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Quality Assurance Practices in Industry and Business: Implications for the Education Sector

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Abstract

"Quality" is, quite simply, what it takes to satisfy a customer. Quality is an attribute of a product or service which, as perceived by the customer, ensures that the product or service is attractive. Quality is not, as often assumed, an absolute property but rather a relative measure.

To managers of manufacturing and service organization, Quality is a good competitive tool which can win and keep customers as the life blood of their business. The achievement of a level of quality, which matches the expectations of the targeted customer group has a direct effect on long - term performance and has a much greater effect upon market share than does price. Most customers will pay to get the quality they desire, and this in turn generates profits.

An institution of Higher Education should be committed to the search for knowledge and its dissemination. Reference to the generic ISO Quality Management guideline indicates organizations that provide educational products should define their processes. These processes, which are multidisciplinary, include administrative services and other forms of support.

In this regard, standard criteria should be established for accrediting HEIs. These standards concentrate mainly on administrative and academic structure, curricular consistency, pedagogical competence, student accomplishment, ethical consciousness, environment conducive to learning, educational support ...etc

1. Introduction

Our Lives depend on Products of different kinds. We meet them in a variety of contexts: Housing, Food, Communication, Health care, Education, etc. The products may be *goods*, which are concrete and tangible, or *services*, which are abstract and intangible. However, they are often combined in one product. For instance, education includes housing construction; educational includes housing construction, educational materials and the teaching service.

The reason why customers demand products is usually because they have certain requirements or needs they wish to satisfy. If a certain need is satisfied by a certain product, the customer will be satisfied and consider the product to be of an acceptable quality. If the product does not satisfy his or her needs, the customer will consider the product to be of poor quality.

Though we have tried to define quality on the basis of how needs are satisfied, it is important to note that needs can be stated directly by the customer (e.g. 1% fat milk) or indirectly by regulatory authorities (e.g. standards indicating level of contaminants in milk).

Thus, we can say, "*Quality is the totality of characteristics of a product that bear on its ability to satisfy stated and implied needs*".

The customer's perception of the product's quality could depend on how the product actually satisfies his/her expectations and demands (based on purpose, experience, price, good will and so on).

We may, therefore, also define, Quality as *the ability of the product to satisfy customer expectations and demands*". More objectively, the International Organization for

Standardization (ISO) has defined it as, " *the degree to which a set of inherent characteristics fulfills requirements*", a *requirement* being a need or expectation that is stated, generally implied or obligatory.

Two products which are used for the same purpose, but which are designed or specified in different ways could differ in *Design (Specification) Quality*. There would be a difference in their inherent capacity to satisfy stated or implied needs.

Design (Specification) quality is indicated in the design (specification) used when the product is manufactured or prepared.

A product may conform more or less closely to the design or specification. In such a case, the manufactured (conformance) quality may be said to be better or poorer.

Manufactured (Conformance) Quality may be defined as the degree of conformity between the product and the quality requirements for the product in question, which should be listed in the specifications.

To achieve the "right quality" an organization must actually know what the customer really wants (*specification quality*) and deliver the right product (*conformance quality*) which fit the purpose proposed by the customer at the right price and place. Often the desires of the customer may seem perverse, but if organizations are to be competitive, they must clearly understand and put customer needs at centre stage.

2. Evolution of the Quality Concept

It is generally recognized that the concept of quality has undergone some basic changes. The shift is from a traditional concept based on individual commitment to a modern

concept closely related to the overall management system. It is useful to follow these changes to gain some insight into the historical evolution of the concept of quality.

The concept of quality and the method for its achievement have evolved over many centuries. From the times of early civilization till the industrial revolution, quality was mainly the responsibility of the craftsman who conceived the product and made it for the market or to the order of a particular customer. With the beginning of the industrial revolution and the advent of factory production, quality progressively became the responsibility of the shop foreman or supervisor, who was usually picked up from among experienced workers and was responsible as well for production quantity.

The wide spread of manufacturers interchangeable components was the starting point for the inspection departments in companies. They represented the separation of the quality and production functions and brought specialized inspectors and sophisticated measuring and testing equipment to the scene.

