

Implications of internal quality assurance systems and their impact on adult education provisions

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Abstract: The purpose of the present paper is to analyse different implications of internal quality assurance systems and their contribution to adult education provisions. To a certain extent, the paper aims at helping traditional higher education institutions implement a functional internal quality assurance system and make a shift toward an orientation of adult education. Following these two purposes, the paper will describe the main characteristics of a functional internal quality assurance system and, at a later stage, offer elements and indicators for adult education in higher education.

Key words: internal procedures, quality assurance, adult education, performance indicators.

Quality of Higher Education

The concept of quality in higher education has become an increasingly important matter for institutions, as well as for public policy and debates on education. Quality assurance has been used for the overall improvement of institutions, their management and the student experience they deliver. As the demand for higher education has increased, so has the demand for its accountability, reliability and value for money (Harvey and Askling 2003). Institutions are responsible for the internal management of their own quality and the effective establishment of procedures which monitor this. Nationally, quality assurance agencies provide an external evaluation of the institution and/or its programmes. From country to country the mechanisms can vary and how quality is achieved and monitored can be very different. However, institutions now face much larger competition from other institutions and providers, both at home and abroad. In order to attract more students, institutions are under the constant pressure of having to maintain their quality, standards, reputation and especially the student experience they provide.

Basing itself on Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)13 (Council of Europe 2012), the 24th Standing Conference of Ministers of Education (Helsinki, 26 and 27 April 2013), on the theme of “Governance and quality education”(Council of Europe 2013), agreed that quality of education was closely linked to four inter-related purposes, namely:

- preparation for sustainable employment;
- preparation for life as active citizens in democratic societies;
- personal development; and

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- the development and maintenance, through teaching, learning and research, of a broad, advanced knowledge base. (Bergan 2005)

In the same recommendation, Council of Europe places a strong emphasis on a broad understanding of quality, which encompasses system quality as well as institutional quality.

Within the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education – ESG (ENQA 2005) many aspects of quality assurance such as the quality of the academic standards, the relevance of assessments, and involvement of stakeholders within the governance and the reliability of internal practices are addressed.

Quality assurance agencies have the responsibility to institutions and the public to assure that the education and experience providers deliver is of a good standard, in order to maintain trust in the education system nationally and internationally. Most importantly, however, quality assurance review mechanisms provide valuable recommendations to how institutions can enhance their provision. Undoubtedly, quality assurance has seen many improvements since the launch of the Bologna Process in 1999. However there are many challenges still remaining. Many external quality assurance mechanisms still do not manage to take a holistic view of quality, while the internal mechanisms count on an intrinsic motivation of the institution towards building a quality culture.

When defining “quality education”, Council of Europe states as first characteristic that education should give access to learning to all students, particularly those non-traditional, as adult students, adapted to their needs as appropriate. Recommendation (2007)6 of the Committee of Ministers to the Council of Europe member States on the public responsibility for higher education and research underlines the importance of adequate measures to ensure equal opportunities and financing.

When referring to “equal opportunities” the basic principle we stand for is that quality education should be inclusive. Public authorities have the responsibility for ensuring quality education also for those who are unable to make successful use of mainstream education.

A functional internal quality assurance system⁵⁹

In order to develop and secure quality, the autonomy and personal responsibility of all involved has to be supported: institution management, academic and non-academic staff, students.

Due to the development of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the increasing autonomy of universities and the development of global competition between universities and tertiary institutions, internal quality assurance has increasingly established itself as an organizational task. More than ever universities are required to make their quality transparent and their achievements traceable. In this respect it is necessary to bear the framework conditions and requirements in mind. The Bologna communiqués and the ESG declare that – due to their institutional autonomy – it

⁵⁹ The chapter describes features of “Karl Franzens” University of Graz (Austria) internal quality assurance system, as contained in the self-evaluation report for the audit of the quality system

is the universities themselves that have the main responsibility for the quality and the evaluation of the educational offers and they determine an obligation for an extensive national quality management.

