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Quality management in higher education between desiderate and reality

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Abstract

The universities have to assure the highest level of quality management, to help teachers and students to acquire the European knowledge. The universities must be encouraged to develop better for the promotion of academic and civic values. However, the reality is often quite different: we find that the phrase "quality management" is understood differently, having different connotations, depending on the beliefs and values of the institutional managers, but also depending on the financial resources which they have and are willing to spend for an adequate training of all categories of personnel involved in education, with the aim of promoting an effective quality management to enable the acquisition of performance on all plans and to contribute, ultimately, to the development of the society.

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Higher education, quality management

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1. The role of higher education in modern society

Planning education is integrated into a society's development policy, involving change and constant innovation, focusing in particular on quality and less on quantity because "any policy is determined by the value systems" (Emerij, 1972, p. 9), the plan is to draw a path to a desirable future for a given situation which has great possibilities of realizing (Hummel, 1977, p. 6). But to plan the future of a company must determine its present and past because "at any time society faces many ways, but choices regarding future are limited by the arrangements and rules of the past" (Gass, 1972, p. 6).

The need for knowledge, specialization in a particular field has led to increasing requirements for higher education and to attributes it award an important mission on which the future of society depends: training specialists to meet the professional requirements of the labour market and society as a whole. As a result, worldwide there is a very rapid expansion of higher education, a massive increase in the number of colleges and universities, leading thus to a high demand for highly qualified academic trainers in their fields because the quality of education depends very much on their training and professional development. To ensure the progress of society, "not only national authorities, but also all types of educators, parents associations, associations of students, print and spoken have an important role" (Văideanu, 1998, pp. 42-43).

Universities must ensure **the highest level of quality, management, leading the students and teachers to new knowledge; they must be active on the global scale, contributing to sustained economic development.** In this direction, governments, universities, teachers and their students must show a total commitment on long term for a strong European knowledge. Universities should be encouraged to develop in different ways to promote academic and civic values.

But daunting challenges which take place in society will have a considerable impact on the work and role of each member of the higher education institution. All those involved in this process will be affected by certain changes and trends. These are:

- the need to be sensitive and capable of change (in accordance with the policies of changing governments, external requirements and social pressures)
- the request for a deeper knowledge of international perspectives that will be reflected in the courses' content;
- the request to capture essential aspects of the curriculum for employees, governments and institutions;
- the need for cooperation between public higher education institutions and, where is appropriate, even with private institutions;
- the awareness of the role of higher education institutions in society and need to contribute to national or local community development;
- to highlight the importance of the act of teaching, as opposed to research activity, which deserves to be considered the most important target for teachers in higher education.

Universities need to appeal to all the resources they have for a slight and a continue adapting to the requirements of society, which is constantly changing: "In an accelerated world, it is not possible a school reform for a long time, but it is necessary a constant adaptation" (Stanciu, 1973, p. 6).

Thus, the university is witnessing to all the changes taking place on the cultural, political, socio-economic, etc., much of these changes are provoked by the university teachers, contributing to a developed society and serving people's interests, their needs to be better prepared.

2. Quality management in higher education: fact or fiction?

The current trend must be quality management in universities involving to achieve the goals proposed by the Ministry of Education, by academics and to satisfy the needs for training and education of students. The efforts to increase the quality must come from the teachers and the university system as a whole. As a result, several training activities at the university level are designed to increase the quality and to achieve much more easily the proposed objectives. The following factors must be taken into consideration for o achieving the goals of quality management in higher education:

1. university teachers,
2. students as beneficiaries,
3. managers at the institutional level.

2.1. Academic profession - between appropriate and inappropriate

Higher education undergoing a difficult period because there are high demands for superior training, on one side, and because the number of trainers is very low in relation to its needs, with the current needs of society, on the other side. However, the selection criteria of academic teachers are very high and conditions and requirements they must meet are multiple and complex as "the efficiency of the educational quality is directly conditioned by the quality of teachers' formation and their teaching styles. We do as much education as the culture and dedication that we put in our activities" (Văideanu, 1998, p. 43).

Quality education depends very much on the quality of initial and continuing training. The role of the teacher, in general, and teacher at the university level, in particular, is very complex because he must demonstrate adaptability, flexibility and plasticity, both in teaching, training to meet the needs of students and to meet the requirements of the Ministry of Education, requirements which are constantly changing and taking on new dimensions, new meanings and directions.

Academic profession is so complex that appropriate training is essential and many higher education institutions do not provide training in the workplace to acquire the required

skills. This is true not only for young teachers, but also for teachers who have some experience. The role of academics is uncertain because the institutions, the academic profession and departments express different expectations and demands. But these expectations are semi tacitly; they are not expressed out loud and clear (Fulton, 1993). Teachers with considerable experience and even human resource development departments (Departments of Quality in Higher Education) should be aware of these expectations because they are derived from shared values, but teachers have not yet been able to socialize, will succeed harder to learn, to discover them. ***It is necessary to provide an opportunity to acquire these skills during employment.*** New pressures for quality teaching, professional development and training during their activities were accompanied by reviews of quality, from the outside.