The dramatic increase in production, especially, of armaments during World War II lead to enhanced application of Statistical Quality Control which helped to reduce the huge cost of inspection work involved in military production.

The post-war period was characterized by an abundance of consumer products of different designs and strong competition between manufactures who wanted to win over more customers. The concept of quality changed again with the realization that customers' satisfaction with a product or a service depended on nearly all activities carried out by different departments of a company that begin with the identification of the needs of the customer and continue till the assessment of whether those needs have been satisfied not. The different stages involved constitute what is called the quality loop, and the concept of dealing with all these activities to achieve quality was known as integrated quality control

or total quality control. These concepts prepared the way for two important concepts: quality assurance and total quality management.

Quality assurance should be understood as all activities needed to provide adequate confidence that a product or service will fulfill requirements for quality. *Total quality management* means a management approach centered on quality, based on the participation of all members and aiming at long - term success through customer satisfaction.

Currently quality is receiving increasing attention in industrial and commercial circles world-wide. In all the developed countries and in many developing countries, nation-wide quality programs have been established and are getting strong hold of organizational operations. The globalization of markets and the increasing liberalization of world trade are posing a serious challenge to the manufacturing and service sectors of developing countries, facing them increasing competition not only in export markets but also in domestic markets as well.

In order to survive amid these conditions, organizations need to become competitive. Competitiveness in markets rests on three bases: quality of products, their price and delivery time.

3. Quality in Education

Recent developments have brought the questions of quality and relevance of Higher Education at the forefront. Quality assurance and Accreditation both imply a search for ways and means of defining indicators to attest "quality" education.

In the education sector, quality is something that most people and organizations think they have, yet very few people can define what it is. People tend to think that the more expensive an educational service become, the better its quality will be. Quality is not a

function of how much a product costs, but rather how well a product *consistently* meets the expectations of those who purchase it. People always return to an establishment where performances tend to be consistent.

In an increasingly competitive marketplace, a number of HEI leaders and accrediting organizations are asking ways of improving quality of Higher Education. "Is there a better way to manage Higher Education?"

Today's students tend to choose HEIs which can offer better services, require lower costs, and have higher Quality. Parents now ask HEIs "What exactly are we paying for?" and they measure the quality of Higher Education in terms of their children's ability to get secured and well-paying jobs.

The bottom line is that parents and students are searching for HEIS that have gotten the message on price, access, and quality. HEIs can only build confidence in their customers through effective quality assurance systems which:

- Stipulates clear specification of roles, responsibilities, procedures;
- Enables institutional aims and objectives to be achieved;
- Informs decision making;
- Is free from individual bias;
- Is repeatable over time;
- Involves all staff;
- Includes the specification of standards and acceptable evidence;
- Prompts continuous improvement;

Higher Education Institutions are facing demands for increased societal relevance of teaching and research. They are forced to explicitly demonstrate to the society that they make effective and efficient use of their resources and that their activities are relevant to

the economy and the labor market. Therefore, quality and accreditation are major concerns in relation to education.

Quality systems in different forms are today an intrusive reality of the Ethiopian National Higher Education system and will be an important regulation and steering tool.

Today, there is an increasing diversity of rationales explaining why quality and the measurement of quality have assumed such an important role. Changing situations in Higher Education have a profound influence over the HEIs in their governance and management systems. However, there is an indisputable responsibility and legitimacy of HERQA in guarantying the quality of Higher Education.

4. Accreditation Methodologies

Accreditation is a process by which a given Higher Education Institution (HEI) is periodically submitted to an overall or partial evaluation of its educational activity. The aim of the evaluation is to determine whether and how the educational objectives of the institution are achieved. The results obtained should comply with certain standards which are specific to other comparable institutions of Higher Education at a given time.

The process of accreditation implies the action of an external accreditation body. This body, with the help of expert peers, assists HEIs which applied for accreditation in the evaluation and the improvement of their educational objectives. Finally, it reaches a decision as to the granting of the accreditation.

