COMPREHENSIVE QUALITY ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

The article presents an analysis of approaches towards the development of a system of comprehensive quality assessment of education based on an example of one of Russia's major institutions of higher education. The system encompasses all the participants in the educational process and related stakeholders. Comprehensiveness and balance of the quality assessment is achieved by unifying the centralised and decentralised approaches, whereby part of the work is carried out on the faculty or departmental level, while the other part is undertaken at a university-wide level. Based on this analysis, a number of practical recommendations were made in the aims of improving the quality of education in a number of areas. The implementation of these recommendations has already produced real and significant results for the students. This is also reflected in the results of the regular surveys undertaken to assess students' satisfaction with the quality of the master's programme in linguistics.

Keywords: higher education, quality assessment, quality assurance, stakeholders, student satisfaction

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Quality is one of the core values of modern higher education. At the present time higher education quality assessment is an important objective for universities, since the quality of the education services which they offer to a significant degree predetermines their ability to function and develop normally. It also determines the level of financial support provided by all categories of stakeholders (state, academic and business communities, students etc.), as well as a series of non-tangible benefits.

This study is based on the author's many years of experience as a teacher of English and Translation Studies on the master's programme in the Institute of Humanities at the Peter the Great Polytechnic University of Saint Petersburg, one of the largest HE institutes in Russia, and also in her capacity as administrative coordinator of the education process. This experience has allowed the author to affirm that universities cannot function effectively without rigorous quality assessment of all aspects of the education process.

According to Article 11(a) of the World Declaration of Higher Education, "Quality in higher education is a multidimensional concept, which should embrace all its functions, and activities: teaching and academic programmes, research and scholarship, staffing, students, buildings, facilities, equipment, services to the community and the academic environment" (UNESCO, 1998). As a consequence of this approach, the quality assessment process for higher education institutions and subdivisions thereof requires the creation of a complex, multi-component system. The effective quality assessment of university educational activities requires that a huge quantity of factors and conditions be taken into account.

In the modern environment of active academic mobility, students cannot only select their educational establishment, but also change it at any stage of their education (Munteanu, Ceobanu, Bobâlcă, & Anton, 2010). The consequence is an increase in competition between universities, leading to the need for internal monitoring and assessment of the level of satisfaction of the users and all stakeholders in the quality of education services provided.

Given that the quality of education services is an aggregation of the properties and characteristics of the education process which ascribe to this process the ability to satisfy the educational needs of specific users, the HE establishment must "establish the

expected and assume the unexpected needs of specific users" (Gaidukova, 2013), in order to satisfy these needs to the maximum. To this end, the main groups of users of educational services at a given phase in higher education must be determined.

The key users of the educational services provided by a given HE institution are internal and external. According to the opinions of Russian researchers, the following groups of users can be determined: internal users, direct external users and indirect external users (Masterov et al., 2012, p.8). Within these groups, a determining role is played by such users as school graduates and their parents, students, graduates, employers, the state and society as a whole (Masterov et al., 2012, p.9).

In a comprehensive assessment of the quality of higher education, it would be inappropriate to speak only of the users of education services. The notion of "stake holders" is broader and covers not only direct and indirect users of education services, but also those who have an interest (stake) in the activity of the institution and are capable of influence. In addition to the users, one must also take into account the teaching staff, employees, administration and management of the university (Moraru, 2012; Kuzu, Gökbel, & Güleş, 2013). Stakeholders can be categorised as external and internal, individual and group (partners), state and private, academic and non-academic (Kuzu et al., 2013, p. 282). Stakeholders and their various groups in the area of HE pursue a variety of interests, but they are unified by a common purpose – to increase the quality of education provided by universities.

Thus, the primary object of universities is to determine the main groups of stakeholders and users of the services provided by them, and to define those indicators of service quality satisfaction which can be assessed. The provision of feedback to the university from stakeholders and the users of education services is a necessary condition to bring about corrective actions to improve the quality of education.

The main models referred to in the literature on the subject of consumer satisfaction are compliance or non-compliance with expectations. One of these is the Disconfirmation Model, according to which satisfaction is a function of the divergence between user expectation and the real quality of the product of service (Huang, Yang, & Hampton, 2011, p.78). It is this model that is most frequently used in the assessment of user satisfaction with the quality of higher education.

Assessment of the level of satisfaction of users and all stakeholders is a key aspect underlying the quality the education. Universities need to create a system to provide for regular and multi-lateral monitoring of the level of satisfaction of all stakeholders, as well as the dynamism of their expectations.

One of the key groups of internal users, and the largest, of the education process in HE is, of course, the students. Although the academic environment continues to persist in not accepting the notion of a student as a user or client (Mark, 2013), at the present time this concept is general recognised. Once they leave the confines of university, graduates as a product of its education processes, become external users of its services (Jongbloed, Enders, & Salerno, 2008), both in their capacity as members of society, tax payers, and in the more distant future, perhaps even employers and parents of the next generations of students.

