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QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS THROUGH THE RISK MANAGEMENT INTEGRATION

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Abstract. Recently, universities are under increasing public and government pressure to demonstrate the implementation of quality processes. In the present study we analyze what represents the concept of quality in higher education, how we differentiate the services offered by universities in terms of quality, what is the role of risk management in quality assurance. Several researches provided by various scientific sources, international standards in the field of quality, the experience of some foreign universities regarding the implementation of risk management are analyzed. The experience of the public institution, the Academy of Economic Studies from Moldova, was also presented, although not very extensive in the analyzed field. The conclusions we reached relate to the need to promote an effective communication in the field of quality assurance and risk management at the institutional level, the implementation of a risk culture at the institution level. Only in such conditions, the efforts made by the management of the institution can bring the expected results.

Keywords: *quality, risk, risk culture, communication, stakeholders, employability.*

Rezumat. În ultimul timp universitățile sunt supuse unei presiuni publice și guvernamentale din ce în ce mai mari pentru a demonstra implementarea proceselor de calitate. În prezentul studiu analizăm conceptul de calitate aplicat în învățământul superior, cum diferențiem serviciile oferite de universități din punct de vedere al calității, care este rolul managementului riscului în asigurarea calității. Sunt trecute în revistă mai multe cercetări oferite de diverse surse științifice, standarde internaționale în domeniul calității, experiența unor universități din străinătate privind implementarea managementului riscului. Este prezentată și experiența instituției publice Academia de Studii Economice din Moldova, deși nu foarte vastă, în domeniul analizat. Concluziile pe care le-am realizat țin de necesitatea promovării la nivel de instituție a unei comunicări eficiente în domeniul asigurării calității și a managementului riscului, implementării la nivel de instituție a unei culturi a riscului. Doar în astfel de condiții eforturile depuse de managementul instituției pot aduce rezultatele așteptate.

Cuvinte-cheie: *calitate, risc, cultura riscului, comunicare, stakeholders, angajabilitate.*

Abbreviations: ANACEC - National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research; ASEM - Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova; EQA - External quality assurance; ISO - International Organization for Standardization; TQM - Total Quality Management; QMS - Quality Management System; USA - United States of America.

1. Introduction

In the last few decades, we increasingly read, hear, and also use the term "quality" in different contexts, at different conferences, round tables, TV shows, but also in private discussions. We use it when we refer to certain products that we purchase, when we need various services (medical, educational, financial, other). Every time we want to make sure that we get only high quality. So everyone knows what quality means once they refer to it and want it. But each of us knows quality for ourselves, what we consider to be quality, what satisfies our perception of quality. Each person not only interprets this term differently, but also with reference to one and the same product or service, the requirements will be different. Quality is an indistinct and elusive construct [1], therefore it is necessary to achieve a common understanding of the term „quality“. Quality is a particularly complex notion, currently there are a multitude of definitions and dozens of synonyms for this term. Thus, we mention the definitions presented by the classics of quality management, such as Crosby (1979), who defines quality as „conformity with requirements“[2], while Juran and Grya (1980) understand by this concept „fit for use“ [3], and Deming (1986) characterizes quality by assigning it „an unpredictable degree of uniformity and reliability; it has low costs and is adapted to market requirements“[4]. However, these expressions represent only certain facets of quality, so additional explanations are usually needed to clarify the mentioned concept. There are multiple attempts to group the various definitions, putting forward some differentiating criteria. We believe that, in line with some common elements that quality has, a lot depends on the field we are referring to. In this article we will focus on the illustration of quality within higher education institutions.

The purpose of this study is to highlight the importance of risk management in supporting the quality assurance framework and the activities, in general, of the higher education institution. We have outlined some specific objectives to achieve the proposed goal: highlighting the difficulties in evaluating the quality of higher education institutions based on the study of the literature in the given field; presenting the risk approach in the context of quality assurance; giving an example of ASEM's experience where the quality management system recognizes risk and deals with it appropriately.

