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QUALITY EVALUATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAMMES: PROCESS AND CHALLENGES IN LATVIA

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Abstract:
The aim of the paper is to analyze process of higher education programmes' quality evaluation and define its main challenges, basing on the case of Latvia. At present stage the evaluation of higher education study programmes is realized in frames of the European Social Fund financed project "Evaluation of higher education programmes and proposals for quality improvement"(the Project) from May 2011 – April 2013. There are approximately 950 higher education study programmes in Latvia, and most of them are evaluated in frames of the Project. Apart from accreditation this is the first Project for evaluating the quality of higher education programmes in Latvia, thus requiring analysis on its performance. Investigations included in the paper are based both on theoretical concepts (e.g., Baartman, 2007, Bornmann, et.al, 2006, Darussalam, 2010, Gikanti, Morrow, Davis, 2011, Gomez, 2007, Kai, 2009, Nesman, 2007, Sarrico, et.al, 2010, Smith, 2008, Yarmorharmmadian, 2011, Westerheijden, et.al, 2007, etc.), on statistical data analysis provided by Latvian higher education institutions in frames of the Project and on interviews with the Project administration. The paper concludes that evaluation of higher education programmes is a complex issue not only due to the number of data necessary for ensuring the evaluating the higher education quality, but also due to the different types of calculations the higher education institutions use e.g. for registering their academic staff or financing available for one programme. The paper provides summary of the main challenges having arisen during the evaluation of higher education programmes'.

Keywords: higher education programmes, evaluation, quality of higher education.

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1. EVALUATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION – THEORETICAL CONCEPTS

A tension between productivity and quality becomes evident in many debates in higher education, however there is often an insufficient link between the two aspects (Sariko, et.al., 2010). Accountability in higher education is a concept related to efficiency, effectiveness, and performance evaluation; it calls for proving, by effective means, that higher education has attained the predetermined results and performance (Kai, 2009). If the total quality management evaluation is done correctly, the evaluation will present the profile of the organization to different audience, i.e. the customers, governments, other industries, funding agencies and public (Kulkarni, 2005).

The concept of quality in higher education is not new. Systematic procedures for quality assurance and improvement through evaluation have been in place in Western Europe since the mid 1980s (Bornmann, et.al. 2006; Neave, 1988). The »Communique´ of the Conference of Ministers Responsible for Higher Education in Berlin on 19 September 2003« establishes that the quality of higher education has »proven to be at the heart of the setting up of a European Higher Education Area« (http://www.bolognaberlin2003.de/pdf/Communique1.pdf). At the same time discussion on defining the quality in higher education and measuring it is of importance.

For many years, controversy has never abated over the questions »Can institutions of higher education be evaluated?« and »Can evaluation truly reflect the quality of educational activities and processes?« (Zhentian, 2009). The debates about quality suggest that the task of defining quality in higher education is rather tricky, due to the complexity of the matter (Sariko, et.al., 2010). To this day, there is still no widely acknowledged concept regarding the definition of higher education quality (Kai, 2009).

Evaluation means »a study designed and conducted to assist some audience to assess an object's merit and worth« (Stufflebeam, 2000) or more elaborated »a careful assessment of the merit, worth and value of processes, systems, output and outcome of interventions and organizations, an assessment which is intended to play a role in future, practical actions situations« (Vedung, 1997). Educational evaluation has its roots in the classroom, in testing and assessing students. This activity is, of course, still important, but today evaluation activity has expanded into the entire educational system and is used on all levels from individuals, over classrooms, programmes, organizations, fields, and national as well as international levels (Hansen, 2009). Many of the existing methods of evaluation in higher education are underpinned by a conception of learning that is de-contextualised. As a consequence, many data collection methods do not address aspects that affect students' learning. This is problematic because the core aim of higher education is to facilitate student learning (Nygaard, 2011). There are different aspects in scientific literature concerning evaluation of study programmes.