In England, the Council for Quality monitors the quality assurance mechanisms for teaching, which are based on real involvement to ensure excellence in this field. In Australia, promotion procedures have been refined through valuable academic activities, consisting of teaching and service department for the institution and the community in response to external pressures. The need for involvement at the institutional level for teaching priority was expressed in the Guidelines for Effective Teaching. A National Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education evaluates quality assurance mechanisms and results of these actions. Impact on staff development is considerable.

Continuous vocational training has a long history. While some have viewed it as ***"a key objective rather than a desirable one, more likely as an obligation than as an option, it is a professional expectation, a duty and a responsibility that higher education institutions have for their members"*** (Gordon and Partington, 1996, pp. 62-75), seldom this view has echoed among those who allocate human resources in institutions or at national level. Courses offered under the voluntary conditions by certain services are increasingly common to meet this need. When someone joins this reality with the massive changes taking place in higher education, there are other questions waiting response, ***"why, if the quality of teaching is so much concern for the government, so few resources are allocated to support teachers university to learn how to improve teaching performance?"***, ***" Why, in Germany, there are only 60 professional staff trainers for a potential audience of 140,000 teachers? "***, ***" How can this culture be changed?"***.

In many countries in Europe or the U.S. a great importance to professional development of university teachers is granted. Higher education institutions such as universities, colleges and polytechnics carried out an intense activity, they depend on people to provide and to offer their services to those who request and need them. ***The quality of teachers in higher education is very important for these institutions to develop to its full potential. Staffs of teachers of high quality and well motivated professional with a very high culture are essential in building excellence*** (World Bank, 1994).

Often, it is ***considered that the university trainers are not sufficiently prepared to undertake activities required by academic career***, talk about their inability to achieve its objectives in the teaching classroom because they have no teaching ambitions. In less developed countries, there are particular issues that affect teachers' ability to acquire special skills required. When they receive salaries that do not serve to cover daily needs, it should not surprise us that they

are seeking a second or even third job. Under these conditions, the quality of the teaching activities decreases because they don't have the required time to prepare extensively. Retention of teachers in these conditions is possible only because higher education institutions provide service home with a modest rent, but the opportunities to increase financial resources and even their time are minimal if not nonexistent. The fight for survival greatly limits the time that most teachers can devote to activities other than teaching character.

An important aspect of the teaching profession is research that must occupy a high share in academic activities. However, although current trends are to promote a quality research, however, individual performance self-evaluation sheets, which differ from one university to another, the criteria for assessment of the quantitative research remain, so that if staff teaching at universities in Europe or America, would be subject to these criteria, more than 75% of them would discover that their place is not in the university, because they are not sufficiently prepared!. We emphasize in this context, the importance of qualitative criteria for assessing researchers, criteria by which are evaluated teachers from many countries.

As we can see, the continuous training involves not only acquiring and developing skills and personal skills, but especially the formation and development of those skills, interpersonal abilities which contribute to good management at higher education institution and local community level.

2.2. Students as beneficiary of knowledge - key factors or not for a successful quality management?

In recent decades, radical changes took place among students. Today's university students are distinguished from those of yesterday, primarily because they are more numerous. If before there was talk about higher education institutions which educate the elite of those times (higher education institutions of the time benefit by considerable material resources), now we can speak ever more about a massification of education (Frenay et al., 1998), more than 40% of young people have access to one of the forms of higher education, leading thus to a diversification of the types of students. Mass higher education yet educate elites, but for a wider range of professions and social positions, with a greater emphasis on transfer and training skills.

Students who work part-time are becoming more numerous, in several countries; they represent the majority of the total number of students who study in higher education. This "new customer" is mainly made up of adults who had a delayed "start", or seeking other specializations useful for their service. These two groups have different needs from each other or from students who come from school which leads to different teaching methods.

In a market economy, students, especially those who pay for access to higher education, are considered clients, even customers by authorities at the university level. Their expectations, in this new hypostasis, are totally different from the period when higher education address to a privileged minority of students. In most countries, in higher education institutions, teaching is followed by evaluation, and students are expected that teachers to take notes about the

suggestions made by them. However, due to transient student's status, their expressed dissatisfaction report dissipates and often does not lead to action. Students from many countries, and especially those with fee changed their status from recipients of scholarships granted by state or university, becoming real economic forces, taking into account increasingly more of them options. Education has become an industry and the educational market has become a competitive international arena.

The diversity of students as customers is explained by the fact that there are very few universities which operate a rigorous selection for admission, placing, in the same course, students with different levels of training, often leading to low performance, or even abandon their studies.

