

Applicable Quality Models in Higher Education in Argentina^{*}

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The aim of this paper is the study of quality management systems applied to higher education. The specific objectives are to present different models of approach to the concept of quality education applicable in Argentina: to study the legal framework governing university education, and to introduce considerations about its evaluation. The National Education Law 26026/2006 is clear about State responsibility to ensure quality education for all residents, and implementation of assessment policy to secure it. Accreditation is the process commonly used to give public account of the degree of compliance of higher education institutions. Periodic accreditation of undergraduate careers, whose titles correspond to professions regulated by the State, is performed. External evaluations present evaluation reports that are public.

Keywords: Higher Education; Quality Models; Argentina

Introduction

Quality is a word which needs qualifier, defining quality as an attribute. Another idea is to consider it as a “standard of excellence”. Rupérez Lopez (1994) evokes the reference to a safe value, as an attribute or set of attributes of objects and services that meet the expectations for the perception of citizens.

It is essential nowadays to manage educational organizations based on criteria of quality and continuous improvement, applied for some time in the industry. It is therefore interesting to know the origin of these criteria and the feasibility of its application in higher education institutions. Deming (1982) introduced quality systems applied to industrial companies in Japan after World War II, setting the fourteen fundamentals of management, one of which is established in order to constantly improve the product and service, with the goal of being competitive, which means continuous improvement. That country applied the Kai-zen, a humanistic approach that is based on that every human being can contribute to improving their workplace, further emphasizing continuous improvement involving everyone in an organization. A relevant Kai-zen principle is: “If we do what we’ve always done, we will get beyond where we have arrived”.

According to Vasquez Lema (2007), the meaning of “quality” is ambiguous, and there are various approaches to its definition. It could be considered that the required quality is achieved when it meets customer satisfaction, through a competitive organization based on quality processes. According to ISO 9000:2000, quality is the degree to which a set of inherent characteristics fulfills requirements. It then becomes essential to study the internal processes and the optimization of resources.

Canton & Vázquez (2010) state that concept of quality, from

industries, was understood at first as a control focusing on results, but soon evolving towards more open models covering indicators and processes. In the quality concept three levels are represented: system, process and product. First, a series of models were developed, framed in the product, after emerging systems were oriented to a set of standards and regulations, and finally the approach has focused on the processes that have achieved significant development in all quality work.

Global transformations of the international order and the progress of the reorganization of the world economy over the value of technology have also targeted at education systems. They bear the responsibility to generate and disseminate knowledge in society and therefore they constitute the decisive instance on the basis of the technological race (Aguerrondo, 2008).

Many of the definitions relating to quality have been based on their assessment, identifying standards, criteria and/or requirements, which can vary according to context, orientations and social needs prevailing at a given time (Proyecto Alfa, 2008).

The aim of this paper is the study of quality management systems applicable to higher education in Argentina. The specific objectives are to present different models of approach to the concept of quality education, to study the legal framework governing university education, and to introduce considerations about its evaluation.

A documentary analysis of quality models is performed in chronological order, the National Education Law 26026/2006 is presented, and evaluation principles are considered.

Development

Models of Quality Estimation

In recent years there have been several models for estimating

^{*}Quality in higher education.

the quality standards applicable to any type of company or organization, both private and public. Their objective is to implement articulation between the components of the organization, enabling the management and conduction of quality. A summary of the main concepts are presented, as they could be interesting for practical application in educational concerns.

Malcolm Baldrige (1982): The National Quality Award Malcolm Baldrige in the US was created in memory of the Secretary of Commerce that prompted it. It is based on the concept that Total Quality Management is necessary for organizations to compete in the international market. The system is based on the following concepts: leadership, customer focus, organizational and staff learning, participation and development of employees and partners, agility, responsiveness and flexibility, future orientation, innovation management, public accountability, focus on results and value generation.

