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BEST PRACTICES**THE QUALITY OF THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS AT UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT LEVEL – A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE VIEW**

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Abstract

The literature and evidence of the theory and practice of quality assessment in higher education has been growing fast. Within the larger field of quality assessment, the terms good practices and communities of practice have been largely used by administrators, managers and practitioners with various intentions and connotations. The present article explores the use of the concepts in the Romanian higher education with the view to document the process of adopting or developing an internal assessment procedure in the languages department of a non-philological university in Romania. The need for such an endeavour and the associated challenges are explained through the external pressures to increase the visibility of the department both at institutional and general public levels.

Keywords: quality assessment, good practices, communities of practice

JEL Classification: I23, D73

Introduction

Quality assurance in education is closely connected in our view with the concept of good practices that may be defined as the methods or techniques that have consistently yielded better results to those obtained through other means. Both the public and the professional narratives are crowded with references to good and best practices as desirable lines of actions to get the results that had been set as organizational targets.

Within discussions about quality and standards there often is a terminology fuzziness. In discussions of quality and standards there is often confusion over the use of the terms. As Beso et al. (2007) note concepts such as quality, quality assurance or standards are used without clearly defining their meanings, although a simple way to look at this is to see quality as a process, and standards as a means of evaluating the outcomes. They give an

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example of evaluating the quality of higher education by examining the process through which students learn. Within the same example the standard of higher education would be evaluated by examining what the students have learned, in other words the outcomes of the learning process. Obviously this is not an easy endeavour. Moreover, Beso et al. (2007) highlight difficulties of implementing quality assurance procedures due to the academic traditions that are hard to change and to the personal resistance of academics themselves particularly in institutions where the terminology of quality assurance has not been internalized. From among the diverse issues that Beso et al. (2007) underline the following is useful for our research namely the tendency of academics to subvert or ignore the value of quality processes if they do not fully understand them and consequently do not value them.

Within the larger field of quality assessment, the terms good practices and communities of practice have been largely used by administrators, managers and practitioners with various intentions and connotations. Taking this various usage into account and based on the literature reviewed the present paper sets out to explore those concepts and to offer some clarifications. It then presents the way in which a community of practice focusing on internal quality assurance emerged in the department of modern languages of the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (BUES).

1. Literature review

Quality assurance in higher education has been an important topic in the European public debate ever since the 1990. In Romania this debate has taken more the form of reacting to and adopting the practices of a European Commission project initiated between 1994 and 1995 and meant to develop a common model of education assessment in the member states as Sârbu et al (2007) show. During the period in which European universities were developing quality assessment best practices and policies, the Romanian higher education system was in internal turmoil going through its reparatory reforms period (1990 – 1995) that had been meant to undo the negative effects of the communist regime followed by its first wave of systemic reforms (1995 – 2002) aiming at developing higher education and which managed to put in place real autonomy for universities [Nicolae (2010)].

It is important to have this larger context in view when discussing the way quality assurance is being discussed and implemented in Romania, which is the narrow approach of accreditation. Florian (2011) shows that this narrow approach had undesired effects especially upon the state universities which suffered by the continuous severe underfinancing of the system and could not develop services perceived as valuable by its various stakeholders – students, academics and employers included. Researchers therefore consider that quality assurance instruments have relatively failed to generate the expected results and universities could not provide the expected services either because they have not clearly set themselves this target or because they have been often, even if indirectly, hindered by the state. These findings are echoed by the BUES Evaluation Report (2012) which states that “the evaluation team understands that the BUES, like all Romanian universities, has suffered –and still suffers – from an evaluation overload.” The Report also emphasizes the “difficult phase for Romanian universities (e.g. financial crisis, changes in legislation)” in which evaluation bureaucracy and punitive evaluations do not contribute to the building of a quality culture which needs to include attitudes, mentalities and values and

not refer only to standards, rankings or classifications. The evaluation team considered that developing the quality culture of the university should be a bottom up process encouraged and stimulated at individual level by the leadership of the university in its various positions. And this is where communities of practice have an important role to play as they are driven by the passion of its individuals and not by bureaucratic pressures.

The classical definition of communities of practice as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" was given by Wenger (1988) as part of his framework for a social theory of learning. He considers communities of practice as part of this framework and he describes them as "the social configurations in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognizable as experience". Communities of practice may not necessarily be known under this title, but are given various names such as learning networks, discussion groups or interest clubs. Wenger points out that they all have three elements in common - a domain, a community and a practice. But besides this they come in a variety of forms and sizes. Although their conceptualization is relatively new, some communities of practice have existed since the development of human types of learning together. The concept was appropriated by businesses and by other types of organizations interested in knowledge management. It has become the basis for an approach to knowing and learning that enables the creation of learning systems in various sectors and at various levels of scale.

