higher Education Institutions (HEI's) in a variety of countries. The EUA project which is currently underway clearly outlines some of the added advantages for

institutions for establishing a strong organic and holistic quality culture as well as the growing importance that Quality Culture is viewed by HEI's.

The purpose of this paper is to enforce the idea that UAMD have to develop its institutional culture which is oriented towards responsiveness, organizations, through the evaluation practices and procedures which are applied, is called upon to offer not only answers regarding the background of the community it serve, but also landmarks, impulses and visions in order to support it in its development by offering alternative solutions, designing the development model, and anticipating possible scenarios which are specific to the development of the beneficiaries and communities it serve.

Due to social, political and economic modernization, in the latest years, UAMD felt the need to create and/or strengthen inspection systems that would enable to monitor the practices of the units that comprise it. UAMD have mainly been preoccupied with its own expansion. This expansion was connected to the following processes: offering new study programs – mainly those programs which were solicited by potential beneficiaries, enrolling higher and higher numbers of students.

Methodology

Responsive evaluation leads to an expansion of the environment and categories of actors which are taken into consideration for the evaluation exercise. Thus, even though the Methodology does not explicitly refer to the principle of responsiveness, which can be deduced from the criteria according to which UAMD has to assume an active role at the local and regional levels, it is important to mention the fact that institutionalizing financial stimulation mechanisms will lead in time to an increase in the degree of institutional responsiveness of this university. After analyzing the current Methodology for external evaluation, the standards, the reference standards and the list of performance indicators of the Albanian Public Agency for Accreditation in Higher Education (PAAHE), it can be noticed that it doesn't make any direct references to the responsiveness principle. On the other hand, several references are made with regard to the principles of responsibility and institutional accountability. Thus, the new methodology aims to assist UAMD to assume institutional responsibilities through the mission that the university sets out in its Charter, taking into account the fact that institutional responsibility is a competence of the university, according to the principle of university autonomy.

Finally, we propose a set of criteria for evaluating the way in which the responsiveness principle is applied by the higher education institutions in Albania. This could be used in order to develop new means of encouraging institutions which develop programs and actions which are specific to the responsiveness principle.

Data collection and data analysis

The concept "evaluation" is often associated with the collection of a mass of data. This is not a good starting point in an educational system. Instead, the strategy should be to make better use of the great amount of available information about educational programmes.

We have collected some data from statistical office in UAMD and what we can say is that we might be optimist for the future referring the increasing number of study programs and enrolled students in all study levels from opening of UAMD. Both qualitative and quantitative evaluations have developed a new line of research regarding the relevance and usefulness of the interventions or products and services which are offered, which drives UAMD to get closer and adapt to the interests and aspirations of beneficiaries, by thinking and acting in unison with them.
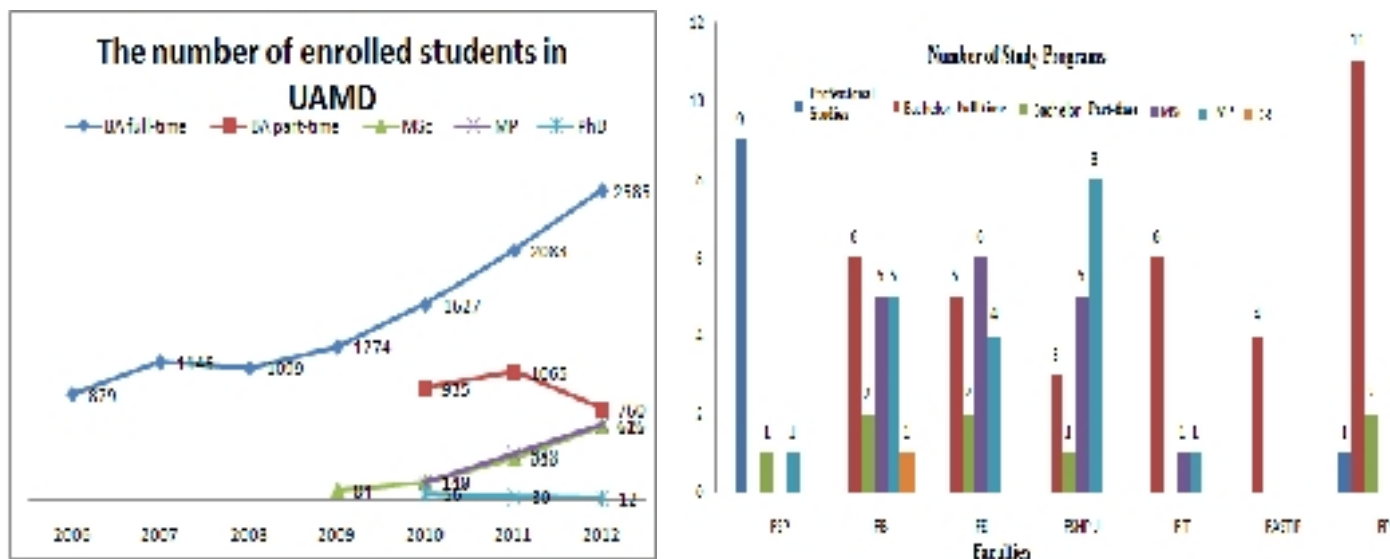
Fig. 1: The number of enrolled students and the study programs in UAMD (from opening)
Source: Statistical Office UAMD, April 2013

