

LINKING QUALITY MANAGEMENT WITH MISSION AND STRATEGY

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I have been involved in EUA (and CRE) activities for more than ten years. My former institution, where I was vice rector in charge of research, went through the institutional evaluation of CRE in 1999. My former faculty (of engineering) with all of its departments went through ABET accreditation. Having played a key role in the efforts to establish quality awareness in my former institution, I hoped to create a success story as far as quality assurance and enhancement are concerned. I discuss here the difficulties encountered and the lessons learned; and how these led me to have a different start at my new institution, which has quite different features. I would like to tie quality management to the institutional strategic planning and discuss factors influencing this interdependency as I experienced in two different universities.

1. Short profiles of my former and present institutions; Contrasting features and similarities are as follows:

State versus private (foundation – non-state institution with a public purpose)
Old versus new;
Medium size versus small size;
Strongly believing in own excellence, self-centered, inward looking culture versus a culture that needs to prove itself, necessarily outward looking as there little inside;
Most popular (as measured through the central matriculation exam based on student preferences) versus one of the many;
Collegial versus managerial;
“Hertz” versus “AVIS” (tries harder!) phenomena;
Both have instruction in English;
Both have similar academic departments and faculties;
Both are campus universities.

2. Efforts to establish quality awareness at my former institution:

The ABET assessment of the programs offered by the Faculty of Engineering leading to “substantial equivalence” with engineering programs in the USA (twice, in 1998 and 2004):

- All six engineering departments were involved.
- Second round was based on Criteria 2000 which incorporates feedback and improvement steps as major elements of a closed cycle.

CRE Institutional Evaluation experience (1999): A highly successful assessment exercise touched upon the system of student questionnaires for the assessment of teaching quality, the research centers and their assessments, the initiatives to strengthen ties with alumni-associations and employers, the initiatives to put more

emphasis on individual's research productivity and its influence on academic promotions. The conclusion of the CRE report read: "We recommend that more attention should be given to structured quality assurance mechanisms, especially to stimulate innovations of teaching and learning methods and curriculum development."

Quality Culture Project of EUA in 2003: My term as vice rector had ended in 2000 but I could convince my institution to apply to the QC project and served as the network coordinator for research management in the first round of the project. I believed that this was an opportunity for the university to assess its institutional identity, its responsiveness to external conditions, its strengths and weaknesses. These issues were discussed internally with the senior leadership and key internal stakeholders. The extent to which the institution has developed a quality culture in general and more specifically in research management was put on the table and a road map towards generating a Quality Culture was derived. An action plan was approved by the Senate which included items related to quality management in general and research management in particular. The items were of different content to have a mixture of easy and difficult tasks:

- 1a. Prepare the strategic plan. Have mission, vision, general values, strategies incorporating the needs of the stakeholders and short term objectives (priorities) associated with appropriate resources identified, discussed, shared and accepted.
- 1b. Prepare the plans of individual units in line with the general plan including critical success factors, key performance indicators, benchmarks, targets
2. Develop a system to monitor performance –to measure outcomes against indicators and benchmarks -.
3. Formulate evaluation scheme and mechanisms demanding continuous improvement and make revisions of the strategic plan.
- 4a. Institutionalize research management office and the function of the vice rector in charge of research
- 4b. Re-activate research policies committee or another platform to discuss policy issues related to research including trends, opportunities and threats.
- 4c. Necessary condition for active research may be publishing articles; the ultimate goal is to develop expertise within a sufficiently large group to serve community. Thus, focusing and team building should be emphasized.
5. Emphasize graduate programs as much as the undergraduate ones
6. Encourage international members to be included in the thesis committees.
7. Discuss widely and formulate ways of setting up more effective system of administrative teams and management to work on strategic issues affecting the University as a whole.
8. Develop mechanisms to identify common problems and improve horizontal and vertical inter-personal and inter-departmental relations.

3. Momentary success; fading away of interest

ABET, CRE /IE, QCP all led to successful immediate conclusions and satisfied the people involved. In each and every case the institution felt proud of the accomplishments and used the results to boast in the months that followed the action. Follow up did not materialize in any of the cases, however. The recommendations were forgotten soon. The action plan generated as the outcome of the Quality Culture was never implemented. Nor did the evaluations influence longer term decisions or decision making in the university. An analysis of the reasons is provided below in items 4 and 5.

“Predominantly oral” characteristic of the university culture still continues, structured feedback loops are still too few, and no overarching, integrated and consistent policy of quality exists.

4. Sustainability problems:

Looking at the general picture one may say that quality is not part of the daily life in Turkish higher education system (*especially with respect to state universities*). It is limited to the personal preferences, somewhat sacrificial behavior of a few believers, ending with the mandate of such people if indifference on the part of faculty and students has not terminated it before; no widely shared, sustainable ownership exists. Institutional structures are not robust enough to keep up the “good work” that has started.

The major factor in the day-to-day life as well as in the developmental perspective of almost all universities in Turkey has been the rector’s attitude. This effect is much stronger than in most countries in Europe since the academic bodies and individuals have not matured enough to support institutional corporate identities and to sustain a reasonably stable tradition of that institution. Even one term of a rector (four years) may be sufficient for universities to switch between policies and priorities.

Since rectors are elected by the faculty members following campaign periods the chances of alternating/ contrasting policies to be adopted is not slim. The less favored ones of one period usually become the hottest defenders of changing the throne at the next election.