As Ilie, Maftai and Colibășanu (2011) point out there is a clearly identified need to share best practices in Romanian higher education from the point of view of quality assurance. However, the authors are aware of the particularities of the Romanian higher education development and the difficulties of such an enterprise and propose benchmarking as a starting point for what they see as a larger project based on comparative studies of international, mainly European, higher education systems and practices. Those studies could become an incentive to stimulate a relatively objective definition of quality and quality indicators in Romanian higher education without suspicions of political interference or institutional rivalries as well as being useful "in destroying conceptual reasoning based on narrow experience" that, because it is personal, is given undue validity as universally applicable.

Moreover in Romania the need for good practices in higher education quality assessment are considered important due to severe accusations of corruption. The public discourse on corruption issues has been growing in intensity particularly from the civil society. The Romanian Academic Society (2013), an education think tank, considers that the reform of the higher education system that started in 1995 brought alongside increased autonomy, an increased number of corrupt practices so that one can speak of a pervasive culture of corruption in Romanian higher education at the time of the respective study. The proposal put forward by the Romanian Academic Society was to develop an exercise in public sector benchmarking with the view to evaluate and promote integrity in higher education. To do so, the think tank wanted, among others, to promote and disseminate good practices in quality, mainly, integrity assessment.

Dinu (2005) shows that good practices represent the standard performance of an organization which, however, is not enough for the highly competitive environments of today's globalized economy. In order to achieve high levels of performance organizations need to constantly innovate and apply new knowledge to their current good practices

(figure 1). While Figure 1 refers specifically to business organizations, the correlations it proposes are, in our view, clearly transferable to higher education organizations with institutions of low performance offering a basic educational experience in terms of infrastructure, of learning experience and of the quality of life for both students and staff. Best practices are those that make excellent institutions what they are, having high performance both in research and in teaching and, therefore, setting the standards for the rest of the higher education system.

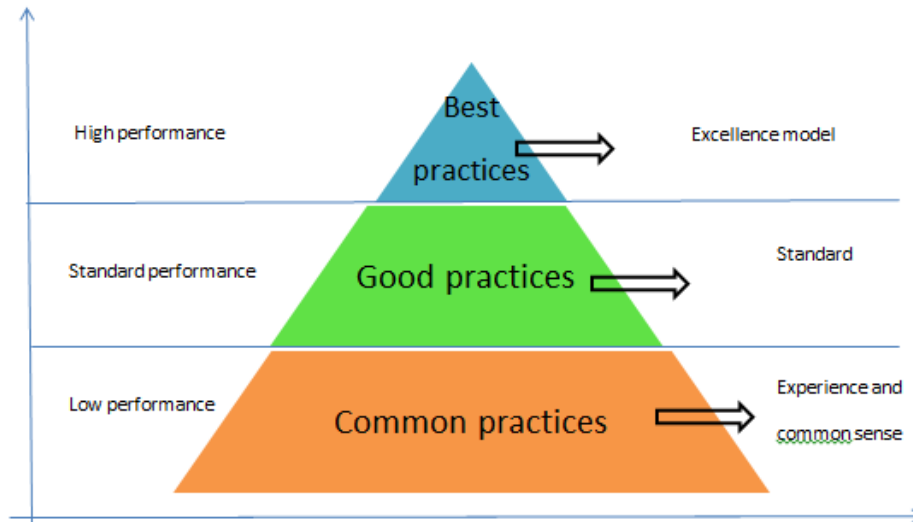


Figure no. 1: Good practices and performance
Source: Dinu, 2005.

Each field of activity identifies, develops and uses its own good and best practices that may become widespread by copying. As Michael Porter (2001) underlines that line of action can become counterproductive due to the difficulty of sustaining a high level of operational effectiveness over one's competitors. Porter states that "once a company establishes a new best practice, its rivals tend to copy it quickly. Best practice competition eventually leads to competitive convergence, with many companies doing the same things in the same ways. Customers end up making decisions based on price, undermining industry profitability". This may seem common sense once put on the table, however the management decisions in higher education are pressing to standardize universities by adopting the best practices of the first tiers in the international rankings which leads to an undifferentiated (everyone offers the same study programmes) and unprofitable field of education.

In the next section of our discussion we present the way a community of practice focusing on quality emerged in the languages department of BUES. The existence and activities of this community of practice seem to be relevant to institutional quality assessment when it is applied to departments that are not in the core competence of the university. More specifically in a business and economics university how do you assess language or law departments which have another type of culture and professional discourse? The present article documents a possible line of action.

2. The Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication

The Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication (DMLBC) in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (BUES) has adopted an internal quality assurance mechanism that addresses its specific profile and field identity. Why is this necessary and even important when BUES has its own well organised system of internal quality assurance as underlined in the BUES Evaluation Report (2012)? We will try to answer this question in the following section by offering a brief outline of the characteristics of DMLBC.

The Bucharest University of Economic Studies has, within the Faculty of International Business and Economics, the largest and most diverse department of modern languages and business communication in Romania. With 65 full-time teaching staff (7 professors, 12 readers, 22 lecturers and 24 teaching assistants), 20 associate/part-time teaching staff and 9 admin and support staff, the DMLBC offers services to the entire university and has also proved to have the professional capacity to develop study programmes for applied linguistics in accordance with the present international best-practices (Nicolae, 2014). Since the increased pressure on research and international publication assessed by quantitative measures the DMLBC has started to have difficulties of positioning itself among the other departments of the university. This is due to the fact that DMLBC is part of a non-philological university which tries to assess all its departments mainly by criteria fit for the fields of economics and business which are the university's core fields of competences.

