

ELEMENTS OF INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AT POLISH UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract:

Higher education is changing constantly. Signing of Bologna Declaration in 1999 caused intensification of actions related to quality assurance at universities. Quality assurance can be external or internal. The article presents elements of internal quality assurance in higher education. European standards for internal quality assurance include:

- policy and procedures for quality assurance, also a strategy for the continuous enhancement of quality,
- approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards,
- assessment of students according to approved criteria,
- quality assurance of teaching staff,
- learning resources and student support,
- information systems to collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of programmes of studies,
- providing public information about the programmes of studies.

The article presents the outcome of research conducted at 79 Polish institutions of higher and university education regarding the elements of internal quality assurance.

Keywords: internal quality assurance, higher education, European standards for quality assurance

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1. INTRODUCTION

The organisations of nowadays function within the conditions of information as well as knowledge based economy. Searching out, location and knowledge exploitation processes play a crucial role in the case of the knowledge based economy, which translates to the fact that universities as organisations responsible for the conveyance and execution of scientific research as well as for rendering educational services are perceived as institutions also responsible for the creation of contemporary social and economical changes.

Education of highly qualified personnel for the needs of the economy draws attention to the issue of the need of ensuring adequate quality of education within institutions of higher and university education. Undertaking of activities from the aforementioned scope in Europe has resulted in the 1999 conclusion of The Bologna Declaration, whilst the Lisbon strategy adopted in the year 2000 defines the strategic goals that the European Union of the 21st century has to face, which include the improvement of the quality and efficiency of educational systems.

The goal of the hereby article is constituted by the bringing closer of the notion as well as of the elements of internal quality assurance with regards to institutions of higher and university education along with the presentation of the results of examinations from the aforementioned scope which are conveyed in Polish colleges and universities.

2. ENSURING OF QUALITY IN INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE LIGHT OF THE BOLOGNA PROCESS

The review of the available literature points to the fact that ensuring of quality with regards to institutions of higher education is to be understood as all activities aimed at the upkeep and mastering of the quality of rendered, services, especially those of educational character. The aforementioned activities should definitely be of system character. Quality assurance systems may be construed by independent institutions operating within the surroundings of institutions of university and higher education or by the given institution itself, hence in such case such are referred to as internal quality assurance systems.

Quality assurance systems should lead to the increase of trust as with regards to the fact the educational services executed by the university or college meet the predetermined quality requirements. Therefore, the goal of the quality assurance system is constituted by the generation of trust of the management of the given institution of educational character and the external system, should pave the way for the generation of the trust of its clients¹ as well as all other stakeholders (Wawak, 2012, p. 300-301).

The European process of intensification of activities of the character of elaboration and implementation of quality assurance systems in institutions of higher and university education was initiated on the 19th June 1999 through the conclusion of the declaration of the Bologna Declaration. The superior goal of the Bologna Process was established as the foundation of the European Area of Higher Education. What has amongst others been devoted attention to within the provisions of the document was the necessity for the undertaking and promotion of European co-operation within the scope of ensuring applicable and adequate quality (The Bologna Declaration of 19 June 1999).

Currently the Bologna Process is perceived as a whole European undertaking, inter-government process executed in co-operation with the academic society. Its significance is constituted by the adoption of particular and clearly defined principles of co-operation and mechanisms of comparison of various solutions adopted in higher and university education in parallel to the ensuring of the diversity and autonomy of universities in particular European countries (Kraśniewski, 2009, p. 7).

Activities executed as part of the Bologna Process are conveyed by the governments of the Bologna Process Declaration signatory member states, by universities, colleges and other institutions which function within the area of higher education as well as by a number of other organisations of European

¹ The review of literature points to the fact that the group of clients and stakeholders of an institution of higher education most often include: students (as well as candidates and graduates), employees, employers, parents, the state which represents the society.

character, such as, for instance: European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, European University Association, European Student's Union. The aforementioned activities stem from particular documents – reports elaborated regularly for the needs of the meetings of representatives of states which participate within the Bologna Process.

Within the area of quality assurance the document of strategic importance is constituted by the 2005 report (also referred to as the Bergen Report) entitled *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*. Elaborated by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, the report points out key aspects and offers hints and recommendations with regards to an internal and external quality assurance in higher education.

2.1 External quality assurance

European standards connected to the issue of the external quality assurance within the European Higher Education Area encompass the following (Standards and Guidelines..., 2009, p. 8):

- application of the assessment of the procedures of internal quality assurance which are implemented in universities,
- determination of processes/procedures of external quality assurance,
- elaboration of criteria for the needs of undertaking of decisions,
- project design of processes respective for the particular goal,
- reporting,
- elaboration of supplementary and auxiliary procedures,
- conveyance of periodical reviews,
- preparation of system analyses.