Types of Accreditation

One can distinguish between *Institutional Accreditation* and *Specialized Accreditation*, both to a large extent, being complementary.

Institutional Accreditation is the status granted to a higher education institution. It refers to the institutions, activities and programmes.

The elements listed below are evaluated during the process of Institutional Accreditation.

- Whether or not the objectives of the institution reflect its aims.
- Whether or not objectives are achieved satisfactorily.
- Whether or not the organization, the programmes, and the material and human resources meet objectives and satisfy standards.

There are standards for accrediting HEIs. One of these standards (ISO 9001:2000 in education) concentrates on processes, such as;

- strategic process to determine the role of the educational organization in the socio-economic environment;
- provision of the teaching capability of the learning providers;
- maintenance of the working environment;
- developing, reviewing and updating study plans and curricula;
- admission and selection of applicants;
- student's education follow-up and assessment;
- final assessment aimed to grant the student an academic degree, a degree that will be supported by a diploma, acknowledgement, bachelor's degree or certificate of competencies;

- support services for the teaching-learning process carried out for the satisfactory accomplishment of their curricula, and support to the student until he/she can succeed in obtaining his/her academic degree or certificate;
- internal and external communication; and
- Measurement of educational processes.

Specialized Accreditation is the status granted to the distinct part of a Higher Education Institution (College, faculty, Program, etc). Specialized Accreditation is an assessment process resulting in defining the academic program, students' capacity and aiming at assuring the fulfillment of the minimum quality elements of the educational processes at the level of the sector under consideration. The Academic Program would be assessed based on the specialized Accreditation Standard set.

In specialized accreditation, attention is paid to the following.

- Efficiency with regard to the achievement of the stated objectives;
- How the educational standards of quality are put in practice;
- The relations between the programs of the unit subject to evaluation and the program of the institution to which the unit belongs.

5. Conclusion

Generally speaking, the management of our HEIs relies upon systems which have taken decades to evolve. The traditional system is bureaucratic. Administrations apply and interpret rules. Managers devise the rules and persuade others to accept them.

The general situation being as such, we have not been entirely complacent in dealing with issues of quality, standards and accreditation in education.

Since its establishment, the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA) has introduced a range of strategies to ensure that the quality of educational product, academic support and student care are of the highest possible standard. A core strategic

goal for HERQA is to have quality systems in place to support the management, planning, internal and external auditing and legislative compliance of HEIs whilst ensuring students satisfaction.

There is a real difficulty in defining quality in the areas of learning and teaching, as outcomes are complex and not easily identifiable or quantifiable. If the quality agenda is intended to assure the public that the standards of our HEIs are largely comparable across the system, then we should look to a process-driven Quality Assurance in Higher Education. One such Quality System is the ISO 9001 Generic Standard.

The ISO 9001 Quality Management System Standard includes all aspects of the administration and management of a Higher Education Institution. It ensures that processes are regularly reviewed and optimized through structured evaluation of processes and outcomes. A major thrust of ISO 9001 is about documenting processes and being able to demonstrate that these processes are followed.

The importance placed on Accreditation in Higher Education would dominate the way HEIs operate in terms of management structures and in monitoring and evaluation of their learning, teaching and research.

Accreditation is a good closed loop approach to quality assurance, which looks not only at the processes but defines the expected outcome. The audit process is used as a means of assessing whether the HEI has performed its measurable functions adequately.

The aim of the accreditation process in explicit terms should thus be;

1. To assess whether the education, training and professional development programs of HEIs being reviewed:
 - are relevant to the objective and outcomes determined by the HEI,
 - are appropriate in terms of modern educational methods and practices.

2. To encourage further improvements and developments in the program being accredited and so enhance its educational quality.
3. To provide an opportunity for the HEI being accredited to review and self-assess its program.
4. To be focused on the achievement of objectives, maintenance of academic standards, public expectations and good outputs and outcomes rather than on detailed specification of curriculum content.

Reference:

NSAI (National Standards Authority of Ireland) 2000, ISO 9001 – Quality Management System.