2. Materials and Methods

To achieve the stated goal, several scientific publications were studied with reference to the concept of quality, in general, and, in particular, what concerns the particularities that determine quality in higher education institutions. It was particularly interesting in how the risk management can be integrated into the quality strategy, what are the benefits, but also the impediments encountered by universities. As well, the experience of some foreign universities in integrating risk management in quality assurance, process of ISO standards implementation has been analyzed.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Peculiarities of the definition of the quality concept in the academic environment

In the higher education sector, quality assurance has been a widely discussed topic for at least the last few decades. It is important to ensure that all strategies, programs and

outputs are coordinated, fit for purpose and focused on results with an appropriate quality assurance system. Quality assurance is about how we understand, measure and improve. Quality improvement inevitably involves change, and the implementation of change itself is a risky thing [5], because often the objectives are not achieved exactly or there are unforeseen consequences. Considering the current situation in higher education, we can highlight several factors, which generate changes [6]:

- *Increasing efficiency and responsibility.* It is increasingly expected that universities, in the process of developing study programs and their realization, take into account the needs of employers and the community as a whole, respond promptly to their requests.
- *Increasing expectations from students* regarding the learning strategies used, the importance of the university's "image" and its reputation, for attracting students with higher education backgrounds and highly qualified teachers.
- *Increasing competition for students and teachers in the global higher education market.* The competition between universities for students manifests itself not only at the country level, but also at the global level and is related to demographic decline, population migration, and the change in young people's preferences in favor of higher education. Competition for teachers is driven by, among other things, the demographic shift towards older age groups and the problems of replacing them with younger people with scientific degrees [7].
- *The strengthening of relations with the business environment* is observed for the vast majority of universities. Often, the initiators of these relationships are university researchers looking for partnership agreements with commercial organizations through which the research activity could be financed, and the research results - implemented. Another component of these growing relationships is the implementation of dual education in universities, based on the needs of the business environment [8].
- *The impact of information technology.* Higher education has not been left out of the progress made in the field of information technology, more than that the COVID 19 pandemic has accelerated the development of this direction. Online education has brought about important changes in traditional learning and teaching models. The share of direct student-teacher contact has been significantly reduced in favor of remote classes. Secondly, several support activities for students have been digitized, such as admission, access to the online library, payment of university services, using various platforms, etc.

In the case of services, quality is largely represented by customer requirements and indicates how the services provided have met or exceeded customer requirements and expectations.

Some authors, for example, Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2007) [9] recognize the uniqueness of the higher education sector in that it provides not only administrative services similar to those in other service sectors, but also professional teaching, research and consultancy services that transform students in human resources developing countries and driving the global economy. They argued the need to create a holistic quality management model to meet the expectations of various stakeholders. In the university sector, stakeholders play an important role in the delivery of academic services. An attempt to highlight the importance of stakeholders in the provision of academic services, and, implicitly, on their quality, can be found at Green, D (1994) (Figure 1.)



Figure 1. The multi-stakeholder view of quality.

Source: [10].

From Figure 1 we can see the important role of students, graduates, employers, taxpayers, but also governments as a whole in determining the quality of the services provided by a university. On the other hand, the quality of services is also dependent on those standards, which determine the level of quality in a certain period of time. So quality is relative [11, p.74] because it depends on who sets those standards, how they apply them. At the same time, we also mention the dynamic nature of quality, given the fact that we aim for continuous improvement and the standards periodically change.

Several researches in the field confirm the importance of the satisfaction degree of the university's main stakeholders regarding the quality of services [12 - 14]. There are a number of methods and models, which evaluate the perception of students and graduates regarding the quality of the academic service, rightly considering that they, as the main beneficiaries of the educational services, could determine the quality of the services provided. Precisely in this sense, one of the most common perspectives in higher education institutions refers to customer orientation [15]. Lately it has been mentioned more often the expansion of the orientation from quality for the customer to quality for all stakeholders as an essential component of the total quality philosophy of management and the starting point in the foundation of continuous improvement strategies for higher education institutions [16].

3.2. Discussions regarding the quality indicators of higher education

Are there endless discussions about what determines the quality of a university though? These concerns are not only theoretical in order to highlight some criteria, indicators

and make the respective calculations. A favorable climate for the creation and improvement of quality in the academic environment comes to the fore throughout the world, as it is currently faced with factors and challenges, such as the insufficiency of financial resources, the development of competition between universities, the lack of motivation of teachers, institutional autonomy, etc. At the same time, these challenges must not affect the quality of the training of future specialists, who represent the future of the country.