Under these conditions, although students are key factors in promoting an efficient quality management, their requirements and needs, often not consistent with those of academics and, implicitly, with the society' needs. Because universities focus on quantity regarding students, we can speak without the slightest exaggeration, about a poor quality of management at the institutional level because it is a policy practiced by the vast majority of universities, leading to a quality level far below the limit imposed by the Ministry of Education and, implicitly, by the society in which we live.

2.3. Managers at the institutional level, between authentic and surrogate

Effective management within institutions require new skills, while the emphasis is on quality and professionalism, there is a protest, a complaint among institutions related to "*new management cultures*" that removes the old spirit, academic, collegiate, but the complexity of the requirements necessary institutional managers make these cultures to be essential for them to become true professionals. In an attempt to acquire these skills, academics need to learn commercial management techniques, to adapt to academic context and to never forget that they serve the university mission. Technical skills necessary rectors, prorectors, managing directors of today's institutions of higher education put into question some management structures traditional and specific to their service. Under these conditions, lots of people in higher education need and really should seek a development support at managerial level.

Institutional managers, deans and heads, such as department teachers, are partners and should ensure that change occurs. They have an important role, leading their colleagues, teachers, being a key part in implementing the change at the institutional level. They will share the "agitation" which involves leading teachers and institutions, in a transition period; in any case, they will need to have skills tangible with the goals of the institution.

Often it happens that institutional managers to refuse funding for professional development of teachers and administrative staff of universities, to promote a development policy, based on the competitiveness criteria, between different categories of staff, leading ultimately to dysfunctional relationships between them, to a tense atmosphere at work, stress and poor performance. We can say that we are dealing with genuine cases of deficitary management,

situations present in large-scale in European higher education, and why not, with surrogate managers interpreting management theories according to their level of culture and education.

3. Conclusions and suggestions

According to Mukhrjee and Singh (1994) "must be a comprehensive and a total approach where development of academic, managerial, administrative and technical staff to be considered as a whole, in an infrastructure that facilitates these issues." There are two other key principles which should be in everyone's mind:

- *teachers at all levels should be encouraged to engage in lifelong learning to acquire skills in the workplace and to fulfil the role for which they were employed in these institutions;*
- *all programs of staff development must be flexible and easy to access.*

According to this model, higher education institutions around the world should have clear strategies to protect staff development, in general, and teachers, in particular, at any level of career development. These strategies must be integrated along with human resource strategies so that selection and promotion criteria, career planning to be influenced by them.

Based on these aspects, we will make some suggestions that address the various factors that may contribute to a quality management performance among higher education institutions in Romania and elsewhere.

Trainers at the university level with (or without) experience:

- awareness and understanding of different modes and ways in which students learn;
- training and skills development to evaluate students in order to teach them how to learn;
- making aware of IT applications on the discipline, and access to materials and resources related to teaching technology,
- responsiveness to "signals" of external market related with of employers needs;
- knowledge of new changes in teaching and learning, especially dual learning requirements and face to face learning (teacher and students) and distance-learning, using the same learning materials with face to face learning;
- ability to seek help from colleagues, authorities, when they are confronted with problems whose solution does not foresee;
- understanding the impact of international and multicultural factors which it will have on the curriculum;
- ability to teach tu a huge variety of students a, from students with different ages, from students with different socio-economic situation, from different races and ethnicities during the day;
- ability to work with more students than ever before, courses, seminars and laboratories without losing the quality of teaching and learning;
- developing a strategy that can adapt to a professionally and personally change;

- use of modern teaching ways, resources in order to transform teaching into an interesting and exciting activity for students;
- making grants and research projects to gather the necessary funds for research and for the development of knowledge in general;
- leadership of PhD and researchers;
- possession of competencies regarding project management, especially projects with international participation.

For higher education graduates who want to embrace, in particular, teaching career:

- return to basics, which means knowing the history of education, its development and the steps it will take in the future;
- respect for them teachers and have made a significant contribution to them career;
- knowledge great educators who had a high impact for the society and follow their examples because the models' power may exercise a positive influence in particular on their teaching;
- respect for the chosen profession and considering it, rather as a way of being, than a simple job;
- trying to reflect deeply before choosing to be teachers because the decision can change the destiny of the innocent ones (students), in good or bad.

For institutional managers:

Institutional managers are those which allocate funds, specifically for human resources development. They must demonstrate certain skills and abilities, including:

- management skills of people such as: team building and helping teachers to develop themselves on academic, professional and personal level;
- calculate and understand the financial implication in the development of the institution in accordance with standards set nationally and internationally;
- need to be aware of IT resources for the institutions they manage;
- receptiveness to new changes in external contexts, such as competitive threats;
- awareness of the institution's position on national level;
- understanding how decision making operations of institutional management can be used in an institutional context, in a college.

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