Study environment in the context of hei study quality assurance: case study at Daugavpils University (Latvia)

Jeļena Davidova, Irēna Kokina

Department of Pedagogy and Pedagogical Psychology, Daugavpils University, Latvia.

Abstract

In recent years the system of higher education quality assurance has undergone several essential changes: a greater emphasis is being laid on the qualification framework, on student-centered learning and study results, the development of the teaching staff, active students' participation in the assessment of the study process. The given study is oriented towards studying students' opinions about the study environment in the context of study quality assurance at Daugavpils University (DU), Latvia.

The participants of this study were 60 students from 12 master and doctoral study programs at Daugavpils University. The analysis of structured interviews with the students made it possible to identify the typical characteristic features of HEI study environment as the significant ctireria of DU internal quality assessment. The research showed that students assess highly lecturers' personal qualities (attitude to their profession, personal interest in students' success, empathy, striving for cooperation) and their professional qualities (knowledge of the subject, didactic and communicative competence, and ability to get the feedback from students as well).

To promote the cooperation between the students and the academic staff of DU, it is useful to practice trans-disciplinary out-of-study forms, which contribute to a deeper understanding of the study content, of topicalities in global education and possibilities of synergetic thinking in cooperation with students and lecturers.

Keywords: quality assurance; higher education institution.

1. Introduction

Responding to the challenges posed by globalization, information technologies and knowledge-based economy in the 21st century, the paradigm of higher education quality assurance is undergoing changes. Quality of education is the quality of the future, determined by the role of education in regards to the future needs of individuals, community and society (Cheng & Tam, 1997). Therefore, a further quality assurance (further – QA) of a higher education institution (further – HEI) relates to the compliance of aims, content, practice and results of education with the future of new generations at solving the problems of the new millennium.

The goal of the Bologna Process is to develop the area of Europe's higher education and make it competitive, transparent and multiform by assuring a qualitative higher education which will create conditions for a sustainable social-economic development (The Bologna Declaration, 1999). The majority of studies on the system of quality management in industry and education underlines factors that promote the development of this system, for example, such as obligations of a higher level management, involvement of employees and a continuous development (Curry & Kadasah, 2002; Montes et al., 2003). Research on the quality management in higher education emphasizes the special importance of QA effectiveness (Welsh & Dey, 2002; Wiklund et al., 2003; Logermann, 2014).

Despite the fact that students' involvement into the processes of internal quality assurance of HEI is an essential factor for achieving the Bologna goals as to the quality, the studies on the issue of students' (as those concerned) integration into the procedures of internal quality assurance are very few and fragmentary (IBAR, 2013; Kohoutek, Land & Owen, 2013). Besides, little is known about students' actual situation or influence on processes of internal quality assurance to achieve a high study quality level.

Research aim: to explore DU students' opinions about the HEI study environment in the context of study quality assurance at Daugavpils University.

2. The Normative Base for the Quality Assurance at a Higher Education Institution

The main principles of European standards and guidelines for higher education are:

- good quality of higher education where the interests of students, employers and society are taken into consideration;
- institutional autonomy;
- proper external quality assurance for the goals of the institution.

After the proposal prepared and submitted by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), in 2005, the ministers responsible for higher education adopted Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). In 2013, at the 24th conference "Management and Qualitative Education" the ministers of education from EU member states came to an agreement that education quality is closely related to four interrelated aims: training for a sustainable employment; getting ready for life as active citizens in a democratic society; personal development; to develop and maintain a comprehensive, progressive knowledge base via teaching, learning and studying (Council of Europe, 2013).

According to the ESG revised version adopted on May 15 – 16, 2015, at the Summit of European Ministers in Erevan (Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, 2015), many aspects of quality assurance are being dealt with, for instance, such as a quality of academic standards, adequacy of assessment, involvement of those concerned into the management and the reliability of internal practice. This document stresses the fact that higher education institutions must have QA policy oriented towards: development of QA system; responsibility of structural units and HEI management, staff and students for QA; academic honesty and freedom; intolerance to academic deceit; struggle against lack of tolerance and discrimination of students and the staff; involvement of external interested parties in QA.

