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Corporate Responsibility for the Quality of Provision

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“Corporate Responsibility” = responsibility shared by two or more people

In a university, responsibility is typically shared for different purposes at different levels:

- The staff responsible for delivering a programme of studies
- A Board of Examiners
- The department - represented by a Departmental Committee/Head of Department
- A Faculty - represented by a Faculty Board/Dean
- The university as a whole - represented by the Senate/Rector

In the university tradition to which Croatia belongs the balance of responsibility is

tipped

in favour of the autonomy of the individual professor (without much accountability)

and against corporate responsibility

'Quality' relates to the question:

“Could it be better ?”

'Accreditation' or *'approval'* relate to the question:

“Is it good enough ?”

'provision'

refers here to

***the education provided for
students***

A University (Senate) has a responsibility to ensure a proper ***standard*** for the diplomas (and diploma supplements) awarded (or issued) in its name.

- Normally this responsibility is clearly stated in national Laws and in University Statutes, at least for the academic awards themselves

(Croatia ?)

- The implementation of the Lisbon Convention depends upon it (i.e. upon trust in the integrity and standards of the Higher Education Institutions which are recognised by any of the countries whose Governments have signed the Treaty).

But why should an HEI (as such) be responsible for *ensuring the quality of the provision* made for the education of its students?

There are

two essential reasons

and also reasons which are either

external or

internal.

The first essential reason is that

Within the limits of whatever autonomy an HEI enjoys, its policies, actions, decisions and planning will affect the quality of its students' education

and

if education is a good then it should be *as good as possible*

The quality of students' education will be affected by other factors such as the state of the economy and actions of Government, but these are things over which the HEI will have no control (although it may seek to support the development of the former and influence the latter).

The second essential reason is that

students have a right to the best education which the HEI at which they have enrolled can possibly provide

(See, e.g. Article 88 of the Croatian Law on Scientific Activity and Higher Education)

This right is sometimes expressed as a contract between the enrolling student and the HEI

One external reason is

the commitment made by the country to the implementation of international agreements:

- the **Bologna process** (which requires institutional responsibility for educational quality)
- the **Lisbon Convention** (which requires comparability in the quality of provision, necessary for the mobility of students during their studies - underwritten by the host institution)

“quality is a fundamental building stone” (*Salamanca Convention*)

“the primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution itself” (*Berlin Communique*)

The “providers of higher education have the primary responsibility for the quality of their provision and its assurance” (*ENQA Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance, endorsed at Bergen*)

“we urge higher education institutions to continue their efforts to enhance the quality of their activities through the systematic introduction of internal mechanisms and their direct correlation to external quality assurance.” (*Bergen Communique*)

Another external reason is that:

An HEI must be successful as a teaching institution if it is to prosper (and maintain a high reputation).

The success of an HEI (as a teaching institution) will depend upon ***the successful production of graduates*** (proportional to the number admitted, as well as graduates who have met a good standard for their award).

This success rate will depend ***not only upon the abilities of the students it enrolls but upon the quality of their education.***

In this modern world ***an HEI must be attractive*** to those who do (or could) invest

- their money, in the case of sponsors (increasingly significant are non-Government donors as well as States)
- part of their lives (and possibly money) in the case of potential students* (and their sponsors, e.g. parents)

No HEI is an attractive proposition if, say, only three students graduate out of ten of those who are admitted.

**** With increased mobility (including membership of the EU) it becomes increasingly important, and more difficult, to be able to attract and retain students***

Nota bene

An HEI does not become more attractive by de-valuing the currency of its academic awards

but rather

it becomes more attractive through improvement in the quality of the education provided

Importantly, there are also **internal** reasons (pressures, imperatives) why there needs to be a **corporate approach** to the quality of educational provision in an HEI.

While the external pressures will tend to lead to a “top-down” approach to quality (Quality Management)

the internal pressures will tend towards a “bottom-up” approach (a “quality culture”)

There will necessarily be a point at which the “bottom-up” approach meets the need to be facilitated (and be thereby encouraged) by the hierarchical authority.

Ultimately, ideally, the two approaches should work in harmony.

There are **two principal *internal* sources** of pressure for improvement in an HEI:

- 1. Frustrations felt by students who are trying to learn***
- 2. Frustrations felt by professors who are trying to support their students' educational development***

Both will tend to require a corporate approach to quality if their frustrations are to be ameliorated

1. Students who are trying to learn

What such students experience will necessarily be ***a range of elements in combination***:

- The structure of their programme of studies
- The loading of syllabuses
- The coherence of their teaching (including assignments)
- Various forms of learning support (including e.g. the relationship between recommended reading and available material)
- The time available to them for mastering the demands of different course units
- The ways in which their assessment is organised

Meeting the legitimate concerns of such students will typically require co-ordinated solutions (and therefore the exercise of corporate responsibility).

