

QUALITY AS SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

An approach to quality assurance defines all the activities and procedures institution will utilise. There are so many different approaches that influence European perception of quality in higher education institutions. This paper offers a new perspective and tests the idea for different quality assurance initiative. The ideas presented in this paper were generated from Robert Pirsig's Metaphysics of Quality, a theory which claims that quality cannot be defined, but can be understood through its dualistic realisation. In this dualism, subjective and objective represent two manifestation of the same essence. This approach has already been applied at the University of Bihac and this paper will reflect on some of these experiences.

Introduction

Education is one of the oldest intentional human activities. It emerged as a necessity to transfer experiences and knowledge, cultural, social and religious values of a community to offspring. It still fulfils this role, but it also fulfils many other roles, like driving prosperity of a community. In its various roles and functions, it was, and is necessary to redesign and enhance education at various levels.

The Bologna process redefined and re/confirmed priorities in the development of the European Higher Education Area. There are various important issues treated in the past years, and amongst the most prominent and the most important ones is quality assurance.

Even though the states were signatories of the Bologna Declaration, the universities were key protagonist of the whole process of transformation and harmonization. In the development of necessary instruments and mechanisms in this new world, quality assurance emerged as an unavoidable segment of university activities.

When we discuss quality, several difficulties arise. Among the most often confronted ones is the fact that there is no unique nor universal definition of quality. Depending on the definition of quality, there are various approaches and tools used to identify and measure quality. These approaches vary from nearly informal to mandatory ones, which can even bring legal consequences. Nevertheless, all these approaches are, apart from primary definition of quality, similar and they

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mainly diverge in the context of size, frequency and type of collected and analyzed data. This diversity should not be looked at as something negative, but rather as a feature that contributes to the quality of the process itself – the European framework is spacious enough to accommodate different approaches and practices, and European academic communities are sufficiently self-critical and thus will be able to embrace and promote truly valuable concepts and approaches. European apprehension of quality assurance is wide enough and allows for many differences between countries and inside a country as well. In this multitude of existing practices and approaches, it is difficult to promote a single approach as the best and/or treat others as less valuable: this work does not imply this in any way. It rather contributes to the variations of existing attitudes and suggests another one – all-embracing and comprehensive. This paper will treat quality as subjective experience of those affected by higher education.

Background and context

This paper's conclusions are based on the data acquired from the University of Bihac in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Therefore, institutional and national contexts of quality assurance will be described in short lines, followed by theoretical background behind proposed concept of quality as subjective experience.

Bosnia and Herzegovina's treatment of QA is of rather recent date. In its short history, one can witness wandering of university community between different practices and approaches. Bosnia and Herzegovina itself can represent Europe with its territorial organisation and numerous laws that regulate higher education. With its eight public and two dozens of private universities, it is not surprising that the state law created central Agency for Development of Higher Education and Quality Assurance. This Agency is still constituting its basic regulations and this paper can serve as a basis for creating a system which will fully embrace institutional diversity on the state and, why not, on the European level. With several approaches applied at the University of Bihac, in different periods, this university adopted the approach that will be discussed in details in the following lines.

This paper's scope is to shed some light on quality in a higher education institution. Quality assurance at a university can be nothing but about quality and higher education. So, why are there so many different, but still correct answers to the same questions? Well, the thing is that there are different perceptions of these very basic terms we want to discuss about, quality and higher education.

Quality

There is no common understanding of quality. There are different perceptions of quality that serve certain purposes, but its definitions vary substantially and some authors even argue that quality itself cannot be defined.

First considerations of quality are recorded in Aristotle's *Categories* where he asserts that qualities can be possessed or attributed to things and persons. John Locke in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* introduced distinction between primary and secondary qualities. Primary qualities truly exist and belong to bodies whilst secondary qualities are interpretations of these primary qualities, depending on subjective mode and the context of appearance. Thus, we can talk about primary quality as intrinsic and secondary quality as extrinsic since its manifestation is dependent on influence from outside the object. In this view, quality is manifestation of our senses. Before we continue about subjective and objective perception of quality, it could be said that from the neutral point of view, we must agree that the quality of something is inseparable part of that entity, and thus does not determine its value. Value, which is often misinterpreted as quality is just our perception of the outer manifestation of these intrinsic qualities. Later considerations of a quality introduced further notions of subjective and objective perception of quality. These opposite perceptions treated quality as the result of subjective feelings or objective facts respectively. This dualism of quality was further developed by many authors. In everyday use, quality is identified with excellence. There are various concepts of quality, and a common line that can be drawn through all these concepts is the fact that the quality of something depends on the criteria used. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Robert Pirsig in his works advocates a theory of reality known as the *Metaphysics of Quality*, where he argues that quality itself cannot be defined. It is important to know that his work was influenced by certain Sanskrit doctrine that claims that both subjective and objective are one and undivided. In this way, we are able to better understand reality. In this reality, quality manifests itself in static and dynamic form. Dynamic form is recognized as the first impression after certain experience. Everything that comes after it is influenced by our association with previous experiences and dynamic form is transformed into static form of quality.