Over the time, the role of students, as those concerned internally, has been different. In between 1970 and 1990, students could be seen more frequently as members of academic community in the leading structures of HEI (Student Goteborg Declaration, 2001). HEIs compete to attract and maintain a highly qualified academic environment (Baruch, 2006). "The young generation, called generation Y (Gen Y) is highly skilled people that place high value on career development and will work for organizations that will provide them with career development opportunities" (Mayer, 2006, 65). The environment around us has an impact on students' consciousness and sub-consciousness. The quality of a study process determines the way of their thinking, habits and personality on the whole.

A comprehensive QA system ought to verify the diverse quality concepts by making use of three interrelated areas: quality of available people and material resources; quality of management and a study process; quality of outcomes (Frazer, 1994; Westerheijden & Kohoutek, 2014; IQM-HE, 2016; Ganseuer & Pistor, 2017; Martin & Parikh, 2017).

Based on the new paradigm, the concepts of added value and created value substantially differ in the context of QA. The increase in the HEI added value greatly depends on the improvement of the internal processes, while the creation of value is mainly based on the adequacy of aims and satisfaction of those concerned with the growth of education services. In HEI, the academic factors identify an important aspect of education quality. Lizzo et al.

(2002) have established that the understanding about the HEI study environment enhances the academic outcome, while the previous academic achievements do not influence it.

3. Qualities of environment for good teaching practice in HEI

How can higher education be improved? A.W. Chickering & Z.F. Gamson (1987) defined what good higher education means and formulated seven principles of good teaching, which have been intended as a guideline for HEI's academic staff, students and administrators for improving teaching and learning: 1) encourage contact between students and faculty, 2) develop reciprocity and cooperation among students, 3) encourage active learning, 4) give prompt feedback, 5) emphasize time on task, 6) communicate high expectations, 7) respect diverse talents and ways of learning.

When all principles are practiced, there are six other forces in education that surface: activity, expectations, cooperation, interaction, diversity, and responsibility.

Authors stressed qualities of environment that are favorable to good practice in higher education:

- A strong sense of shared purposes,
- Concrete support from administrators and faculty leaders for those purposes,
- Policies and procedures consistent with the purposes,
- Continuing examination of how well the purposes are being achieved.

By analyzing the concept of A.W. Chickering & Z.F. Gamson (1987) and EU normative documents in the context of study environment as one of the components of HEI's study quality assurance, authors of this paper especially emphasize the importance of such aspects of education quality as collaboration in different levels (administration - students, academic staff - students, students – students): a) active position of students in creating knowledge and compentences; b) development of students' learning motivation.

4. Research Design

Study was based on qualitative methodology which allows us to more objectively identify the QA similarities, differences and ideas about the quality of a study process and students' satisfaction with its course. The research process for this case study involved the use of structured interviews aimed at collecting data about students' position in the context of quality assurance of the study process at Daugavpils University. The data obtained during interviews of this qualitative research were analyzed according to the Tesch (1990) principles.

A total of 60 students from 12 master and doctoral study programs at Daugavpils University participated in the interviews individually. Each interview was non-structured and about 30 to 40 min long. The interview data were collected, transcribed and analyzed in 2018 according to regular qualitative coding principles (Dey, 1993). Responses from each participant were analyzed in detail and in isolation from those of other participants; there were several approaches to the analysis of these responses and the key words were identified.

The key words were classified into broader categories that might be refined and challenged until the key words classified reasonably. The major open-ended questions in the interviews were about study process quality: competences and personal qualities of academic staff, study program's content, evaluation requirements, as well as about students' participation in study quality assessment etc. A qualitative data analysis was achieved by identifying topics in the frame of research object in the collected research data, which were synthesized and generalized.