2. Professors who are trying to support their students' educational development

In asking him or her self "Could I do what I am trying to do better?" such a professor will exercise self-criticism and will listen to the students. As a result there will almost certainly be some improvements possible which are in his or her hands alone.

But other problems are likely to be identified which can only be resolved in collaboration with others (e.g. the adequacy of prior course units as preparation, or the demands being made on students by others, or the adequacy of the forms of learning support which are outside the individual professor's control).

The logic of this is that all those staff (including learning resource staff and technicians) should come to see themselves as a team, and should seek to resolve issues and develop improvements in the quality of the programme of studies through debate and ultimately consensus agreement.

Such a process is never easy nor conclusive, and requires leadership. **The crucial role of programme team leaders requires recognition within the wider institution** since they will need to negotiate on behalf of the interests of the programme.

Programme teams have an opportunity to exercise their own Quality Assurance processes, particularly if they have appropriate administrative support.

They can **monitor** at least the following as **performance indicators**:

- The demand for the programme (the ratio of applicants to available places).
- Student success in examinations.
- The retention of students (as against the proportion who drop out, and if possible the reasons for the latter).
- What happens to graduates.

Trends from year to year are important (and can give rise to questions which need answering), but **targets** can also be set and the success in meeting them monitored.

They should also **listen to students**:

Questionnaires are valuable (particularly if designed in conjunction with the students), as are student representatives, but simply talking to students is important.

If students' declared needs cannot be met they should always be told the reasons why.

From time to time programme teams should sit down and as systematically and as objectively as possible, ask themselves

“Could we do better?”

(Institutional self-evaluation should, ideally, begin from the bottom.)

A programme of studies which is not equivalent to the institution itself (the simplest but most limiting of models) will have staffing in common with others and will share facilities.

There is therefore likely to be potential for improvement which can only be realised through optimisation of the relationship between programmes of study.

This raises issues of quality to another level of corporate responsibility (e.g. the Faculty).

The principles, however, remain the same, although the nature of the issues may change (e.g. resource allocation will loom larger as an issue at the levels where resource allocations are decided).

Similarly, the potential for quality within and between Faculties will require the corporate responsibility of the university as a whole.

The university as a whole should equally recognise its corporate responsibility if Faculties are degenerating and failing to provide education of good quality.

“No man is an island, entire unto itself, and one man’s death diminishes the whole. Ask not for whom the bell tolls - it tolls for thee.”

applies equally, by analogy, to an institution of higher education.

“Could I/we do better ?”

is an uncomfortable question for anyone, and needs to be approached as objectively as possible.

One way to ensure its objectivity is to **externalise** it.

External evaluation, if properly conducted, is a means of such providing objectivity, asking (with all due understanding), “Could you do better ?”

But ideally, while external evaluation is also an opportunity to introduce a fresh perspective from those who have experienced similar problems in a different context (peers), **no external evaluation should have to raise issues which have not been considered and dealt with internally.**

It is for this reason that good external evaluation begins from an internal self-evaluation and should be able to confirm the validity of the latter, together with the institution’s plans for improvement.

In other words, the best outcome for any external evaluation is confidence in the exercise of the institution's own corporate responsibility for the quality of its provision.

Trends in Quality Assurance in Europe include

- Revision of external QA processes
 - improvement in the light of experience
 - responding to new challenges
 - ***placing greater reliance on institutional QA systems***
- Questioning whether the current predominance of programme evaluation/accreditation in Europe is only a phase of development

- Slow and uneven emergence of new ‘standards and criteria’, external reference points for quality, focusing on learning outcomes and outputs rather than input standards
 - important to address new forms of provision and providers
 - potential of providing greater transparency at national level hence facilitating international mobility and recognition of qualifications
- Bologna national stocktaking report good progress overall is apparently being made but that there is a general need to improve student participation and international networking

“Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance
in the European Higher Education Area”

***Provides generic principles covering both
internal and external QA,***

***but leaves procedural matters for national
authorities and higher education institutions
to determine and implement***

(Endorsed at the Bergen Ministerial meeting in May)

Initiating QA processes at institutional level

- Define roles and responsibilities of individuals
- Identify priorities
- Define indicators and targets: have a 'rolling plan' for units and departments related to the institution's strategic plan
- Develop monitoring and review processes - self-evaluation for external review is only a starting point not a substitute for regular internal activities

- Focus on curriculum development: content and delivery are important elements in programme/course design, ECTS credits are not a substitute for this nor an indicator of quality per se
- The timing and management of initiatives is important
- Beware of cosmetic and surface changes said to represent a fundamental shift
- Use resistance to change as a control mechanism to ensure changes are thought through
- Drop the rhetoric of quality in favour of honest appraisal of what you do, how you are seeking to do it and why, and how you strive to improve it.

(EUA report: Trends IV; European Universities Implementing Bologna, and referring to Ireland, Finland, UK, Netherlands, Denmark and more recently Austria)

“Institutions with the most systematic approach to quality are also those that benefit from the greatest institutional autonomy”