The provisions of the below table 1 present the characteristics of the aforementioned standards.

Table 1: The characteristics of standards of external quality assurance in institutions of higher and university education

Standard	Characteristics
The assessment of procedures of internal quality assurance	The system of internal quality assurance should take into the consideration all applicable processes of quality assurance of the given institution of higher education along with provisions of the assessment of their effectiveness. It is the role of the activities executed inside the university that should constitute the foundation for the conveyance of assessment by the external agencies of quality assurance.
Procedures of internal quality assurance	Within the system of external quality assurance all institutions the scope of the operation of which is constituted by the assessment of the quality of education should be attributed with applicable tasks and goals. All interested entities shall participate within the process of the formulation of the above. Moreover, what is important is that all results are published.
Decision making criteria	All official decisions undertaken by the agencies of external quality assurance should be based upon the predetermined criteria, hence the aforementioned decisions in a significant manner influence the functioning of the institution of higher education as well as upon the faculties and educational programmes executed therein.
Process applicable for the determined type of goal	Activities executed as part of the internal quality assurance should be adjusted to the goals and tasks which constituted the core of the operation of agencies. Amongst process elements what should be determined are: the choice as well as schooling of experts, participation of students, taking the self-assessment of the institution of higher education into the consideration.
Reporting	Elaborated, later published reports should be construed with the application of legible language and capable of being understood by its recipients. A report prepared in a correct manner should encompass: an analysis and assumptions, positive opinions along with all applicable recommendations.
Supplementary procedures	Quality assurance processes should also encompass a supplementary procedure, which would guarantee execution of recommendations as well as undertaking of all applicable enhancement activities.
Periodical reviews	Ensuring adequate quality constitutes a continuous process, therefore all activities undertaken within the scope of external quality assurance should be executed with the application of a cyclical manner.
System analyses	Quality assurance agencies should in a periodical manner elaborate documents containing analyses, assumptions, commentaries connected to the conveyed reviews and assessments.

Source: Own elaboration based upon: (Standards and Guidelines..., 2009, pp. 20-22).

In the process of structuring of quality assuring systems external agencies take advantage of the three basic models of quality assurance: accreditation, assessment as well as review.

Accreditation constitutes the confirmation of the fact that the education programme or the given institution of higher education meets the particular border criteria determined by the agency, i.e. the determined and adopted quality criteria. Accreditation is subject to periodical awarding, whilst the decision on its awarding is undertaken *ex post* based upon the comparison of the achievements of the given organisation as well as based on particular (Chmielecka, 2000, p. 160).

On the other hand the goal of the quality assessment is constituted by the issuance of the certificate on the quality of executed education processes, stemming from the comparison of the achievements of the given institution with the predetermined standards as well as the placement of the achieved results upon the scale of assessment (for instance awarding an applicable category). The process of assessment concentrates on the content of programmes, organisations as well as results of their education. Indication data are treated as the supplementation of information about the given university (Wójcicka, 2001, p. 89).

The goal of the review (audit) is constituted by the verification of the method of functioning of the internal mechanisms of quality assurance and quality improvement in the case of the researched

institution. The review is directed at the method with the application of which the given institution manages quality, therefore it encompasses the conveyance of the various types of analyses the aim of which is to ensure that the given university applies all applicable quality management mechanisms (Wójcicka, 2001, pp. 101-102).

The currently functioning national quality assurance systems constitute certain combinations of the presented models. The main goal of such systems should be constituted by the mobilisation of all institutions of higher education to undertake activities aimed at the enhancement and improvement of quality of all rendered services of educational character as part of the internal quality assurance system.

2.2 Internal quality assurance

The essence of the internal quality assurance of educational processes is constituted by the undertaking, by an institution of higher education or by a university, activities leading to the mastering and enhancement of processes being carried out therein. European guidelines from the aforementioned scope, contained within the Bergen Report have been encompassed within seven groups of standards, which are as follows (Standards and Guidelines..., 2009, pp. 16-19):

1. *A university should formulate its own policies as well as particularly determined procedures within the scope of the quality of offered services and should execute strategy towards the constant improvement of quality. The aforementioned documents should possess a formal status and should be generally available.*

The policies should also include declarations on the topic of goals as well as determine the methods of their execution. The procedures as well as instructions may constitute the source of particular and detailed information from the aforementioned scope. The policies should amongst others deal with such issues as: the relations between the activity of didactic and research character of the given institution, organisation of the quality assurance system, engagement of students in quality assurance processes, obligations of particular bodies as well as organisational units in the process of quality assurance. The adopted policy should constitute the form of structuring of the culture of quality of the given educational institution.