5. Results and Discussion

The analysis of interviews with the students enabled us to identify the typical characteristic features of DU study quality assessment. Students assess competences of DU academic staff in their respective areas and their favorable attitude to students as high. However, to students' mind, there could be more practical classes in some subjects. As regards to the requirements for assessing learning outcomes, students are satisfied with the fact that the assessment requirements and criteria are clear to them and academic staff are objective when assessing their knowledge, skills and competences.

When students evaluate their cooperation with academic staff, they greatly appreciate academic staff's readiness to motivate, help and support students: this encourages them to develop themselves. In regards to students' possibility to influence the study process as well as the content quality, all the informants are positive. Students state that they are active participants in assessing the study process and take part in surveys, work in study program councils and on faculty boards or openly and constructively communicate with the academic and administrative staff in this context.

This research showed that academic staff's personal qualities (attitude to their profession, taking interest in students' achievements, empathy, striving for cooperation) as well as their professional qualities (knowledge of the subject, didactic and communicative competence, and also the ability to get feedback from students) are very important for students. In this aspect, the data obtained in our research are closely analogous to the results of the research done by Arnon & Reichel (2007), who established that such academic staff's qualities as

general knowledge, orientation to a specific social mission are considered by students as less important.

What concerns the diversity of DU study environment, students of master and doctoral programs emphasize the importance of methods, which are based on concrete trans-disciplinary problem's study during group discussion and focused on sustainable development:

- "...helps to better understand the role of higher education, both globally and locally" (I.D.);
- "helps to get better around at sustainable and unsustainable activities..." (A.M.);
- "...promotes setting up of specific goals in the development of oneself as a professional" (N.D.);
- "...helps to reflexively assess the experience acquired so far and outline the broader future development opportunities" (F.D.);
- "...there is feeling of power in the discussions with others..." (S.L.);
- "...influences the creation of many new ideas..." (R.O.);
- "helps to understand the growth of oneself as professional" (D.K.);
- "...promotes productive collaboration and synergy" (U.L.);
- "..guarantees the cooperation of students and lecturers on the principles of freedom and partnership" (B.A.).

The above mentioned examples of students' responces indicate that the study environment, which is based on interactive teaching/learning methods and trans-disciplinary approach, encourages students to think about the future of civilization, sustainable and unsustainable behavior on a global and local scale, about the aims of sustainable development and awareness about them. During group discussions, participants managed to identify the possible ways for their cooperation, some complex problems and opportunities for engaging in deeper studies of these problems. In this context we can speak about the role of HEI study creative and research environment for achieving modern higher education aims.

6. Conclusions

1. Study process quality is one of the factors for the effectiveness of HEI internal quality assurance. Students' involvement in the processes of HEI internal quality assurance guarantees an adequate coordination between HEI management processes and perspective needs of society. The research data show that the personal qualities (attitude to their profession, personal interest in students' success, empathy, striving for cooperation) and professional qualification of DU academic staff (knowledge of the subject, didactic and communicative competence, and ability to get the feedback from

students as well) are one of the most important factors that influence the perception of education quality.

2. In HEI, the academic factors identify an important aspect of education quality:
   - Promoting good communication between academic staff and students,
   - Encouraging interaction among students,
   - Providing opportunities for active participation,
   - Motivating learning by communicating expectations.

3. To promote the cooperation between the students and the academic staff of DU, it is useful to practice interactive teaching/learning methods and trans-disciplinary approach, which a) contribute to a deeper understanding of the study content, b) provide opportunities for synergetic thinking in cooperation between lecturers and students, c) create a platform for generating new ideas; d) provide an opportunity for identifying oneself as a researcher in the area of interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary problem studies.

References

Arnon, S. & Reichel, S. (2007). Who is the ideal teacher? Am I? Similarity and difference in perception of students of education regarding the qualities of a good teacher and of their own qualities as teachers. Teachers and Teaching: Theory and practice, 13(5), 441-464.