In educational policy, quality has manifested itself as a leading paradigm of higher education management; the state wants to rely on functioning internal quality assurance systems at the universities. In this sense the systems serve to establish and monitor agreed quantitative parameters and aims to regularly evaluate scientific work in research and teaching, as well as characteristics of the student body, in order to then be able to deduce decisions as to further regulations.

With a functioning internal quality assurance system, partly divergent quality requirements shall be fulfilled. It is not only politics, but also students, the state, society and economy that call for quality in education and research. Thus, depending on each specific interest group, quality management can for instance be directed at excellent achievements in education and research, scientific progress and/or at high numbers of graduates, shorter durations of study and (the students') employability, diversity in the student body.

However, a solemn focus on the targets of one interest group would of course fall short, as it is neither the state nor the society or economy that could pre-set for the highly complex university system from the outside what quality should mean for them and how a once achieved standard of quality should be maintained and developed – this is something that each university will have to define and decide itself. Experience has shown that the more institutional autonomy a university has in regard to its quality management, the more effective are its internal quality processes.

The university internal quality assurance system has to be custom-tailored at the organization's requirements and should be individually arranged in awareness of the organization and particularly of its power structures and influence structures. Thus, the system's key factor of success is the setup of the university's and its employees' competence so that a quality culture can develop in which criticism and evaluation can be taken for granted.

There is continual work on the gradual transformation of the existing procedures and instruments into functioning system. In order to ensure coherency and efficiency, a functioning system has to be further systemized and coordinated.

A functional internal quality assurance system should serve the following purposes:

1. to ensure a comprehensive and systematic quality assurance and enhancement of all university's activities
2. to promote that organisational units and their activities meet organisational objectives defined in the University's strategy.
3. to demonstrate compliance with internal and external requirements.

Secondly, the system should be based on the following key principles.

The system:

- is aligned with university's strategy,
- emphasis on aspects of development and not on quality control,
- is based on communication and dialog,

- is designed to serve teaching and research and not to dominate them,
- boosts clear, individual and jointly agreed target setting,
- promotes active participation of all members of the university,
- facilitates systematic documentation,
- is intended to be evidence-based, informed by data.

The key elements of a functional internal quality assurance system describe a cycle from the establishment of objectives through planning to meet those objectives, the implementation and monitoring of actions to meet the plans, followed by the identifications and analysis of outcomes and the subsequent enhancement of processes. In addition to the review on target achievement and its consequences it's the effects of certain measures and its side effects, which serve as a base for enhancement.

The quality system should comprise a number of key elements, including:

- continuous strategic planning processes with monitoring of operations and feedback.
- performance indicators are used as a mechanism to translate the institutional objectives into expectations for faculties and staff members. The performance indicators and the extent to which targets are reached are an integral part of virtually every resource allocation discussion.
- a comprehensive reporting system that provides key data from the core areas (research, teaching) and the cross-sectional areas (internationalization, diversity in the student body, resources) assists at different management levels, thus it provides an objective basis for communication.
- periodic and occasional evaluations of all fields of activities, (i.e. research, courses, curricula, services and student characteristics).
- strategic human resource development (e. g. quality development of appointment process, internal training and further education development, leadership and organizational development) that is an investment in the University's most important asset.
- Annual interviews for academic and non-academic staff, involving goal setting and reporting on achievements and information on possible paths for development, requirements and training.
- tracking initiatives on students and graduates (e.g. long term career tracking of graduates, with regard to integration in the labour market status, salary, transition from university to professional life).
- benchmarking initiatives (e. g. in internationalisation, research management, library) to gain new perspectives on performance and further development.

An internal quality assurance system is not meant to be a control system but rather as a means of supporting the continual quality development in education and research. This can only be achieved through the linking of organizational learning with individual learning.

All the quality protections and measures have to be part of the overall university internal quality assurance system which ensures that the quality of resources, structures, processes and results is regularly reflected and systematically

improved. The system is oriented at transparency, verifiability, plausibility and efficiency and ascertains the implementation of necessary quality-improvement activities.

The steps of the a functional internal quality assurance cycle are:

Situation analysis

For a holistic determination of the quality of the university the strengths and weaknesses of the entire university and its subunits has to be analysed and the opportunities and risks for the university are weighed.