2. *Within an institution of higher education there should function mechanism which determine the issue of periodical confirmation and monitoring of executed educational programmes as well as their effects.*

Undertaking and execution of effective activities within the scope of quality assurance contribute to the increase of trust to the notion of higher education amongst the students as well as other stakeholders (employers, parents, local communities). Ensuring of adequate quality of programmes as well as their effects should therefore encompass: development as well as publication of educational effects, drawing attention to the content of programmes, regular obtainment of employer opinions, students' participation in ensuring applicable quality as well as monitoring of their progress, availability of adequate resources supporting educational processes.

3. *The process of student assessment should take place based upon the adopted criteria.*

Student assessment is one of the most important elements of higher education, therefore it is important that it is to be conveyed in a professional manner. Student assessment procedures should: enable for the execution of the assumed effects of schooling and education, include clear cut assessment criteria, be adjusted to the needs of the defined goals, be subject to administrative verification and control.

4. *A university should possess methods which guarantee that the academic personnel possesses adequate competences.*

The academic and didactic personnel is the most important resource of any institution of higher education. It also constitutes the most important element of the quality of education. It is important that the personnel is able to document all of the required competences, i.e. knowledge, experience as well as skills enabling for efficient passing over of knowledge and information. Institutions of higher

education should apply adequate procedures of recruitment and employees should be offered the possibility to develop their skills.

5. *Possession by the institution of higher education of sufficient resources which offer support to all education processes executed by students.*

During the process of pursuing higher education students should be offered the possibility of versatile development. What is of significance is the possession by the university of such resources as: a well equipped library, modern didactic infrastructure, access to computers as well as execution of close monitoring and care over the students by the members of the personnel of the institution.

6. *The institution of higher education should possess at its disposal all applicable IT systems applied for the needs of gathering and communication of information applied in the process of effective management of the offered educational programmes as well as other activities.*

IT systems should gather data on the following topics: results achieved by the students, employability of institution's graduates, students' satisfaction from the executed educational and schooling programmes, lecturers' effectiveness, available scientific resources, own measurements of effectiveness of operation of the institution. Possession of the aforementioned types of data allows for the execution of the assessment of the correctness of the functioning of particular quality assurance system elements.

7. *A university should publish information connected to the offered education programmes as well as their effects*

Universities, as institutions of public utility character, should communicate all applicable information with regards to the executed and completed educational services. All of the published information should be of neutral character and should refer to: the offered educational programmes as well as their effects, applied procedures within the scope of education, opinions as well as the location of work of its graduates.

Implementation of European standards of internal quality assurance should lead to the improvement of the effectiveness of functioning of monitoring mechanisms as well as to the enhancement of the quality of education in institutions of higher education.

3. RESEARCH METHOD AND THE RESULTS OF EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

All of the research has been conveyed in 79 institutions of higher and university education all over Poland in the years. 2012-2013. The choice of the research group was of target character. All of the examinations have been executed based upon a survey questionnaire. The main goal of the conveyed research was to offer an answer to the following question: to what degree do elements of internal quality assurance systems which function within Polish universities meet the European standards, initially formulated within the Bergen Report. The presented results of examinations refer to the applicable standards within the area of the possession by the institution of higher education of resources supporting the education of students as well as ensuring adequate quality of the didactic and academic personnel.

Table 2 presents the distribution of answers to the question: *What activities associated with the ensuring of resources supporting student education processes are being executed as part of the quality assurance system in Your institution?*

Answers were provided by 78 institutions.

Table 2: The frequency of the occurrence of activities associated with the ensuring of resources supporting student education

Activity type	Answers		Observation percentage
	N	Percentage	
The analysis and assessment of didactic infrastructure as well as didactic aids	71	13,8%	91,0%
The assessment of equipment of libraries	68	13,3%	87,2%
Access of students to computer databases within the university and outside it	71	13,8%	91,0%
The assessment of work of particular administration entities	53	10,3%	67,9%
Research and examination of the expectations of students with regards to didactic infrastructure	45	8,8%	57,7%
Functioning of the internet website of the university	68	13,3%	87,2%
The possibility and capability to contact university employees over the Internet	67	13,1%	85,9%
The determination of caretakers for students of the particular faculty as well as university year	63	12,3%	80,8%
Other	7	1,4%	9,0%

Source: Own elaboration

The obtained results point to the fact that in the case of the examined universities (91%) the most frequent activities directed at the ensuring of adequate resources supporting the process of education are constituted by:

- the analysis and assessment of didactic infrastructure as well as didactic means,
- students' access to computer databases within the university and outside it.