Some authors are of the opinion [16, 17], that an important role in increasing the quality of study programs is held by internal and external quality assurance structures, which provide the necessary support and monitor the measures for continuous improvement of the quality of the educational services undertaken by the institutions of Higher Education. We agree with the authors, that these structures (in the Republic of Moldova it is ANACEC: National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research) contribute to monitoring compliance with quality standards. In Moldova, the External Quality Assessment Methodology for provisional operation authorization and accreditation of study programs and vocational technical, higher education and continuing education institutions [18] is approved, in which the procedure for external assessment of higher education programs is determined, the evaluation criteria are established. ANACEC developed the Guide for the external evaluation of undergraduate higher education programs (cycle I) and integrated higher education, which includes accreditation standards, criteria and performance indicators. One of the specific objectives of the accreditation (authorization) of study programs consists in "assuring the academic community, the beneficiaries, employers and the public in general, that the bachelor/integrated higher studies program and the educational institution meet the quality level corresponding to the educational standards state and good practices, both national and international" [19, p. 6]. Compliance with state educational standards, the presence of accreditation certificates allows the higher education institution to offer the respective services. It's kind of a "green light" for these programs. But how do we differentiate these study programs offered by different universities? How do we judge which institution offers higher quality? The accreditation procedure does not give us an answer to this question. There are indeed voices who mention that „one of the disadvantages reported by the opponents of EQA is that it promotes 'game playing' and compliance instead of quality improvement" [20, p.17]. It is pointed out, which is true for most European higher education institutions, that one of the dangers of overly bureaucratic systems of external monitoring is that they can lead to a 'culture of compliance' at the expense of real quality improvement.

In the search for the answer to these questions, I found that more and more people are talking about the use of the graduate employability indicator in the labor market as an important factor in assessing the quality of studies. True, the professional insertion of higher education graduates has gradually become, in the last decades, a fundamental component of the national systems for evaluating the quality of universities. Employability is considered to be one of the best operationalization of the concept of quality as transformation [21]. In this sense, an important dimension of quality assessment is the one through which we can quantify the change in skills that a person possesses, measured at the time of entry into the educational system (or a certain level of it) and later at the time of exit (usually through graduation) within the system.

At the same time, several challenges are highlighted that any attempt to evaluate the way in which higher education graduates fit into the labor market, such as: the lack (imperfection) of the mechanisms for recording the employment of graduates. However, the

biggest challenge is to identify the fields of study followed and to correlate the field of study with the skills obtained after graduation. An additional impediment refers to the fact that it is very difficult to make a clear match between a certain field of studies and a certain field of economic activity.

Employment with higher education degree (graduate employability) becomes a performance indicator for the quality of higher education, which causes institutions to pay more and more attention to this issue. There are several studies conducted by scholars from different countries and from different times regarding the positive correlation between university education and future earnings [22]. At the same time, relatively little of the existing research focuses on the quality of studies to describe the causality between the quality of higher education and the results of insertion in the labor market. Some scholars in the USA have tried to determine how the quality of college education has influenced the level of salary that the graduate obtains, using multiple identification strategies. However, far from converging on how large the impact of college education quality has been on wage magnitude, relatively recent empirical evidence has yielded mixed results [23 - 26]. Zhang (2012) [27] further examined the impact of university education on employment opportunities in the first 10 years after graduation and found that although graduates of prestigious institutions considered to offer high-quality education enjoyed the highest income compared to graduates of other higher education institutions, they also had the highest graduate unemployment rate. Other research, for example, has shown that the prestige of the higher education institution had no significant impact on employment status or starting salary.

So, the employability of graduates is a complex process, which is influenced by many factors, both personal and the quality of the studies obtained. Although there are statements that [17, p. 11] „employability depends not only on the attributes of individual graduates, as well as on knowledge, experience, skills and personality traits, but also on the quality of the study program, curriculum and teaching-learning-assessment techniques used in the educational process, the quality of teaching staff, as well as employers' expectations”, we cannot establish the extent to which each component influences the hiring process.