Baruch, Y. (2006). Career development in organizations and beyond: Balancing traditional and contemporary viewpoints. Human Resource Management Review, 16(2), 125-138.

Cheng, Y.C. & Tam, W.M. (1997). Multi-models of quality in education. Quality Assurance in Education, 5(1), 22-34.

Chickering, A.W. & Gamson, Z.F. (1987). Seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education. AAHE Bulletin, 40(7), 3-7.

Council of Europe (2013). 24th Standing Conference of Ministers of Education: Governance and quality education. Standing Conference of Ministers of Education. Retrieved 30.03.2015 from http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/standingconf/Default_en.asp

Curry, A. & Kadasah, N. (2002). Focusing on key elements of TQM: Evaluation for sustainability. The TQM Magazine, 14, 4-16.

Dey, I. (1993). Qualitative Data Analysis: A User-friendly Guide. London: Routledge.

Frazer, M. (1994). Quality in higher education: An international perspectives. In D. Green (Ed.), What is Quality Higher Education. UK: SRHE and Open University Press.

Frazer, M. (1994). Quality in high education: International perspectives. In D.Green (Ed.), What is Quality Higher Education. UK: SRHE and Open University Press.

Ganseuer, Chr. & Pistor, P. (2017). From Tools to an Internal Quality Assurance System University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany. Paris: International Institute for Educational

Planning. Retrieved 18.09.2017 from https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000249502

IBAR Project (2013). Identifying Barriers in Promoting European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance at Institutional Level. Final Synthesis Report IBAR Project. Retrieved 07.11.2017 from http://www.ibarllp.eu/assets/files/Results/Final_synthesis_report.pdf

IQM-HE (2016). Internal Quality Management in Competence-Based Higher Education. Retrieved 02.03.2017 from https://iqmhe.wordpress.com/

Kohoutek, J., Land, R. & Owen, C. (2013). Identifying Barriers in Promoting the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance at Institutional Level (IBAR): Final synthesis report IBAR Project. Retrieved 18th July, 2016 from http://www.ibarllp.eu/assets/files/Results/Final_synthesis_report.pdf

Lizzio, A., Wilson, K. & Simons, R. (2002). University students' perceptions of the learning environment and academic outcomes: Implications for theory and practice. Studies in Higher Education, 27(1), 27-52.

Logermann, (2014). Students as Stakeholders in the Policy Context of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education Institutions: A comparative case study of a Dutch and German higher education institution. Master Thesis. Universiteit Twente.

Martin, M. & Parikh, S. (2017). Quality Management in Higher Education: Developments and drivers results from an international survey. Paris: International Institute for Educational Planning. Retrieved 18th July, 2017 from https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000260226

Mayer, J.D. (2006). Personality: A systems approach. New York: Pearson.

Montes, F., Fover, A.V. & Ferrantez, T.M. (2003). Factors affecting the relationship between total quality management and organizational performance. International Journal of Quality & Reliability Management, 20(2), 16-31.

Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) (2015). Brussels Belgium.

Student Goteborg Declaration (2001). Retrieved 12.06.2017 from http://www.ehea.info/cid102734/student-goteborg-convention-march-2001.html

Tesch, R. (1990). Qualitative Research: Analysis types and software tools. New York: Falmer.

The Bologna Declaration (1999). Retrieved 30.03.2015 from http://www.magnacharta.org/resources/files/BOLOGNA_DECLARATION.pdf

Welsh, J. & Dey, S. (2002). Quality measurement and quality assurance in higher education. Quality Assurance in Education, 19(1), 17-25.

Westerheijden, D.F. & Kohoutek, J. (2013). Working together to take quality forward. 8th European Quality Assurance Forum. The Netherlands CHEPS & Czech Republic Centre for Higher Education Studies.

Wiklund, H., Wiklund, B. & Edvardsson, B. (2003). Innovation and TQM in Swedish higher education institutions – possibilities and pitfalls. The TQM Magazine, 15(2), 99-107.