In more than 80% institutions the elements of internal quality assurance encompass:

- the assessment of the equipment of libraries,
- functioning of the internet website of the university,
- the possibility to contact university employees over the Internet,
- determination of caretakers for students of the particular faculty as well as university year

The least popular activities are constituted by the conveyance of research amongst students on the topic of their expectations with regards didactic infrastructure. Such activities are executed in almost 60% of all examined universities.

Answers from the category *other* amongst others featured:

- e-learning employee duty,
- survey assessment of the operation of Dean's offices,
- organisation of additional courses and student seminars.

The second question referred to the standard associated with the ensuring of the quality of personnel responsible for the execution and conveyance of didactic classes. What has been presented in Table 3 is the distribution of answers obtained to the question: *What activities connected to the ensuring of quality of the didactic personnel are being executed as part of the quality assurance system in Your institution?* Answers were provided by 79 institutions of higher education, i.e. all which participated within the examination and research.

Table 3: The frequency of execution of activities associated with the ensuring of the quality of didactic personnel

Activity type	Answers		Observation percentage
	N	%	
Periodical assessment of academic teachers (didactic and academic employees)	79	16,0%	100,0%
Observation of classes performed by the superior of the employee	76	15,4%	96,2%
Execution of survey polls amongst students with regards the quality of executed classes	79	16,0%	100,0%
Evaluation of classes conveyed by the didactic personnel	49	9,9%	62,0%
Examination of the coherence of the scope of conveyed classes with the research and development activity executed by didactic and academic personnel	36	7,3%	45,6%
The obligation for the participation by the didactic personnel in pedagogical courses preparing for the conveyance and execution of classes	20	4,1%	25,3%
Formal determination of the principles of entrusting of classes in accordance with the competences held by all applicable personnel	36	7,3%	45,6%
Passing over onto the hands of employees all applicable information on the topic of the results of the assessment of their classes which is executed by students participating within those classes	74	15,0%	93,7%
Recruitment procedures which guarantee at least the minimum level of required professional competences	37	7,5%	46,8%
Other	7	1,4%	8,9%

Source: Own elaboration

The obtained results point to the fact that in the case of all institutions of higher education, which have been included within the research the periodical assessment of academic and didactic personnel is conveyed with regards to the quality of conveyed classes. Adoption of such approach is understandable hence both elements are required with the provisions of the law which oblige all institutions of higher education operating upon the territory of Poland.

What should be drawn attention to is the fact that in more than 90% of all researched colleges and universities observation of classes conveyed by the didactic personnel is subject to regular execution. In 45,6% of all universities i.e. in 36 of all examined institutions the process of the verification of the degree of coherence of the scope of conveyed classes with the research and development activity executed by didactic and academic personnel is also being carried out. The same number of institutions of higher education established clearly determined principles of entrusting of classes in accordance to the competences of didactic employees. In about 50% of all examined institutions there have been implemented procedures which guarantee at least the minimum level of all required professional competences.

An activity least often executed is the participation of the didactic personnel in pedagogical courses which prepare for the conveyance and execution of classes, undertaken in only 25,3% of institutions which means that only in the case of only 20 examined colleges and universities such obligation has been introduced.

The other proposal also included:

- conveyance of workshops from the scope of the quality of education, publication of information on the topic of available workshops as well as conferences the topics of which were associated with the conveyed faculty of education,
- meetings of all academic teachers with the management of the university organised twice a year,
- methodical meetings, seminars connected to the modern methods of schooling and education.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In the conditions of globalisation as well as the observed increase of international competition within the field of education, what seems important is the ensuring of adequate comparison of European systems of higher education as well as the increase of their competitiveness. Proposals of activities leading to the execution of the aforementioned challenge are listed within the provisions of the Declaration of the Bologna Process which has been signed and is being implemented by 47 countries. Amongst the determined activities what is of significant importance is the European co-operation within the area of ensuring quality.

European standards as well as guidelines connected to the external and internal quality assurance in institutions of higher education constitute the basic guidelines with regards to the elaboration of quality assurance systems.

All examinations conveyed in 79 institutions of higher education operating upon the territory of Poland prove that the two chosen elements of the internal quality assurance systems functioning within those organisations are coherent with the provisions of European standards as well as guidelines from the aforementioned scope and therefore should contribute to the enhancement of the quality of educational processes.

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