The ultimate target of the education and teaching reform in higher education institutions is to improve the quality of teaching and talent training. Scientific evaluation and monitoring are the important means to achieve this target (Huiru, 2009). To achieve strategic themes it is necessary to propose specific and effective strategic targets. To evaluate progress and performance towards these strategic themes and targets, quantified performance measure indicators must be established in a specific and simple manner that allows all staff members

to understand the orientation of the balanced scorecard in fulfilling their daily tasks (Chen, et al., 2006).

Evaluation of teaching at universities is traditionally realized in terms of student ratings (Spiel, et.al., 2006). Furthermore, Le Grand (2003) has identified two main methods of dealing with the quality problem. In the first place, the profession itself can develop and enforce a code of ethics. Secondly, "a government-appointed regulator or monitor" could be introduced to oversee the maintenance of quality (Le Grand, 2003).

The comparative evaluations of quality determinants as they are perceived by students are (Tsinidou, et al., 2010):

Academic staff
A1: Academic qualifications
B1: Professional experience
C1: Communication skills
D1: Friendliness/approachability
E1: Links with enterprises
F1: Research activity

Administration services
A2: Rapid Service
B2: Friendliness
C2: Availability of Information material
D2: Clear guidelines and advice
E2: Office automation Systems for customer service (IT support)
F2: Use of internet for announcements
G2: Sufficient working hours

Library services
A3: Availability of textbooks and journals
B3: Easy borrowing process
C3: Friendliness
D3: Working hours
E3: E-library

Curriculum structure
A4: Interesting module content/books
B4: Educational material of high quality
C4: Efficient structure of modules
D4: Availability of information on the module structure
E4: Variety of elective modules/modules on specialization areas
F4: Laboratories (connection with market demands)
G4: Weekly timetable

Location
A5: Accessibility
B5: Frequency of transport service
C5: Cost of transportation

Infrastructure
A6: Quality infrastructure (classrooms and laboratories)
B6: Catering services
C6: Free accommodation
D6: Sport facilities
E6: Medical facilities
F6: Quality infrastructure (administration)
G6: Availability of services to host social and cultural events (theatrical plays, cinema)

Carrier prospects
A7: Perspectives for professional career
B7: Opportunities for postgraduate programs
C7: Opportunities to continue studies abroad
D7: Availability of exchange programs with other institutes
E7: Institution's links with business

Although student evaluations of teaching data are collected in many universities, there is little published evidence that they are systematically used by staff for developing and improving their teaching (Marsh, 1987). Students' learning is seen to be affected by three central aspects: (1) students' inherent abilities, (2) students' own efforts to acquire the relevant knowledge, and (3) teachers' abilities to present and thereby transfer knowledge to students (Nygaard, et. al., 2011). Correspondingly, accountability in higher education includes such elements as the rational use of resources, provision of evidence, evaluation of evidence, attaching importance to costs and effectiveness, and improving the education process (Dressel 1980).

The purpose of quality assurance in higher education is to obtain public assurances that institutions of higher education are fulfilling their duty of providing services of value to society, which is the reason for the policy of requiring institutions of higher education to submit to certain forms of minute external censor (Kai, 2009). Quality assurance in teaching and learning requires not just the collection of data but also a system that ensures interpretation of, and response to, those data (Smith, 2008). Quality seems to be not only an elusive concept, but also a complex one that can be perceived in very different ways. These difficulties in defining the quality concept have led several authors to propose a more pragmatic approach to the meaning of quality in higher education, by regarding quality as 'fitness for purpose' as well as 'fitness of purpose'. This assumes that the interpretation of the quality conceptdepends ultimately on higher education's stakeholders (Westerheijden et al. 2007).

Opponents of higher education institution evaluation emphasize that education and teaching are mental activities unique to humans, that they are person-to-person activities, and that the objects of education are living individuals, each of whom is different and unique. They assert that education and teaching activities possess practicality, randomness, nature of life experience, and nonreplicability, and that no unifying essence exists among them—even less can they be explained merely by any manifest behavior (Zhentian, 2009). The massification of higher education systems also created a very complex and diverse environment that could no longer be efficiently addressed by a traditionally centralised bureaucracy engaged in scrutinising the minor details of the daily life of institutions (Sariko, et al., 2010). Besides, two case studies of programs of higher education reform in Germany, initiating so-called 'virtual universities' were used to investigate how stakeholders experienced evaluation.

