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QUALITY FRAMEWORK OF ACADEMIC COURSES

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This article deals with the problems related to the university approaches and efforts for delivering quality training through delivering authentic, updated and relevant academic courses. Universities have to prove commitment to the quality and academic standards of all awards. Curricula and course contents of all university subjects should be answerable to a number of both external and internal bodies and requirements, including student engagement. All university structures have to constantly work to maintain an effective and coherent system of course quality by taking into consideration the European expectations derived through the Bologna Process and the development of the European Higher Education Area, National Quality Frameworks, sector and stakeholders' good practices, and internal institutional regulations and provisions related to curricula and contents.

Keywords*: quality, academia, management, quality assurance, stakeholders, study programme, curricula*

Quality assurance in higher education has gained increasing importance in the last decades, the primary responsibility for quality management being placed on higher education institutions. At the same time, the number of stakeholders that demand quality is on the rise, adding an extra dimension to institutional approaches to quality assurance. In this context, universities are required to set up and maintain internal quality assurance systems, engage stakeholders and maintain compliance with legal requirements and accreditation standards. The role of university administrators is a key role in institutional efforts to maintain and enhance quality. They are instrumental in assuring that the university-wide approach to quality is data-driven, implementable through efficient processes, and oriented towards

continuous improvement of the academic quality culture. Thus, the university's quality culture represents the atmosphere of the university community supporting and maintaining high-quality operations and activities. The quality culture manifests itself in the high commitment and accountability of the staff, administration and students to their work and studies. The staff and students collaborate in accordance with the values and objectives of the university and adhere to common policies. They also share good practices and engage in continuous evaluation.

In this context, academic quality management is generally understood as the organization and conduct of operations within a university. The practices adopted by the university are carefully pre-planned and should be well managed. Through quality management, academia tends to achieve the goals set for university development, thus ensuring ensures that society can trust in the university.

On the other hand, academic quality system is an integrated management system which helps maintain and develop the quality of university teaching and learning. It is a collection of measures and methods used to ensure that the progress towards achieving the goals. With the help of the quality management system, through the description and measurement of operations, something not working properly can be observed. In general, the academic quality system provides the necessary structures and defines the procedures and responsibilities for well-functioning quality management.

If we define the academic quality management broadly, it comprises a lot of activities likely to be attained: teaching, learning, research, academic mobility, internationalization, organization of admission and final exams, accreditation, etc. Consequently, all the mechanisms, systems, processes and activities that back up these activities are typically perceived as quality assurance systems.

In spite of a long and successful history of higher education system development, the concept of quality has not gained a consensus yet and has generated lots of definitions of the word quality in the framework of the higher education systems. As suggested by Niedermeier F. [3], the concept of quality largely depends on the views different stakeholders have about the quality:

Stakeholder	Quality focus on…
Students	Practical use and usefulness for future employment vs. use for personal fulfillment
Lecturers	Processes of learning
Management	Achievements of the institution (tangible and intangible)
Alumni	Job opportunities
Employers	Competences of the graduates
Politics	Percentage/number of alumni
Community/society	Ethical and socially responsible persons Production of new knowledge to cope with present and future challenges

Table 1. Stakeholder quality focus exemplary comparison [3, p.21]

In spite of the apparently different views on the quality focus in higher education institutions, it is clearly understood that the overall focus of academic quality is on the *result*, which is perceived differently by stakeholders. So, the quality is a complex and multi-dimensional concept. Different stakeholders sometimes make it difficult for higher education institutions to live up to all the diverse conceptions and expectations. The institution has to be constantly aware of the stakeholders and their role, expectations, views and needs.

This is the perspective when quality can be seen in five dimensions: input, process, output, outcome and impact. On the one hand, it is important to keep in mind the distinction when assessing quality and, on the other hand, it is important to consider the context of our own institutions.