Defining objectives and determining indicators

The quality and quality level of the achievements in research, teaching, further education and in management and supporting processes have to be tailored and determined in the form of measurable targets and procedures to ascertain the achievement of the goals are agreed on.

Designing, organizing and implementing the measures

After the quality objectives, framework conditions and responsibilities have been defined, measures and processes to enhance the quality can be planned, organized and put into practice. Here it has to be assured that everyone involved in service provision has to know – and preferably also want – the targets and quality features and has to have the knowledge and measures in order to put these into practice.

Monitoring and feedback

It covers the ongoing observation of a measure or a process that can – if it does not follow the customary process or is below or above a pre-set threshold level – be controlled and regulated. Thus, there can be something like an early warning system that helps to identify undesirable developments and allows the possibility to make adaption in time.

Achievement control and further consequences

The implementation of goals has to be measured and examined with the help of the corresponding agreed indicators, instruments or evaluation methods. This examination can take place by means of self-control and/or by means of field-independent personnel or external auditors. Here, the determination of reasons for possible deviations of the planning objectives plays a major role. The root cause analysis has to be discussed with those involved intensively. The analysis of the target achievement is linked to the derivation and implementation of improvement measures. Based on the results of evaluation, reporting, etc. adaptations and improvements concerning the assurance and development of the quality are made.

Effect analysis

The degree to which targets are achieved, the effects of a certain measure and its side effects are determined and serve as a base for further steps of development.

The system is defined by clearly defined targets, indicators that can capture and analyse deviations from the desired state. For each element of the cycle – depending on the field of activity – appropriate measures and instruments have to be used. In the sense of the quality cycle it is not only about a basic agreement on the aims but above all about defined measures and their implementation and evaluation as well as about actions to be followed in order to

reach the targets and modify them. The main task of the internal quality assurance system is to continually close the quality cycle of planning, implementation, goal verification and improvement.

Indicators for adult education

Higher education institutions around the world in the 21st century are being faced with serving the educational and learning needs of a non-traditional population (older than the traditional age of 18-22). This new population requires different approaches for fulfilling their educational desires. They usually come into the higher education setting on a part time basis, study and take courses for a period of time, and then drop out for a while. They return later, seeking to “pick up” their course of study again where they were when they were previously enrolled. The institutions have to deal with shifting populations, learning needs, and how to work in these situations.

Identifying the elements of such a re-orientation toward lifelong learning was developed by adult education researchers at the University of Missouri (UM) in the Extension Division, and the St. Louis (UMSL) Campus on the North American Continent and the Northern Hemisphere, and by adult educator researchers at The University of The Western Cape (UWC), Cape Town, South Africa, on the African Continent and the Southern Hemisphere. During this process, elements of a re-orientation were adopted in order to address the issue of a higher education institution moving from a traditional orientation toward a lifelong learning orientation. The list of second indicators that we are going to approach is characterized as providing within the institution and community an atmosphere that is people-centred, caring, warm, informal, intimate and trusting. (Henschke, 2007)

(1) Overarching Frameworks – provide the context that facilitates operation as a lifelong learning institution. This would mean that all stakeholders relating to the institution have a financial policy and implementation plan, the legal framework, and the cultural/social sensitivity as a foundation to operating the institution for serving lifelong learners.

(2) Strategic Partnerships & Linkages – form collaborative relationships internationally, with other institutions nationally, and with other groups in society. The indicators needed here will focus on increasing the institution wide concern with promoting and increasing the number and quality of partnerships across multiple departmental, institutional, national, and international boundaries. Decisions regarding choice of programmes, assessment of learning outcomes, curriculum design and methods are a shared responsibility based on collaborative processes among academic staff, service staff and learners.

(3) Research – includes working across disciplines, institutions, investigating what kinds of institutional adjustments need to be made to help the institution better serve lifelong learners: i.e. convenience, transportation, child care services, locations of offerings, library accessibility, computer and website services, etc. In addition, targets are set for increasing and encouraging a broader range of research paradigms: action research, case studies, story telling, etc.