Thus the student is the key user of HE education services. However, the quality of education should not be assessed solely on the basis of student satisfaction. This indicator cannot be the only source of information about the quality of education provided. This is due to the objective existence of an asymmetry of competences. The assessment of any service is subjective, and assessment of education services is made more difficult by the existence of an asymmetry in the competence of the users and suppliers of the services.

The users of education services are frequently insufficiently qualified to provide an informed assessment of the quality of the services provided by professionals. The service supplier (educational establishment) possesses much more information about their quality and quantity than the user (student). As Titov indicates, the asymmetry of competence in HE establishments is exacerbated by the complexity of the services provided by the higher education facility. This asymmetry is further exacerbated by the fact that the users of paid education services are students, or, in the majority of cases, their parents (Titova, 2008, p. 14). Thus, students, especially during their first years, do not possess sufficient competences to make an objective assessment of the education received, the qualifications of the teaching staff, or the benefit of a given discipline, etc. As Moraru (2012) suggests, the level of satisfaction on the part of the students and their parents is directly proportional to the reputation of the university (which is far from

being a guarantee of the real quality of education) and corresponds to the level of employment of its graduates and putative income after graduation.

Without possessing the entirety of information due to this asymmetry of competences, the student and later graduate as a result of acquiring an educational product of inappropriate quality (Merkulova, 2007) may waste time and money, lose out on favourable opportunities and miss out on the opportunity to enhance their social and economic competitiveness.

At the present time, a unified approach towards the assessment of user and stakeholder satisfaction in the education process has not been developed. The majority of existing assessment methods consist of assigning a numerical mark to the level of satisfaction on the part of the user with regard to a number of factors listed on a questionnaire (Eliseeva, 2012, p. 107). The main problem is the creation of list of criteria for each group of stakeholders and users of educational services based on a variety of parameters.

The majority of studies examining student satisfaction take the gender criterion into account as an obligatory aspect (Huang, Yang, & Hampton, 2011; Munteanu et al., 2010) and frequently categorise in according to age groups and year of study. When designing a procedure to analyse user and stakeholder satisfaction with the quality of education services for Masters degrees, there is a certain rationality in implementing ideas developed by Romanian researchers about the need for a separate assessment of the satisfaction of quality of the education process amongst students with varying degrees of academic achievement (Munteanu et al., 2010).

The general scheme of the student survey should include the following units:

1. "General Information" Unit, which will allow for the collation of base information about the respondents, including their age, gender, family status, previous education, sphere of education, etc. This is necessary, in order to define compliance of the totality of information and then for clustering of data and the definition of correlations.

2. "General Assessment of Satisfaction with Education" Unit assesses the degree to which students are satisfied with the quality of education as a whole, and how far it fulfils their expectations and needs.

3. "Teaching Staff Performance" Unit assesses of students' satisfaction with the performance of the professorial and teaching staff as a whole and in individual disciplines. Development of this unit must take into account the fact that the data obtained will be used to take decisions about teaching staff career development and competitive advancement, etc.

4. The "Educational Support" unit assesses students' satisfaction with the curriculum, access to literature, equipment, auditoria and facilities.

5. The 'Interpersonal Interaction" unit shows the level of students' satisfaction with communication with students on their course, teaching staff, auxiliary personnel (administrative staff and student liaison staff).

6. The "Extramural Activity" unit assesses students' satisfaction with sports, cultural and other types of events organised at the University.

Depending on the specific objectives, the survey may include additional units or exclude existing ones. However, the survey must not limit itself only to monitoring students' satisfaction with the education provided to them. The assessment of the quality of education must be multi-lateral and include all the participants in the educational process, as well as all the stakeholders. This includes students, their families, (since they directly or indirectly financially support the education of the student in HE), HE administration, teaching staff, employers, the state (and corresponding agencies), as well as society as a whole. The intra-institutional monitoring system should include students, graduate, employers and teaching staff.

When developing an intra-institutional assessment of the quality of education and, in particular, of the satisfaction of users and stakeholders, the most balanced approach is to unify the centralised and decentralised approaches, wherein part of the monitoring (emphasis on narrow and specific questions) is undertaken at faculty or departmental level, and part (students' assessment of the curriculum/curricula, satisfaction with education conditions etc.) should be undertaken at a university-wide level.

The university's objective in monitoring of the level of user and stakeholder satisfaction is to determine compliance of the quality of education with expectations, determining specific problems and area for improvement, discovering new needs and expectations on the part of the users, and defining trends. Based on the results of monitoring, specific management decisions can be taken, and corrective actions implemented (centralised but with the participation of coordinators in the specific sub-divisions or programmes).

Surveys are the key instrument in monitoring. This is the cheapest way of obtaining data whose reliability depends on the quality of the questions, consequent interpretation and processing. Each question must produce quantitive and qualitative data required for taking management decisions. The quantitive data must be measurable. Each survey must contain identical scales to facilitate the processing of obtained data and the consequent adequate interpretation of the results.

Modern IT allows for rapid online surveys and data acquisition, already processed in automatic (or semi-automatic) mode. The main difficulty lies in a precise and literate approach to devising the questions and evaluation scales, in order to achieve objective results and effective management decisions based upon them.