In the light of such a concept of quality, it is fully justifiable to treat quality as personal experience of those affected by higher education. It is further advocated by the fact that quality as objective manifestation is in fact manifestation of congenial score of subjective experiences (like in students' evaluations of teaching). We already use the concept of treating personal views and experiences as objective ones (peer review) without any substantial objectives.

Higher education

Higher education is generally defined as post-secondary education and is mainly organized at higher education institutions (HEI). We witness creation of new HEIs, even virtual ones, and still

have centuries-old ones in operation. Apart from the fact that there are various types of HEIs, we are facing limited number of aspects of HEI's activities, namely teaching, research and public services.

In many considerations of quality of HEI, services are not treated, which leaves teaching and research as two aspects that make differences among HEIs. Both of these aspects must be considered when deciding on quality, but do they contribute the same, or which one is more important. And yet, how to approach to quality identification at different types of university? Small ones and large ones must use different strategy, or not? What about virtual universities? Do we treat them as universities at all? Answers to these questions make quality issue in higher education complex. But still, this paper will try to offer some answers to these questions and limit itself only to the consideration of quality of teaching at HEIs.

So, having excluded the remaining two aspects, it is necessary to define some basic characteristics of teaching in order to identify its quality. First of all, the concept must be broad enough to cover all the existing institutional diversities and to anticipate the emerging ones. These institutional diversities encompass the type of institution, educational philosophy in use, resources available, laws and policies, students' profiles and many more.

Teaching

Teaching represents an organized activity that has formative effect on the mind, character and physical ability of a person. At HEIs its primary aim is transfer of existing knowledge, acquisitions of skills and development of intellectual capabilities. There are countless styles and methods of teaching. It is realized in the form of lectures, practical work, experiments, trainings, discussions, and research work – to mention some. Common feature for all of them is that a student must invest substantial amount of time and efforts in order to achieve predefined aims. This paper will not go into any details of the process itself, but will rather focus on the evaluation of the quality of teaching.

If we try to analyse university teaching we will come to realize that there are several characteristics present in every form of teaching. They are communication, assessment and feedback, academic support, organization, learning resources and personal development – and all contribute to the overall satisfaction with teaching, or may we say the quality of teaching.

Methodology

It is necessary to measure the quality of teaching at HEIs. This paper advocates the approach in which quality of teaching is manifestation of subjective experiences of those affected by higher education, primarily teachers and students. Such an approach to the quality of teaching as the manifestation of personal experience will best annul existing differences among universities that prevent fair and objective evaluation, and thus enable wide and fair use of the suitable approach and techniques to the evaluation of quality. It will also annul the differences between the fields, subjects and different forms of teaching. In this way, institutional diversities will be maintained. It is this methodological approach that can be used for such a diverse institutions and contexts.

Quality of teaching as the most prominent manifestation of quality assurance at HEI should be measured in a consistent and reliable way. So far, there is no universally applicable system for measuring the quality of HEIs in Europe. Maybe there should be prevailing one, and eventually there will be. In this light, it is hoped that this paper will contribute with its perspective to further advancement of quality assurance of HEIs.

It is intended to gather personal experiences of everyone affected by higher education. These experiences will be compiled separately for every interest group and statistically processed. Suitable statistical methods will be used in order to calculate correlation factors which will be the basis for the evaluation of the quality of teaching. Every interest group will provide “subjective” perspective, but when compared to another interest groups, this subjectivism becomes objective if it correlates significantly. It will also be used for longitudinal monitoring of quality. In order to demonstrate the possibilities of such an approach, we will look at the case study of the University of Bihac.

Case study

University of Bihac is implementing this policy in a way that it carries out surveys about the quality of teaching, and the aim of these surveys is to identify the level of correlation between students’ and teachers’ opinions on the quality of teaching. It is realized through several tasks in order to ascertain whether teachers’ and students’ opinions about the quality of teaching are significantly correlated. Distributions of teachers’ and students’ answers are considered separately.