On the other hand, if external quality assessment has been traditionally driven for assurance rather than enhancement purposes, nowadays researchers seem to document an increasing tendency to develop internal quality enhancement processes in order to document arguments for potential change or to inform change as Becket and Brookes, (2006) state. This is the case of the DMLBC which needs to become more visible in its own university not only as a teaching department, but also as one that is dedicated to research. Moreover, the need to be part of an international community of research in the field of the department's interests encourages part of its staff to adopt internal quality processes in order to enhance the existing research competences of department staff and enlarge their practices to areas that could become relevant to the larger academic community. Such areas include supporting research communication of the other departments of the university, as well as raising awareness to academic practices such as plagiarism and academic integrity from a cross-cultural perspective, translation and editing in the academic context, teaching of English for academic, research and publication purposes and peer-reviewing best practices.

The need for such an approach is also due to the larger effects of excessive external quality evaluations focusing on single standards and indicators. As Florian (2011) shows, quoting Brennan and Shah (2000), the introduction of external evaluation weakened the internal cultures of study fields and disciplines, changing the distribution of power within higher education institutions. This could mean, and actually happened with the DMLBC, a shift from department level to university management level. Policies and regulations, often coming from external authorities, including the ministry of education, have become more important than the specific teaching and research interests of the academic study disciplines, particularly those who are peripheral for the core competence of a higher education institution. In other words, the external values of society, of the economy, have become primordial over the intrinsic ones related to academic interests and academic

freedom. In practice that meant the narrowing of the access to funding of DLMCB and to promotion for an important number of its academic staff.

Taking into consideration the above context the council of DLMCB and the head of department, following three years of consultations at various levels and in various formats, put forward to the community a proposal to adopt an internal quality assessment scheme based on the Practice Code of the Romanian Association for Quality Language Services (<http://www.quest.ro/quality/description/>), which takes into consideration the evaluation of the teaching-learning process, the quality of research and of the publications of the members the department, the quality of human interaction at department level and in connection to other departments from the university. This proposal has come as a natural consequence of the existence of a well profiled community of practice within the DLMCB focusing on quality practice, teaching and research.

The community of practice is driven by the passion and commitment of its individual members. Through this community the DLMCB has a well-established history of involvement in quality assessment activities. As such individual members of the department are among the initiators and founding members of QUEST Romania, the Romanian Association for Quality Language Services, set up in 1996 with the aim to promote language services of the highest quality standards through its quality assurance scheme (<http://www.quest.ro/about/>). Institutionally the DLMCB organised together with QUEST Romania international events such as the eleventh international conference of QUEST Romania with the theme "Languages for Business and Career Development - The Quality Dimension". QUEST Romania is authorised by the Romanian Ministry of Education to provide teacher training and development programmes and has been included in the National System of Continuing Education.

Through this community of practice, members of the DLMCB have coordinated or participated as members in European programmes among which the following are significant: QualiTraining - A Training Guide for Quality Assurance (2004 – 2007) http://archive.ecml.at/mtp2/QualiTraining/html/QualiTraining_E_pdesc.htm; QualiTraining at Grassroots Level (2008 – 2009) <http://qualitraining2.ecml.at/>; ISQALE - Improving standards of quality in Adult Language Education (2011 – 2013); QATRAN - Quality Assurance and Accessible Training (2013 – 2015) <http://qatrain.blogspot.ro/>.

An important contribution to the activities of this community of practice in terms of becoming known at university level was the presence of the head of department in the internal team that prepared the Self-evaluation Report for the 2012 evaluation performed by the Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP) of the European University Association (EUA). Also a team of seven department members helped by three students translated the documents produced during the evaluation process and offered interpreting services for all the stakeholders involved in the process. It is worth mentioning and relevant for the international dimension of our discussion that the IEP is a full member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and is listed in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). We are underlining the following features of the evaluation process which explain the invitation of the DMLBC to support the evaluation process: a European and international perspective and a peer-review approach with an emphasis on improvement. Those features are distinctive and characteristic elements of the majority of the professional community of the DMLBC: a proficiency of English used in the context of evaluation, giving and receiving constructive

feedback, developing peer-review best practices and understanding the language and culture of the quality assurance processes. They represent part of the DMLBC's set of best practices in interacting with other university departments.

Conclusions

The case presented in this article highlights the importance of communities of practice in the adoption of an internal quality assessment scheme in organizations which could be naturally unwilling to this process if it is top-down. The presented community of practice has a history of two decades in developing itself. It contributed to the building of a strong quality culture at the faculty level which includes attitudes, mentalities and values that are characteristic of the profile of the field and disciplines of study of the community.

The importance of the adoption of an internal quality assessment mechanism is also significant for a university department as a distinct organizational entity as it contributes to the increase of its visibility on the internal level, in the inter-institutional relations as well as in those with a more general public.

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