Surveys must be carried out on a regular basis and the data obtained must be comparable, i.e. identical questions must be included in the survey over a number of years, in order to evaluate dynamics. The frequency of the surveys depends on the specific objectives and aims defined by the University and its sub-divisions.

Reports on the results of the surveys should be submitted to the management of the University and its sub-divisions after processing. The information should be visualised and the conclusions clearly defined.

In general terms, centralised internal monitoring can be shown in the following way (Table 1).

Table 1. Centralised internal monitoring of user and stakeholder satisfaction with the quality of education services

Category of persons surveyed	Monitoring stages	Periods and frequency	Objectives
STUDENTS	Entrance	Single, on admission to 1st year (separate for bachelors and masters students)	Indication • Expectations of education course • Motivation for study • Factors which influence the choice of HE establishment, area of study, etc.
	Periodical (regular)	Upon completion of each academic year (or term)	Indication • Compliance of education process with expectations • Problems; • Reasons for dissatisfaction; • Positive aspects
	Final	Single, upon completion of education (separate for bachelors and masters students)	Indication • Compliance of education process with expectations • Level of satisfaction with education provided • Reasons for dissatisfaction; • Positive aspects • Employments plans
	Project	Upon implementation and completion of a new project affecting students (education, extra-mural activity, facilities)	Indication • Possible reaction to innovations; willingness to change (during project preparation stage); • Reactions to implementation, reasons for dissatisfaction; positive aspects (during project implementation); • Satisfaction with results (upon completion of project)
EMPLOYERS	Periodical (regular) – for all employers	Annually	Indication • Expectations of graduates (qualification, level of education) • Satisfaction with the level of education; • Desire for change according to individual aspects of the education; • Desire to continue employing

			graduates of the University • Markets trends etc.
	Concluding – for employers offering work experience and internships to students of the University	Upon completion of production work experience	Indication • Expectations of interns (qualification, level of education) • Satisfaction with the level of education; • Desire for change according to individual aspects of the education; • Desires to continue to cooperate with the University; • Desires to employ graduates of the University upon completion of their education • Markets trends etc.
GRADUATES	Periodical	Every 3, 5, 10 years after completion of university	Indication • Level of employment of graduates according to speciality • Of the level of satisfaction with education provided • Reasons for dissatisfaction; • Dynamics of attitude to the quality of education obtained and satisfaction.
TEACHING STAFF	Periodical	Annually	Definition • Compliance of education process with expectations • Problems; • Reasons for dissatisfaction; • Best practices etc.
	Project	Upon implementation and completion of new project affecting educational activity.	Indication • Possible reaction to innovations; willingness to change, opposition to change (during project preparation stage); • Reactions to implementation, reasons for dissatisfaction; positive aspects (during project implementation); • Satisfaction with results (upon completion of project)

Decentralised monitoring is carried out by each specific sub-division (institute, faculty, department), in order to obtain operational data to support decision-making at

the sub-divisional level. The decision to implement monitoring is taken by the sub-divisional management. At the same time, monitoring must not contradict the general concept of the University in the area of user and stakeholder satisfaction analysis. This will need agreement and consultations with those responsible for centralised monitoring.

Thus, there must be an integrated approach to ensuring and assessing the quality of HE. The balanced approach is optimal and consists of unification of the centralised and decentralised approaches. Part of the work is undertaken at faculty or department level, and part (for example, student assessment of the courses attended etc.) should be undertaken at a university-wide level.

This approach is being implemented at the Peter the Great Polytechnic University of Saint Petersburg in the assessment of student satisfaction with the quality of education in the Linguistics Masters programme. A survey of students enrolled on this programme has been ongoing over the past two years. The results of the study show that as whole the students are satisfied with the quality of Masters education provided to them (51% of students are completely satisfied and 36% are partially satisfied). The highest average assessment marks were awarded to such aspects of education as students' intellectual and professional growth, interesting courses, relatively low cost of education, interesting social life and student life, as well as the development of relationships with fellow students which could be useful for the future. Nevertheless, a number of areas could be improved. The survey stressed a need for improvement in the following areas: course content; education support; material and technical facilities; and provision of teaching staff.

Students expressed their greatest level of satisfaction with interpersonal relations during the education process. This forms the basis for the conclusion that the Institute of Humanities of the Peter the Great Polytechnic University of Saint Petersburg has succeeded in creating a secure psychological atmosphere. Thus, the interpersonal relationships between students, students and teaching staff and administrative personnel is rated very highly by students and consequently there is no need for radical improvements in this area in the near future.

The most problematic aspect according to students is the "development of relationships with potential employers which might be useful in the future". This is explained by the fact that employers at the present time are insufficiently attracted to the Masters programmes examined here. There are other areas which could be improved.

After analysis, recommendations for improvement were made in the following areas:

1. Content of education
2. Material and technical facilities
3. Teaching staff
4. Teaching support
5. Marketing of the masters programmes

At the present time, these recommendations have been transformed into management decisions which are easily implemented in the education and organisational processes. The implementation of these decisions has already provided real and important results for the students. This has also been shown in the results of the regular surveys.

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