We used a questionnaire with two forms, one for students and one for teachers. There were 22 five-level Likert questionnaire items. These items represent six dimensions of teaching, namely communication, assessment and feedback, academic support, organization, learning resources and personal development – and all of them contribute to the overall quality of teaching. They were administered in appropriate way and the response rates were 70% for students and 95% for teachers. These questionnaires were semi-automatically processed and the data were available.

Results and discussion

Data from our surveys gave several interesting results. First of all, when we look at the distribution patterns it was obvious that all the distributions were negatively skewed. Students' responses in general had slightly leptokurtic distribution, while teachers' responses were slightly platykurtic. Results were analysed separately for every item, then, they were grouped according to different dimensions, and finally for the whole instrument. As one would expect, there were several items where we found small correlation, but when analysed at the level of separate dimensions (communication, assessment and feedback, academic support, organization, learning resources and personal development) statistically significant correlation was calculated. Since the results were rather satisfying, we designed another forms of the questionnaire and are developing strategies to survey other interest groups and check correlation of their results with the existing ones.

It is the result of this analysis that is so important and valuable. It triggers additional actions of the university, depending on the outcome, and it directs further institutional efforts in two directions. If there is a small correlation between students' and teachers' perspectives about the quality of teaching, institution should look no further for additional aspects of quality but invest time and efforts to analyse it. Institution will use optional set of instruments and procedures to find out which segments must be improved in order to reach the satisfactory level of quality. If there is a large correlation between students' and teachers' positive perspectives about the quality of teaching, institution should look further and survey other interest groups – industry, employers, alumni, government and society as well. If at any phase we discover a small correlation, that should be a signal to invest time and efforts in finding out what is not at satisfactory level. Either way, institution uses the results as guideposts that govern institutional efforts. If the result is satisfactory, institution should not undertake any radical changes but continue its pace and efforts in providing quality teaching and raise its definition of desirable results from time to time. University of Bihac is currently developing reward scheme that will be applied when satisfactory results are achieved. In case of dissatisfactory results, institutions employ all the available quality assurance processes in order to precisely identify and improve them. Depending on every particular (dissatisfactory) result, the University of Bihac uses focus groups, structured interviews, peer review, skills demonstrations, statistical data reanalysis, SWOT analysis and self-evaluations, etc. in order to precisely establish what should be done in a better way. Our experience shows that the greatest challenges for an institution rest in this. Once it is established, QA Office designs and suggests particular measures to be undertaken in order to achieve satisfactory level in the identified areas and university management provides resources for its realisation and/or include these suggestions into its strategic and development plans. One example from the University of Bihac is that in this way an institution-wide issue was raised as it was discovered that our teaching staff cannot easily improve and/or

upgrade their teaching and technological skills, so the QA Office drafted a project of creation of the Individual Development and Educational Advancement Centre (IDEA) and university management is undertaking necessary steps to realize it.

It should be noted that in this process, subjective indeed becomes objective. Just when all the interest groups express their subjective opinions about the quality of institutional activities and we calculate a large correlation, one can claim that the institution has reached its goal, if that goal was quality. Results are collected every semester, or annually when it comes to external interest groups, and will be used for longitudinal analyses too.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to present another perspective and thus contribute to the continuing efforts of academic community to find an all-embracing approach to the measurement of quality at HEIs. With its theoretical background, it tries to annul insurmountable differences in a common playground for different actors i.e. institutions. It will be able to accommodate all of them in the same way and thus offer the same basis for the establishment of the quality level of a single institution. It might as well save resources with its structured approach. There might be some obstacles at first when implementing this approach, but the fact that it starts from and always returns to the most involved groups in higher education ensures that those involved will be interested and willing to find out “objective” resolution and achieve significant correlation with other interest groups concerned. After all, we use peer review as a reliable source of information in almost every of the existing approaches to measuring quality at HEIs. And yet, it is nothing more than giving opinion, expressing attitude and impression. Why not expand it to the whole process and use interest groups’ opinions as the conditional and universal indicator of quality? We do not suggest that another methods and tools should not be used; we are only promoting the idea that, in order to save available resources, the first step in these processes should be analysis of subjective experiences.

Only the multitude of subjective opinions can bring towards objective conclusions, isn’t it right? What is objective but a conglomerate of subjective experiences, in terms of good and quality?

Apart from questions raised in this text, here are some additional points for discussion:

- How do we understand quality?
- Position of such an approach in relation to institutional diversity and creativity.

- Subjective in objective processes – where one ends and another begins.

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