Informants argued that there was too much evaluation, that confusion and competition arose about the roles of evaluation, and that little instrumental use occurred (Scwarz, et al., 2007).

The experiences collected by the studies show unanimously that in all the countries, multi-stage evaluation procedures as the main quality assurance instrument for evaluation of teaching and learning in higher education institutions have proved reliable and have gained acceptance. In the multi-stage procedure, academic review begins with internal self-assessment, whereby an academic programme or institute conducts its own analysis of strengths and weaknesses for a self-evaluation report. The next step is external evaluation. Here peer reviewers conduct a site visit of the programmes or units under evaluation and prepare an external evaluation report. The follow-up stage entails implementation of the reviewers' recommendations (Bornmann, 2006). Going back to the control function of organisational management, one concludes that performance indicators are the required informative element necessary for the existence of a control function. However, performance indicators can be a highly divisive subject in higher education, because of technical difficulties, political decisions, and the influence of those who use them. On the technical front, establishing a link between inputs and outputs of higher education processes is one of the hardest problems (Sariko, et al., 2010).

There are different perceptions for evaluating higher education, therefore the next chapter will be devoted for describing the evaluation of higher education institutions in Latvia.

2. EVALUATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAMMES IN LATVIA: EXPERIENCE GAINED AND CHALLENGES FACED

In order to increase the quality of academic personnel performance, teaching, provision of resources and well are improve cooperation and competitiveness, evaluation of the quality of higher education programmes is of importance. Apart from accreditation, a European Social Fund project "Evaluation of higher education programmes and proposals for quality improvement" is implemented in Latvia from May 2011 – April 2013, foreseeing to evaluate all the higher education programmes implemented in Latvia and providing proposals for their improvement.

The Project started in May 2011 and involved the following tasks for the first three months – theoretical analysis of other countries' experience in implementing the kind of projects, seminars with foreign experts' having implemented similar projects in other countries, design of a questionnaire for study programmes' evaluation and development of methodology for evaluation. Approximately 15 experts, representing different academic fields, e. g. engineering, social sciences, etc. participated in designing the questionnaire. Representatives from Latvian Students Association also took active part in designing the questionnaire and methodology. After that the questionnaire was evaluated by independent auditing firm and pilot interviews were performed. In addition the study programmes were divided in 28 branches, e.g. branch of Economics (approximately 50 education programmes are integrated in the branch), branch of Management Science (more than 150 programmes are integrated in the branch).

Evaluation of higher education in Latvia is realised, basing on four main blocks - Quality, Resources, Sustainability, Cooperation and Overlapping. Each of the blocks will contain sub-blocks, in order to gain a fully complete picture on higher education in Latvia. Both statistical

data and visits to higher education institutions, inter alia meetings with students and academic programs will be organised for evaluating the higher education institutions in Latvia.

Approximately 15 experts, representing different academic fields, e. g. engineering, social sciences, etc. participated in designing the questionnaire – the main tool for programmes' evaluation in frames of the Project. Representatives from Latvian Students Association also took active part in designing the questionnaire and methodology. After that the questionnaire was evaluated by independent auditing firm and pilot interviews were performed. In addition all the study programmes were divided in 28 branches, e.g. branch of Economics (approximately 50 education programmes are integrated in the branch), branch of Management Science (more than 150 programmes are integrated in the branch). The study programmes' evaluation is performed in frames of branches. Expert team for each branch consists of two foreign experts, one local expert holding a PhD and/ or 10 years' experience in higher education programmes' evaluation and not being elected in higher education institution in Latvia, one representative nominated by Employers' Confederation of Latvia and one representative nominated by Latvia and Latvian Students Association (participation of the representatives of Employers' Confederation of Latvia and Latvian Students Association is not compulsory).

The benefits of using international experts are obvious for the particularity of the Latvian system of assuring quality and consist of transparency, international credibility and "European dimension". These are strong arguments for a national debate with employers, parents, other interested individuals and the society in general. This model has also diminished the involvement of the state in a higher education system with strong personal connection amongst which finding a free independent expert for each field of study was pretty complicated. From this point of view, the positive experience in Latvia could be interesting for other countries aiming at introducing periodical assessments with the involvement of foreign experts (Horga, et al., 2009).