Basic data about the educational programme are accumulated continuously as the terms go by so that efforts are concentrated on analysis and evaluation of the data material as the time for self-assessment approaches. The data have greater significance for the future policies that UAMD would make. Letting the evaluation emanate from these data creates the conditions for the university to provide the necessary qualitative interpretation for the dialogue with the educational authorities. Also in UAMD are taken some evaluation forms to evaluate lecturers from their students in institutional level. Consequently, the University of Durres has identifies various undesirable tendencies exhibited by classroom practitioners. These may be summarized as: a) a tendency for lecturers to assess quantity of work and presentation rather than the quality of learning; b) a focus on marking and grading at the expense of providing advice for improvement, which tends to lower the self esteem of students; c) a strong emphasis on comparing students with each other which demoralizes the less successful learners; d) lecturers' feedback to students often attempts to serve managerial and social purposes rather than helping them to learn more effectively. So, choices need to be made between assessment techniques which support the process of classroom learning by involving the student with the meta-process of learning and those that de-motivate students by frequently testing performance outcomes (Clark, 2008).

The entire self-evaluation process contributes to a farsighted examination of the indicators that the Ministry of Education and APAAL will be using as the basis for their decisions. The working group must adapt these suggestions in terms of the primary goal of the evaluation, namely to develop its own educational programmes.

IV.   Findings and Recommendations

Quality assurance still has a limited European dimension. There are still only a few examples of HEIs seeking evaluations or accreditation from foreign agencies, apart from cases of subject-specific agencies and of some joint-degree courses. There seems, however, to be a growing number of agencies that are preparing for quality assurance activities outside their national context. This positive development should be further encouraged. The 2006 Recommendation encourages Member States to enable HEIs to seek accreditation (or other quality seals) from registered agencies outside their own country. This can only become a reality

if several conditions co-exist:
– HEIs need sufficient autonomy to apply for a foreign quality seal;
– Agencies need to be able, allowed and willing to operate beyond their national borders;
– National governments and quality assurance agencies must acknowledge registered agencies from other countries and recognise their conclusions.

All indicators and aspects need to be evaluated in order to offer the necessary stimulation for organizational development and continuous improvement of the quality of services, products and programs. UAMD currently experience problems in retaining both academic staff and dealing with growing student needs. Some of the reasons for this may be that staff and students perceive that other institutions are offering more valuable education in terms of quality (recognition, career development, student support etc). There is a big need for various strategies to make higher education that offer UAMD affordable and valuable for students need to be applied and competitive on the national level in order to support the social role of the UAMD and the growth in QA methodologies and the implementation of the results of QA both institutional and socially.

To conclude, when used to evaluating UAMD, this approach has two major benefits: 1) it contributes to a great extent in offering a clear image on how UAMD communicates, participates, uses and satisfies the demands and experience of the actors in the socio-economic environment which are interested or affected by its activity and 2) it enables the improvement of responsiveness in real time during the evaluation because once these aspects are identified, organizations have the opportunity to respond to them in an appropriate manner.

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