In the context of the above, we find that more and more universities implement different programs, which are closely related to management concepts in the industrial sector. Terms characteristic of the private sector, companies, such as, for example, strategic planning, TQM and audits are becoming part of everyday life in higher education institutions. Those who advocate for business-specific quality models (total quality management, total quality, etc.) claim that such a fact results from some characteristics found in the academic environment, such as resistance to perceiving the student as a customer, the difficulty of working in a team, the tradition and resistance to new practices, and others [28]. Other scholars deny the possibility of using the industrial concept of quality in the academic environment, citing the impossibility of quantitative evaluation of teaching and research activity. Considering the criticism brought to the implementation of total quality management in the education system, the specialized literature presents distinct opinions regarding the suitability of using the notion of customer for higher education. One of the proposed solutions to avoid these misunderstandings is to use the less controversial notion of "stakeholders". Despite all the criticisms and controversial opinions with reference to the subject presented above, more and more higher education institutions are trying to

implement (and succeeding in this) the quality standards of the ISO: 9001 series in the desire to demonstrate excellence in the work they do deploy.

3.3. Quality assurance and the role of the universities risk management

The type of the ISO 9001:2015 standard remains to focus on continuous improvement and the process approach in order to satisfy customer requirements, but looking at them from a new perspective, that of risk management. So, in its new form, the ISO 9001:2015 standard [29] requires the organization to fully identify the processes related to the quality management system and to find those that take into account risks and opportunities [30].

Risk management is a driving force with increasing importance, so not only entities show interest in it, but also stakeholders show increased interest in risk. If risk management is addressed for the whole organization, this has a positive impact, as it allows both existing and potential risks with an impact on all processes in the organization to be identified. The necessary condition is an understanding of the risks assumed when aiming to achieve the organization's goals. In addition, it is important to recognize and prioritize significant risks and identify the most inadequate controls.

Risk management in higher education institutions is defined as a „set of designed and planned activities that are systematically undertaken to minimize the negative impact of risk on training processes and learning outcomes” [31, p.49]. In other words, we need to identify a bearable combination of cause-effect tolerance, which allows the reduction of unwanted events, which could threaten the day-to-day activity of the training and research processes.

Risk management is a mandatory condition of some international standards for management systems (quality, environment, security, energy, etc.). In this sense, universities must recognize and evaluate them in order to:

- take measures to ensure that the quality management system will be able to achieve the objectives;
- ameliorate the expected consequences;
- prevent or reduce unexpected effects;
- carry out the planned improvements.

Risk management presupposes the availability of complete and truthful information, their effective management for decision-making. The interdependence of quality management, risk management and information management are presented in Figure 2. This presentation emphasizes the fact that an important premise for effective and complex quality assurance management requires the creation of a reliable risk management and information management system.

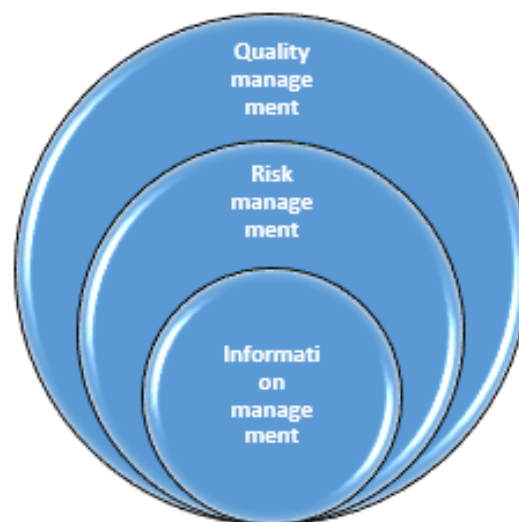


Figure 2. Interdependence of the management system at the institution level.

Source: [31].

Risk management in the academic environment must be considered only in correlation with the development strategy, this being a mandatory component of all operational

activities, important projects. The aim is to identify the factors and draw preventive activities, so that the threats do not create problems for the achievement of the activities and objectives set.

3.4. Case Study. Implementation of risk management for quality improvement in ASEM

The Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova is a public institution, which offers bachelor's, master's and doctoral programs, mainly in the field of economic sciences. The activity in the field of quality assurance within ASEM resides in the Rector's Declaration on the policy of ASEM in the field of quality [32] which mentions as objective: the implementation and maintenance at the level of the entire university of a Quality Management System, designed and documented in accordance with the provisions to the ISO 9001:2015 international standard, the scope of which is also the provision of educational services. ASEM's QMS is focused on meeting customer requirements by ensuring institutional competence to produce competitive educational and scientific services through efficient and effective processes. The ASEM Policy regarding the quality management system is elaborated, a document that includes the ASEM's intentions and general directions regarding quality, expressed by the institution's management.