In September 2011 evaluation of the study programmes' started in the branch Education, followed by evaluation in other 27 branches.
The main sources of information provided by experts are:

- Report, of approximately 20 pages prepared by the higher education institution elaborated for the Project's purposes;
- Statistical data (describing the faculty, research, facilities of the HEI etc.);
- Annual reports and previous self-evaluation reports of higher education institutions.

Afterwards the report on evaluation results is elaborated and the programmes are divided into three blocks:

1. Sustainable programmes.
2. Programmes with several challenges for their continued existence.
3. Programmes whose continuation is under question mark (run a risk of being closed).

Basing on the collection of opinions of the Project administration (Project team leader, Project coordinator, Project secretary and two leading experts) on the necessary aspects to be taken into account in frames of the evaluation and several challenges are drawn concerning the realisation of the Project:

1. Despite the experience gained by the Project administration and leading experts in accreditation process, the evaluation performed in frames of the Project is different,

since the programmes are not evaluated individually, but in branches. Besides more data and information need to be gathered in frames of the Project;

2. Different accounting of data among higher education institutions, e.g. concerning their financing. Since some institutions gather data for the whole higher education institution only, in case data in necessary in frames of one study branch, comparisons of the data provided are not possible.
3. Number of students per one academic staff member in frames of the study branch is often problematic to calculate, since the higher education institutions have data accounts in frames of one faculty, but not in frames of a single programme or a study branch. Besides, in this case some of the persons are working in several faculties.
4. Involvement of higher education institutions in terms of providing data is sometimes a problematic aspect. There is a high number data necessary to be gained from higher education institutions in order to perform serious research. Despite the fact that some compensations are provided for the administrative staff of higher education institutions in frames of the Project, there are cases when the institutions are not very willing to provide data.
5. Time limits set in frames of the Project are challenging. The Project's conditions set the necessity to evaluate the programs in frames of one academic year, therefore the evaluation schedules are intensive. Moreover, there are often problems in terms of attracting foreign experts for a long time period (e.g. two weeks), therefore the evaluation performed for one branch consisting of approximately 30 programmes in 5 higher education institutions needs to be performed in one week, thus making the evaluation schedules even more intensive.
6. Criticism from the higher education institutions e.g. on subjective opinions of experts, in case the programmes are placed on the third block or even the second one appear from time to time. Despite the high competences of the experts and large number of data and information used for evaluation of the programmes, higher education institutions are often complaining on evaluation results, in case the programmes are not placed in the highest block;
7. The Project helps not only in evaluating study programmes (participation in the Project replaces accreditation), but also the higher education system in general. Thus calculations concerning the situation in higher education in frames of study branches will be performed and statistical data gained in frames of the Project will be used for policy planning. Yet sometimes administration members of the higher education institutions are not willing to provide data on higher education institutions performance for publishing.

Despite the challenges faced in frames of the Project, apart from accreditation, it is the first complete evaluation process of the higher education, besides a pilot project for statistical data gathering – e.g. about number of publication of academic staff, library resources, etc. The Project and experience gained in frames of it, will allow improving the overall higher education evaluation process in Latvia in future.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Evaluation of higher education dates back to 1980ies, however, due to its complexity, there are different methods of higher education evaluation, both proposed and opposed by scientists. Besides there are both proponents and opponents of the higher education evaluation process, since the latter ones consider that no objective data may be gained in the research. Higher education evaluation is often limited by certain extend of data, e.g. information on the carrier

paths of higher education institutions graduates. Nevertheless, there are still other objective indicators that may be used for evaluating higher education institutions in Latvia and in other countries, basing on the experience gained.

Evaluation of higher education in Latvia will be based on four main blocks - Quality, Resources, Sustainability, Cooperation and Overlapping. Despite the considerable work the experts will have to perform and the challenges to be faced - different accounting of data among higher education institutions, necessity to gather considerable number of data, etc., it is believed the results will be possible to use both for improving the higher education system in Latvia and providing experience for persons further performing higher education evaluation.

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