The most important element - *the process*, is a complex framework where inputs are transferred into outcomes. In light of the difficulty in

understanding and implementing the quality standards, it can be used as a tool to negotiate and unite the different opinions of both internal and external stakeholders to academia in their views, wishes and requirements. That being said, the quality of teaching and learning on the institutional level can be identified and room for specific definitions and interpretations can be left for the faculties or departments. The process includes all things, procedures and activities that are done and it is sometimes a challenge for universities, meaning there is no measurable knowledge about how the inputs are transformed into outputs. Examples of the process of teaching and learning and possible challenges and questions to are:

- How is the process of teaching and learning working and how should good teaching and learning be performed at the institution?
- Do lecturers consider diverse forms of teaching/ learning for example?
- Are their methods inclusive, comprehensive?
- How does central academic management support the students and academics in teaching and learning?
- How do faculty and department management levels support lecturers in their activity?
- What is the role of research in teaching and learning? How are they connected?
- What is the role of quality assurance councils/departments and what do lecturers expect from them?
- How are curricula run and what is a good curriculum, what should it have or not have?

Taking into consideration the above questions, we can mention that teaching and learning is a core competence of higher education institutions. Therefore, designing, developing and implementing study programmes is something that has been done for a long time and with appropriate expertise. Having passed through diverse higher education processes, we can notice that the question of a systematic and structured study programme development has gained importance in higher education debates, both with regard to management but also concerning a didactical based curriculum design.

In this light, multiple reforms in Europe have been implemented during the last decades. The Sorbonne Declaration of 1998 and the following

Bologna Process are the foundations of a common European Higher Education Area. At the same time, this process is meant to strengthen the common European economic power. The following objectives are pursued by the Bologna declaration of 1998:

- increasing the compatibility and comparability of European higher education degrees,
- implementation of a comparable three cycle degree system for undergraduates (Bachelor) and graduates (Master and PhD),
- implementation of a system of credits – as in the ECTS,
- the promotion of mobility of students and scientific staff,
- promotion of European cooperation in quality assurance and
- promotion of the necessary European dimensions in higher education.

The terms 'quality assurance', 'academic quality', 'academic standards' cover many areas including teaching, supports available, resources, assessment, standards, etc. In its narrow sense, quality assurance is therefore mainly about maintaining standards and ensuring that students have the best possible experience at the university. The university has to pass through a range of quality assurance processes and procedures, which relate strictly to the study programme and include includes the following:

- Programme approval and validation – the process a programme has to go through before it is allowed to run;
- Programme review – a process which looks at programmes every 5/6 years to see how they have been running;
- Annual monitoring – how the University reviews how programmes are doing every year;
- Student feedback and representation – it includes student surveys and student representation.

So, the quality of study programmes is essential for both the academia, graduates and employers. Except human and material resources, standards for quality assurance in higher education area, research and innovation, *the organization of the academic course and curricula design* are the motors that move the whole machine, i.e. the real people that are responsible for enhancing, guiding, supporting and facilitating the realization of a study programme and contribute to the determination of objectives and realization of programme outcomes.

Developing quality programmes and designing curricula are a key element of assuring and enhancing quality in teaching and learning in such a way that students are able to achieve and actively show competences in a certain field.

Programme and curriculum development are closely related to each other. While programme development includes planning and managing and organizational aspects to establish a programme, curriculum development refers to the content-related and didactical design of the programme. In a broad sense, subject curriculum embodies the course philosophy, contents, teaching – learning approaches and assessment of results. Thus, the lecturer is the only actor at this stage, who elaborates his/her own educational plan, decides which goals and objectives should be achieved, topics to be taught and learned, the volume and burden of students' independent work, and teaching strategies and techniques as well.

Nowadays, lecturers are not the providers of instructions to students anymore, but they act as learning facilitators. The main point is what students should know and which skills and competences they should have achieved when completing a study programme. Based on this, appropriate teaching and learning strategies have to be developed that help students to reach the defined competences. Learning is not only a passive adoption of plenty of knowledge. Dealing with diverse and comprehensive information means learning how to differentiate, analyze and use this information systematically and actively according to the respective questions and problems they refer to.