Similar conditions prevailed in my former institution, although the weaknesses were at a much lesser level. There was a sound tradition and “*esprit de corps*” within and around this institution and the faculty members were very proud of this culturally and organizationally rich and diverse tradition. Even the commitment of the institution to quality was cited as one of the strong points of the institution. But it was all in the sense of traditional academic self-regulation, simple expression of commitment to excellence without any explicit, formal quality assurance mechanisms and external accountability procedures.

Nowadays universities must actively monitor their activities and demonstrate their quality to a variety of stakeholders. The strong collegial character together with the complacency created by the belief that the institution is -and will remain- one of the leading universities did not allow introducing formal, structured assurance mechanisms. The quality initiatives did not propagate all

the way to the trenches, were not absorbed and reflected back; they remained as top management reforms and were aborted when top management was changed. They did not create enough champions to sustain change although the moves themselves were very progressive for its time and environment.

5. External incentives to create a quality culture have not been great, either.

Higher Education in Turkey is managed by the Council of Higher Education (CHE) rather than the Ministry of Education. In fact, there has been an incompatibility (political polarization at times or bureaucratic resentment of each other at other times leading to a lack of cooperation or coordination) between the two, most of the time. CHE did not have quality issues on the agenda in the face of more pressing issues. A national accreditation agency or a Quality Assurance Agency was never established. A committee has been formed recently, in October 2005 to introduce “academic evaluation and quality enhancement”. Its success is questionable when one considers the process of setting it up and the preliminary actions it took. Thus, institutions have been on their own to bring quality into the agenda. An opportunity to introduce a package/ an orchestrated effort of quality assurance was never available.

6. Competition is the only driver for quality so far.

Turkish landscape indicates a huge demand for higher education – About 1.5 million candidates take the central entrance exam every year and only one third are placed in a higher education institution. Finding “customers” may not be a challenge, but a competitive edge is necessary to capture “good” students. Competition usually takes the form of advertising and image building by frequent exposures. Superficial nature of this competition prevents, however, deep-rooted, long term initiatives of quality. Face value is more important, and people “appear” to be taking certain actions rather than investing time, money and effort in truly establishing a quality assurance system specific to their institution.

Nevertheless, isolated success stories do exist. There are many top notch universities; their success is closely related to either the legacy they acquired or exceptional leaders they had for a limited time. But individual awareness hardly translated into sustainable, systematic, operational mechanisms.

Institutionalization is not valued enough to put it before the individual gains.

7. Environmental conditions for Işık University:

- Işık University is not research intensive, not comprehensive, not free, not technology transfer or community services intensive, not identified with the region (there are 7 state, 16 foundation universities in Istanbul);
- The top management of the university was renewed in Sept. 2004 to undertake radical improvements.
- 130 yrs of educational tradition of the foundation (FM V) requires a non-profit, non-risky, academically sound approach. A niche could be – and should be – quality management and strategic management.

8. First priority was given at Işık to setting up the strategic objectives:

A strategic planning committee was established in April 2005. This committee met every Tuesday afternoon for a year to develop the backbone of the strategic plan, deliberated with the general assembly several times, presented the draft to

the Senate, Board of Trustees, Foundation's Executive Committee several times; i.e. a process with maximum stakeholder participation was undertaken. The members (a group of 20) felt proud of generating a text to guide the institution (now, of 60 full time faculty members) in the next five years. University vision, mission and core values have been established.

Quality was adopted as one of the fundamental issues, which allowed keeping it on the agenda all the time. Not only the overarching strategic goals and objectives, but also the action plans including resources, indicators, timing (priorities), and actors were prepared and formally accepted.

9. Annual program of 2006 was prepared together with Guidelines for specific objectives: The items in the action plan scheduled for 2006 were detailed as the 2006 Annual Program. This document was shared with faculty, administrative staff and students in separate meetings and copies of it distributed to advance ownership (there were 67 projects in the 2006 program).

A guideline was developed to emphasize student centered behavior and improve academic advising for frequent consultation of the faculty.

10. Quality handbook for teaching:

A handbook was prepared addressing relevant academic principles and processes to improve teaching quality and to set up a quality assurance system. Every faculty member was given a copy of this handbook. The provost was charged with the responsibility of informing periodically the Senate and the Trustees how well the handbook is being implemented.

Conclusion: Quality awareness and adoption of an approach committed to quality enhancement is strongly tied to the guiding role of the institutional leadership. This guidance must generate enough proponents in the academic heartland to continue the process. Weak organizations comprising just a few actors do not survive the changes in the managerial positions and do not bring enough momentum to keep the ball rolling at times of declining institutional enthusiasm.

It is important that the institution can continue to hold onto the fundamental strategies building their institutional identity as the leadership changes. Especially issues requiring cultural transformation need long commitment. It helps if the HE system provides for stability in individual institutions. Otherwise a solution has to be configured to avoid the "pendulum effect".

Strategy development with a broad participation may be a good start to diffuse the ideas to various levels at the university. It also enables the institution to produce written documents to refer to over several years. The quality guidelines, if they are fitting within the overarching goals, may have a long lifetime, a sound basis and a sustained ownership.

QA, with its accompanying virtues of transparency and accountability will be the controlling factor of a successful higher education management, will serve as a change agent and will provide a smooth transition from collegial to managerial model which looks to be the trend.

The foundation (private) model seems to be better suited to create a sustainable environment of quality since the management model is conducive to maintain a stable system. Existence of a team of owners (board of trustees) and the responsibility of the rector to this board proves to be a significant element perpetuating institutional goals allowing an institutional identity to develop.