The strategy regarding quality assurance in the Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova for the period 2022-2026 [33] was developed in accordance with the Strategic Development Plan of ASEM [34], the ASEM Charter and is supported by the documents of the Quality Management System. Within this important document, the strategic objectives and priority directions of action of the institution are highlighted, the implementation risks are also analyzed, which are addressed as factors that can determine the deviation of the results from the initial expectations or forecasts and which require proactive management, and the ways are mentioned treatment of these risks. At the same time, the importance of the identification of risks and their appropriate treatment in order to achieve the proposed objectives was realized. That is why it was decided to approach this topic more deeply and to develop the Risk Management Strategy of ASEM.

The purpose of the Strategy is to ensure the management of risks in a controlled and efficient way, to achieve the general and specific objectives of ASEM and its subdivisions. The definition of risk was accepted in accordance with the ISO 31000:2018 standard "risk represents the effect of uncertainty on objectives" [35]. ASEM's Strategic Development Plan, international standards ISO 9001:2015 served as the basis for the development of this valuable document; ISO 31000:2018.

Each objective presented in the Strategic Plan was analyzed from the point of view of the action of internal or external factors that could block its achievement. The probability of materialization of this risk was calculated, then the impact was determined, that is, the size of the possible losses in case of materialization of the risk situation and, finally, the exposure to the risk, as a product between the probability and the impact. Exposure to risk allowed us to rate the risks.

The next step taken was to determine the risk tolerance, that is, the "amount" of risk that the ASEM is prepared to tolerate. Based on the listed, we rated the risks, in other words, we established the order of priorities in the treatment of risks, taking into account the allocation of resources, and we created the Risk Profile, based on the 5-step scale. So, both probability and impact were translated into qualitative scales (from very low to very high), reflecting the perceived importance in relation to the objectives.

The development of the Risk Profile gave us the opportunity to take into account all the risks to which the institution is exposed according to the level of risk tolerance that we have accepted and to provide for each of these risks specific treatment methods, an activity necessary to keep the risk within acceptable limits. What is really important is not so much the level of risk that we have calculated, but the deviation of risk exposure from the level of risk tolerance.

We passed the exercise of developing the risk strategy at the institutional level. The most responsible component is the implementation of these measures that we have outlined. In order to deal with things, it is important to know who is the responsible person, what are the duties of each person, what is the way of recording and reporting. Only in such conditions, the implementation of the strategy can ensure the success we want.

At ASEM level, at this stage, a separate body for risk management has not been created, the attributions being delegated to the Quality Assurance Council. At the level of subdivisions, the responsible persons from the quality assurance structures were also appointed. To register the risks, the Risk Register was developed, the reporting procedure was established.

At the stage of developing and implementing the Risk Management strategy, certain difficulties were encountered, which mostly refer to the perception of things by employees, the inadequacy of the communication process on this subject. We realized that integrating a reliable risk management in an organization is a difficult thing to achieve. Responsible structures must both constantly prioritize risks and constantly update culture, people and processes. The risk culture reflects the common values, objectives, stabilization mechanisms that incorporate risk into the institution's decision-making activities. In other words, the culture of risk manifests itself according to the behavior of people in the university, their attitude towards risks and their level of risk-taking.

4. Conclusions

The study of bibliographic sources in the analyzed field, of the experience, although not very large, of the Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova regarding the risk management implementation in correlation with the quality management system, allowed us to make some conclusions:

The quality of higher education is important for all stakeholders of the institution. In order for the university to achieve a high quality assessment, it is necessary that it implements a quality management system that is applicable despite the high costs and resources required.

Risk management is a continuous process of learning from past experiences, one's own or others'. In order to ensure an effective risk management, we consider it important to promote and strengthen the organizational culture of risks in the institution. Risk culture reflects the shared values, objectives, practices and reinforcement mechanisms that incorporate risk into the institution's decision-making processes and risk management into its operations.

The implementation of the risk management strategy can only be achieved if at the institutional level there is an adequate communication process throughout the entire risk assessment process, it is a component of the risk management process. Both the importance of risk communication and the persons who must be informed at each stage of the process must be well elucidated in the elaborated documents. During the initiation of a risk

assessment process, it would be useful to share information related to the identification and assessment of risks with all important personnel in the organization.

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