(4) Teaching & Learning Processes – Educators will need to move their teaching and learning processes away from the —instructional paradigm|| toward the —learning paradigm.|| thus encouraging self-directed learning, engaging

with the knowledge, interests and life situations which learners bring to their education, and using open and resource based learning approaches. They will need to use different teaching methods that respond to the diverse learning styles of lifelong learners, including co-learning, interactive learning, and continuous learning while integrating appropriate technology. The learners and faculty will need to mutually design individual learning programs that address what each learner needs and wants to learn in order to function optimally in their profession. This all means that the institution plans to employ and develop faculty who see their primary roles as facilitators of the learning process as opposed to dispensers of information, thus moving their development toward: knowing as a dialogical process; a dialogical relationship to oneself; being a continuous learner; self-agency and self-authorship; and connection with others.

(5) Administration Policies & Mechanisms – service to learners is the top priority of the administration. The mission statement and allocation of resources, including staffing is increased to reflect the institutional commitment for operating a lifelong learning institution. The operational system is imbued with a belief that demonstrates active and systematic listening turned into responsiveness to meet needs of lifelong learners. Registration, class times, and courses – including modular choices and academics support – are available at times and in formats geared to the convenience of learners.

(6) Decision Support Systems – provide within the institution and community an atmosphere that is people-centred, caring, warm, informal, intimate and trusting. It also maintains a demographic profile on programs aimed at increasing the numbers of: students served, courses offered, locations of offerings, and contracts for educational programs with different organizations.

(7) Student Support Systems & Services – provides learner-friendliness, convenient schedules, and in various ways encourages independent learning. Obligations and responsibilities of the learners, educational providers and administration service are made clear from the beginning. The importance of a positive attitude of those in the institution toward the constituencies and individuals that are being served is also a key part.

Conclusions

The purpose of the present paper is to help traditional higher education institutions implement a functional internal quality assurance system and make a shift toward an orientation of adult education. However, given the great diversity of higher education institutions both internal quality assurance systems and adult education provisions have to respond to the needs of the local contexts.

As we could notice in the previous chapters, crucial elements in building a functional internal quality assurance system as well as shifting towards an adult education oriented institution are the trust, autonomy and responsibility given to universities for the quality and continuous development of their education and other operations. When we use the word trust we refer to several dimensions: reliance on the character, ability, strength and honesty for the

institutions, confidence and reliability in their actions, justified belief that commitments will be honoured and maybe also hope or aspiration. Trust is a key concept in many policy debates as it is crucial for the continuous development of our academic area, it needs to be built up over time, it cannot just be decreed, but can it be lost more rapidly than it can be gained.

A trustworthy system meets all major purposes of higher education, builds on and furthers sound values, allows for different institutional profiles, provides for transparent safeguards and is open about strengths and shortcomings. Also, when referring to the focus adult education, the most important characteristic of a trustworthy system is that it provides quality for all, not only for the select few (Bergan 2011).

The embraced internal quality assurance model above represents the so called “QA soft power” defined by values and approaches which underpinned the ESG at its origins, commitments to collegiality, respect for diversity, strong focus on quality improvement or enhancement, recognition of institutional responsibility and autonomy, stakeholder consensus (Singh 2011).

We cannot guarantee that the two descriptions of characteristics will ultimately lead to a functional adult education focused institutional system, as we are convinced that a successful implementation of the recommendations is strictly conditioned by the motivation and responsibility that institutions have for the institutional quality and for the development of adult education provisions.

We can only speak about good quality education if the social dimension is also of good quality. Ensuring equal opportunities in higher education is not only a question of social justice, but also about improving and strengthening the quality of higher education, therefore quality assurance must take account of the social dimension of higher education in making certain that institutions would operate with the goal of fostering equality within the academic world and ultimately in society. Quality Assurance should strengthen its role in regularly monitor and foster the access, succession and completion rates of underrepresented groups in higher education (ESU 2011).

The characteristics described in the previous pages can provide a valuable set of recommendations into the construction of a system oriented towards adult education, continuously developed with the contribution of internal quality assurance structures, mechanisms and instruments. It is important to underline, however, that the initiative has to come from an intrinsic motivation of the higher education institution itself towards constructing an operating internal quality assurance system on one hand and towards a preoccupation for adult education provisions on the other hand.

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