

STUDENTS' REPRESENTATIONS OF THE QUALITY OF CONTENT, PROCESS AND OUTCOME OF EDUCATION

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The given paper is aimed at tackling aspects related to an objective evaluation of the quality of the result of a service, educational under discussion, provided by a higher education establishment. Besides evaluating the degree to which the result overlaps the requirements, a conclusion is needed on the quality of the process itself which underlies the educational offer, namely on how complete, organized, steady, available the process itself is. The university management should understand the current and future needs of their students', should meet and try to exceed its students' expectations. In this context, we have tried to highlight students' representations of the quality of content, process and outcome of education.

Keywords: *education; quality management; total quality management; students' representations of the quality of education.*

Aspects concerning the quality management of educational and scientific research services provided by higher education establishments have become of utmost interest over the recent years. In order to objectively assess of the quality of the outcome of any product or of any technological service, among which educational and scientific research services are undoubtedly the case, an evaluation of the degree of which the result overlaps the requirements is needed, alongside with a conclusion on the quality of the process itself which underlies the provided services. More precisely, a conclusion is to be drawn on the process and the extent to which the former is complete, organized, steady, accessible, aimed towards fighting divergence, incompatibilities etc.

Thus, the quality of the results deriving from the activity of a higher education establishment is to be backed up by the quality management of the main departments of the university under discussion.

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Nevertheless, basic principles focusing on customer's needs are totally taken by educational structures. Accordingly, ISO 9000 standards can apply both to students and to university employees. Thus, it is compulsory to notice whether introducing standards does not break the high educational standards which have been set within the organization over many years of its existence. Such situations can arise through mechanically translating the successful experience gained in industry into education. Recently, Total Quality Management methods have gained ground and these should become the cornerstone of the modern education and the management system within Romanian universities.

The fundamental TQM principles, on which the university management system should rely at a first glance, are extremely clear and can be implemented in universities. Nonetheless, through introducing the quality management principles, change and improvement are needed in the current university management system. Still, there are drawbacks in the latter management system mentioned in the way that it lacks transparency. And that is why no answers can be given to questions such as *Do employees meet the working requirements? How efficient are these requirements? Does the outcome match the planned activities? On which grounds does mismatch arise? What can be done in order to optimize the system?*

Moreover, nowadays any university has set a quality management system that faces a series of typical problems, such as:

- non-employment of the new management principles by the teaching staff;
- the lack of qualified university managers;
- the lack of a specific methodology regarding means of implementing the quality management principles within higher education institutions.

Undoubtedly, the above-mentioned issues and many others will deepen because of the lack of university financial resources needed to change and improve their educational activity. Consequently, what is to be done?

The emergence of the new ISO 9000:2000 and the cohesion of the TQM principles allow the elaboration of a unique methodology, based on a process approach of the management and oriented towards the client's needs. Higher educational establishments view as *customers* the following categories:

- the state and its institutions which provide a plan for scientific and technical development;
- enterprises and service providers which are considered corporate clients of educational establishments;

- students who are directly involved in the educational process and who influence the quality of the learning process in the educational organizations.

Establishing a quality management system based on the opinion of all customer groups concerned and its continuous improving are most efficiently carried out through combining and employing the international standards ISO 9000:2000 and ISO 9004:2000 and through organization of self-evaluation methods, following the EFQM model.

At first, the above-mentioned procedure presupposes a multilateral self-evaluation of its own management structure, of the available resources, of the management methods and of the main processes that are influential of the efficiency of the university activity. Students and employees of all departments can be involved in the self-evaluation process. The self-evaluation is to be carried out by means of the simplest questionnaires, containing questions and answer choices structured on the main criteria of the EFQM model. The principal purpose of the self-evaluation is obtaining complete data on the university's activity, which will be of help in creating a quality management system, and also in showing the improvement potential and the correcting measures.

As far as carrying out the core principle of the quality management is concerned – customer-focused organization – it should be mentioned the fact that, unlike product marketing, the educational activity is a very complex process, closely connected with forming professional and personal traits of an individual. From this modern perspective, that defines the management process on subject-subject relations and which means that the learner is the manager of their own education, the student actually conscientiously chooses the educational establishment they would like to attend, the subject matters they would like to major in and so on.

Students' analysis regarding the need of quality education has become common currency, especially in the context of moving towards new educational standards which presuppose enhancing the amount of time allotted to self-study, that itself entails the student's awareness of their own training process. According to experts in the field, sociological research mirrors the evaluation of the quality of carrying out by the university of its functions as a social establishment, the criteria of choosing a certain higher educational establishment, the evaluation of the quality of a university from the student's point of view, the direct user's point of view.

Regarding the quality of *content* of education, students' representations could be measured by means of the following parameters²:

² *Why does a modern engineer need culture?* Materials of inter-university scientific and practical seminar in Ekaterinburg, February 25, 2009/Edited by N.P. Konovalova, Ekaterinburg: Ural State Technical University – Ural Polytechnic Institute, 2009.

- learning necessary skills to be employed in the professional activity;
- learning basic knowledge;
- learning knowledge basic to personal development;
- learning knowledge needed in the market economy;
- the correspondence between the taught knowledge and the national educational standard.

As far as the quality of the educational process is concerned, the following criteria are to be taken into consideration:

- the high degree of expertise of the teaching staff;
- an individual approach of the student's educational activity;
- using new educational technologies in the learning process;
- appropriate learning organizational facilities ;
- employing active methods in the teaching activity;
- demanding educational requirements for students of university.

The quality of the outcome of the educational process derives from criteria, such as:

- the high level of professional training;
- multiple employment perspectives after graduating;
- the high level of the graduate's adaptability to the current socio-economic state;
- the graduate's high ability to self-development;
- the high level of general knowledge;
- obtaining a prestigious profession;
- obtaining a diploma issued by a prestigious university.

In conclusion, we could highlight the fact that quality education has become an essential characteristic of the current student, while, with the aim of meeting the requirements of direct users, teaching and administrative staff of the educational establishment should give special attention to the applied content of the subject matters under discussion. Moreover, self-training, resource working and applying theoretical knowledge to practical activity skills are of paramount importance and great help to learners.

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