EFQM (European Foundation for Quality Management, 1991): It is an example of theoretical framework and practical application. This European model is useful for the evaluation of educational institutions using homogeneous parameters to identify strengths, assess the quality of education and introduce a culture of continuous improvement at all levels (Rios et al., 2003). It is based on orientation towards results and customer-oriented, leadership and constancy of people development and involvement, continuous learning and improvement, collaboration, social responsibility. It is easy to adapt to the educational field, is based on self understood as comprehensive and systematic review of the activities and results. It is based on orientation towards results and customer-oriented, leadership development and people involvement, continuous improvement, collaboration, social responsibility. It is easy to adapt to the educational field, and it is based on self assessment understood as comprehensive and systematic review of the activities and results.

Cajide, 1994: The author refers to higher education stating that the definition of quality remains a controversy because of the diversity of institutions and the definition of the functions of higher education. The quality is associated with the level at which targets are met, added level value that satisfies the user, excellence of processes and results, proper development of skills and abilities, training and efficiency.

De Miguel et al., 1994: They propose a multidimensional concept of educational quality, considering various aspects: Quality as excellence in relation to standards, and control on products. Centers that promote quality culture. Quality as fitness for purpose and needs of the clients and centers that adequately cover the provisions of the legal framework. Quality as an economic product: efficient centers and accountability. Quality as transformation and change: improve student performance and increase the added value, with organizational development-oriented centers.

Norm IRAM 30000:2001: Educational organizations can be treated as industrial organizations in the sense of combining efforts for continuous improvement and implementation of systems of quality management in their structures and in their missions. The "Guide to interpreting the ISO 9001 for education" (IRAM 3000, 2001) states that the adoption of a system of quality management should be a strategic decision of the institution. It is applicable to any type of organization that provides education, state run or private, within systems of formal and informal education. For several decades the concept of quality has been acquiring an explicit centrality in the field of higher

education. It promotes the adoption of an approach based on the application of a system of processes within the organization to apply the PDCA: Plan-Do-Check-Act, to take action in the form of continuously improving process performance.

In the given context, education is the "product", understood as the improvement in the knowledge, intellectual skills, habits and attitudes of the learner.

"Customer" is the organization or person receiving the product, in an educational organization clients can be students, parents or tutors, national State, provinces, city councils, employers, and the whole society is a stakeholder in the quality of education.

The sequence of processes should define the inputs (programs, teaching materials, qualified teachers, available and appropriate facilities), the outputs (students with the expected learning), the indicators of the process efficiency (test scores, passing rate, dropout, net training time).

The quality of education as a totalizing concept and defining axes (Aguerrondo, 2008): The author argues that the emergence of the concept "quality of education" historically occurred within a specific context. It comes from a quality result model, with final product quality, adequate to concepts of social efficiency ideology that looks at the teacher as an operator of instructional packages, with prefabricated objectives, activities and materials, and in which the "quality" is measured by almost isolated phenomena, which are reflected in the final product.

Her proposal is that the concept of quality is complex and totalizing: the power of the concept of quality is that it is a totalizing concept, comprehensive, multidimensional, social and historically determined: it is read according to historical and cultural patterns that have to do with a specific reality. It constitutes an objective image of educational transformation: in a given society, the quality of education is defined by its adjustment to the demands of society (which changes over time and space). It constitutes a control pattern of the service efficiency: efficient educational system will not be that with less cost per student, but the one that, optimizing the resources, will be able to provide quality education to the entire population. The axes or dimensions that describe technical and pedagogical choices can be grouped into three broad areas: epistemological axis, pedagogical axis and organizational-administrative axis.

An example of monitoring of certain aspects for continuous quality improvement in the Chair of Edaphology since 2007, is the management of some simple items based on IRAM 30000 (2001). Within the "inputs" of the educational process can be cited: available and suitable facilities, available and suitable materials, and qualified teachers. The "outputs" refer to achieve the expected learning by students, by controlling appropriate teaching methods and appropriate evaluations. Teachers are qualified, professors and practical work chiefs possess M. Sc. or Dr. degree, and teaching materials are continuously improved. The Chair has two books of his own: Edaphology: basis and environmental applications in Argentina (2011); and Teaching practices with pedagogical purposes (2013, in press).