Current trends in teaching aim to increase the quality of communication among the citizens of different language and cultural backgrounds. Most recent trends include:

- *The teaching focuses on the student* (student-centered approach). The teacher is becoming a co-learner. This understanding is undoubtedly influencing the changing roles of teacher and student in education.
- The concept of *autonomous learning* is being implemented. Learners are seen as individuals who can and should be autonomous, i.e. be responsible for their own learning climate. Moreover, autonomous education helps students to develop their self-awareness, vision, practicality and freedom of discussion. These attributes serve to aid a student in his/her independent learning.

- *Collaborative* or *cooperative* learning is being advocated. Cooperative/collaborative learning consists of a range of concepts and techniques for enhancing the value of student-student interaction. However, this type of learning requires the mastering of collaborative communication skills, e.g. agreeing politely, making compromises, explaining. One of the common examples of collaborative learning in the learning of foreign languages is *project work*, which enables students to learn together for a purpose other than to get a high score on an exam.
- *Curricula subjects are being integrated*. That means that students use not only their acquired knowledge but also their skills across curricula. This type of learning is exploited while teaching a curricular subject through the medium of a foreign language.
- *Teaching methods* are closely interconnected with the latest scientific knowledge from the field of neurolinguistics and psycholinguistics. An example might be an interest in one's self in connection with the research of motivation.
- The *concept of multiculturalism* is being promoted. Its aim is to make students more sensitive and open to other nationalities and their culture and consequently to make them aware of their own culture, values and beliefs.
- The learning of foreign languages is perceived as a *lifelong process*. Such a process should already involve pre-school learning and extend right through to learning in later life, but it should also cover various professional and personal needs.

At this stage, it is important that learning outcomes on course level have to be reflected on programme level. Nevertheless, there should be a red thread that connects and aligns the courses and its contents with the respective learning outcomes to a complete curriculum. Based on this, expected learning outcomes on course level should be observable and measurable. Meanwhile, qualification objectives are formulated in a more comprehensive and general way. Learning outcomes on course level become more detailed and specific with regard to the expected competences. They describe the expected knowledge, skills and competences to be achieved in a course. In the respective course descriptions, the expected learning outcomes are to be defined.

Last but not least, the success or failure of study programmes and curricula depend on the real people that are responsible directly for

the realization of a course/programme: QA officers, heads of academic departments and lecturers. In our opinion, a quality office and/or the head of academic department define the concept of a programme, objectives and expectations and have to ask questions such as: Who is involved and how? What does involvement mean? Who is responsible and to what degree? What are the limits and opportunities of involvements and responsibilities? How are the competences achieved?

In our country, study programme initiation and development and the decisions about subject-matters, learning outcomes, teaching and learning strategies, assessment methods, curricula etc. are one of the essential responsibilities of lecturers. They are the experts with regard to their subject-matter, which is why they should develop and design their curricula. Proposed curricula are usually approved at the department/ faculty level. The approval by institutional quality manager is normally quite formal. Apparently, quality managers are not eligible to support and give advice to faculties and lecturers with regard to programme development and curricula. Based on this, there is a rather broad spectrum of questions/issues that should be taken into consideration by high-level university management:

- Do they know enough about the shift from teaching to learning and what it means with regard to programme and curriculum development?
- Is there a strong connection between the conception of study programmes and formulation of learning outcomes at course level?
- Do all lecturers offer innovative teaching and learning strategies that help students to achieve the expected learning outcomes?
- What are real effects of an external evaluation of a study programme at the level of course contents, research, teaching, learning and assessment?

Hence, an internal regular revision and evaluation of study programmes can be a good possibility for sharing ideas about how to design and improve programmes and curricula. Moreover, continuous improvement as an integral part of academic quality assurance should be based on an on-going reflective feedback cycle involving monitoring, review and consequent evidence-based improvements both of courses and of major controls on academic quality such as assessment policies and procedures.

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