National Education Law 26026/2006

This Argentine law considers education and knowledge as a public good and as personal and social rights guaranteed by the State, it is a national priority and becomes a state policy to encourage the development of the nation. In ARTICLE 4 introduces the concept of quality of education falling on the national

government, the provinces and the autonomous city of Buenos Aires, “primary responsibility for providing an integral education, permanent and of quality for all inhabitants of the nation, guaranteeing equality, generosity and fairness in the exercise of this right, with the participation of social organizations and families”. In Chapter V: Higher Education, it indicates that policies, regulatory mechanisms and criteria for assessment and articulation concerning Higher Education Institutes will be established in all jurisdictions.

Quality Assessment in Higher Education

The National Assessment and Accreditation Commission (CONEAU) is an Argentine government agency attached to the Ministry of Education, responsible for the evaluation of public and private universities and accreditation and accreditation of their undergraduate and graduate careers and their corresponding titles. External evaluations reports from CONEAU are public. Consulting and advisory committees are constituted by ad hoc experts. The members of the advisory committees act autonomously, according to a code of ethics (CONEAU, 2011).

Quality in higher education can be defined as the degree of fit between the actions that an institution, or academic program launched to comply with the guidelines issued from his mission and the institutional goals, and the results obtained by these actions. Defining institutional purposes must necessarily consider two dimensions:

1) External consistency means that it meets the requirements of the external environment, which materialize in demands from the labor market, the academic community or socioeconomic particular environment. External consistency ensures the relevance of the purposes and allows comparability between institutions and programs.

2) Internal consistency means the translation of these requirements according to the own priorities and principles of the institution. This dimension allows deploying proactive capacity of the university, and expanding the range of possible deals on the higher education system, ensuring a diverse offering that seeks to provide a comprehensive response to social needs.

Institutions need to inform the public about the extent to which they meet the promises they make to students, employers and society in general, as well as the use made of resources that are public or private. Generally, the process used for this is accreditation (Project Alpha, 2008), which consists of a special evaluation process leading to a formal decision of acceptance, rejection, or in some cases, conditionality, based on the degree to which an institution or program meets the demands.

One of the functions of CONEAU is the periodic accreditation of undergraduate careers whose titles correspond to state-regulated professions. The Ministry of Education determines, in accordance with the University Council, the list of titles whose professional work would risk directly the health, safety, rights, property, or the formation of the inhabitants.

Edwards Risopatrón (1991) considers that the assessment is the process of investigation of an educational reality. It must be considered that the meaning of education is diverse-or can be-in different cultures, so that the evaluation of the quality of education must be inserted into the framework of a cultural assessment.

Discussion

A relevant discussion is whether education can be considered

a product, as a result of a process, and if society as a whole is a client of educational organizations.

According to Edwards Risopatrón (2007), it may be considered that the quality is a value assigned to a process or product in comparative terms, and that quality control is performed with quality criteria set by a cultural arbitrary positioning involving society, subject and education. Initially, educational products, results, faculty, curricula were focused, and at present, the work is process-oriented (Canton & Vázquez, 2010).

Under the ideology of social efficiency in conceptualizing the quality of education, which is based on technical rationality, quality refers to the efficiency of the educational process (Edwards Risopatrón, 1991).

The ideology of social reconstruction, that considers that education systems are aimed at meeting social needs, proposes to develop in students a critical attitude in social, political and cultural aspects, and repositions the centrality of the subject. It implies a radical cultural change, which is to place the user as the cornerstone of education.

It is important to note the statement by Vázquez (2006): society is in the aftermath of the industrial age, which was followed by the information age, which could also be called “the era of knowledge”. The countries not engaged in the concept of quality in education, will be poor countries in this knowledge era.

Conclusion

There are different approaches to quality models in education, highlighting the quality starting with orientation to results. According to the norm IRAM 30000:2001, education is a “product”, understood as the improvement in the knowledge, intellectual skills, habits and attitudes of the learner. The “client” is the organization or person receiving the product, and there are indicators of process efficiency.

The National Education Law 26026/2006 is clear on the responsibility of State to ensure quality education for all residents, and implementation of assessment policy to secure its quality.

Accreditation is the process commonly used to give public account of the degree of compliance of higher education institutions.

Education systems aim to satisfy social needs, so this can relocate the user of education as the cornerstone of educational quality.

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