

DEVELOPING A SYSTEM OF QUALITY ASSURANCE FOR THE HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR IN TURKEY

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Abstract: This paper outlines the outcome of the pilot programme initiated by YÖK (Yüksek Öğretim Kurulu – The Council of Higher Education) adapting the British quality assurance system of higher education to Turkey. The details of the British system of quality assurance are presented. Special references are made to models used in Europe and in the United States of America.

Keywords: *Quality Assurance, Higher Education, Turkey*

Özet: Bu tez YÖK (Yüksek Öğrenim Kurulu) tarafından başlatılan Pilot Programın sonucunun anahatlarını vermektedir. Türkiye'deki Yüksek Öğrenim sisteminin İngiliz kalite garantisine adaptasyonunu içermektedir. İngiliz kalite garantisi sisteminin detayları sunulmuştur. Avrupa'da ve ABD'de kullanılan modellere özel referanslar verilmiştir.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Kalite garantisi, Yüksek Öğrenim, Türkiye*

INTRODUCTION

There is a strong correlation between a country's competitiveness and the quality of the higher education provided within that country. According to the the International Institution for Management (IMD) World Competitiveness Report (1), Turkey ranked as the 38th competitive nation amongst 46 nations.

A brief look at some of the statistics shows that there are marked differences in terms of the characteristics of education and research between Turkey and those countries which come before Turkey in the list (2).

Most academic institutions in the developed world have established a system of quality assurance and control to a different degree of complexity and effectiveness.

In many countries, governments have felt the need to assure the quality of the awards granted by their institutions of higher education. This need has become more urgent in developing and newly industrialised countries.

The sufficiency, validity and relevancy of the academic programmes are also very important (3). This is because although a programme may be of a high standard it may not sufficiently cover the subject or may not be relevant to the requirements of the profession or valid as it may lack crucial criteria and so forth.

The intention of the paper is to review the outcome of a recent pilot programme by YÖK to adapt the British system of quality assurance in Turkish universities (4) and describe in some detail the British system (5).

1. THE UK MODEL

The British model of external quality assessment is a comprehensive system of quality assurance and control involving internal and external processes and audit arrangements (5,6,7,8).

However, the terminology is initially confusing as various Higher Education Council of England (HEFCE) documents use terms without due regard to international and standard definitions; for instance, the term accreditation has not been fully explained (4,5). This term is used primarily by professional institutions.

When a programme is accredited by a professional institution, it means the programme has gone through a given well defined process to ensure the programme satisfies the academic and vocational requirements of the profession. The term accreditation in the UK also applies to cases where an academic institution ratifies a programme of study in another institution or when a given already validated programme of an institution is offered by another institution. In both cases the end qualification certificate bears the name of the parent institution or both names. In latter case the term franchise is often used.

In this paper the same terms as those used by HEFCE is used (4,6).

Furthermore, the terms quality assurance and quality control are not specifically

defined in the HEFCE /YÖK Pilot Programme reports listed in (4). In the UK model the emphasis is also on effectiveness and not efficiency. There are however, four major elements of assessment in the British model as summarised below.

1.1 Teaching Quality Assessment (TQA)

The educational programmes are grouped in England into a defined list of ‘subject areas’ (including undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes as well as foundation programmes if such foundation studies underpin given degree programmes). It should be noted that higher degrees are excluded in this assessment. Each programme under a given subject area is assessed by expert visiting teams (each team is chaired by a procedural rather than a subject expert) over a total cycle of eight years. Each subject is covered within a two-year period. The assessment criteria focuses on six Core Aspects of provision.

- Curriculum Design, Content and Organisation (CDCO)
- Teaching, Learning and Evaluation of students (TLE)
- Student Progression and Achievement (SPA)
- Student Support and Guidance (SSG)
- Learning Resources (LR)
- Quality Assurance and Enhancement (QAE)

The assessment of these aspects form the basis for a department’s submission. The visit to assess the department’s submission takes four full days. Every member of the expert visiting team has gone through a very thorough selection procedure and also undergone a three-day training programme to ensure they are fully aware of the TQA process and how judgement is reached.

The expert visiting teams are assigned to a TQA exercise for a week (5 days) and prior to the visit they are expected to have fully reviewed the department’s submission. Each member takes responsibility at least for one of the Core Aspects but they work as a team and they concern themselves with all aspects. There are normally five members plus the chair. The visit starts on Monday and ends on Thursday when the team reports to the senior management of the institution. There is a workroom where all documents are located for the experts visiting team’s consideration.

After an initial meeting of the team and discussions on the submission, the team throughout the four days meet various academic and administrative units and personnel and if they observe anything that either supports or contradicts what is included in the submission by the department, these are reported to the team. Usually the visiting team observes 20 to 25 classes including, workshops, laboratory sessions, etc. Each class selected for observation is observed and rated/graded by a single observer but all members of the visiting team are involved in class observations.

The TQA grades fall into 2 categories. The first three aspects are in general under the control of the departments and the other three primarily under the control of the institution.

The class observation form, apart from requiring the usual information about the topic and its relation to the syllabus and the objective of the section, has a number of sections which is expected to be completed by the observer. The rating given by the observer is expected to reflect upon the comments made on the form. The main sections expect comments on:

- Planning, content, method, pace and examples used.
- Student participation.
- Accommodation and resources.
- Strengths and weaknesses of the session.
- Issues relating to other core aspects.

For class observation grade 1 is given when the session fails to make an acceptable contribution to the attainment of the learning objectives set, and grade 4 is given when the session makes a full contribution to the attainment of the learning objectives.

The main feature of the submission is a self-assessment against the department's own stated aims and objectives. It is pertinent to note that departments are aware of the TQA's requirements of each Core Aspect. Their submission therefore is geared to elucidate that they satisfy these requirements as well as the aims and objectives stated in the self-assessment document. The process and procedures used generally differ from department to department in the country for a given 'subject area' and within a given institution for different subjects.

The visit tests the claims of the self-assessment documents, and makes judgement in the form of grades 1-4 for each Aspect, in each case comparing the evidence with the department's own stated aims and objectives. Grade 1 is given when the aims/objectives set by the department are not met, and Grade 4 is for when a given Aspect makes full contribution to the attainment of the objectives and that aims are met.

After the visit, the department receives a written report on the grades and its strategies and weaknesses in the subject. Currently the results of TQA has no bearing on funding, except that if one or more of the Core Aspects is graded '1' then a return visit is made within a year and if the result is still unsatisfactory then the HEFCE may decide to withdraw funds.

1.2 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE)

The exercise is currently carried out every three years, and all subjects are assessed at the same time. A panel of experts is set up by the HEFCE based on nominations (by Institutions and Research Councils) for each defined subject area. Research Councils are the main funding bodies for the academic institutions and research establishments in the UK. They work closely with Government Departments to ensure their funding is directed to areas or projects which do not overlap with those supported directly by the Government or European Union or other funding bodies such as Eureka, Unesco, Nato, etc.

The departments make submissions based on a given set of criteria and guidelines

and by using standard procedures and forms by a given deadline. This covers the research output over the previous ‘assessment period’ (usually four years) and research plans. The panel of experts award ratings on a 7-point 1 to 5* scale, and these are all that is normally reported back to the departments. In case of RAE, the research funding (HEFCE’s only) for the next 3 years, is then related precisely to these ratings.

1.3 Quality Audit

This assessment practice audits the institutional practices rather than given ‘subject areas’. This form of assessment is beyond the scope of this paper.

1.4 External Examination

There is no system of external examination in Turkey. The TQA process in the UK to some extent relies on the external examiners’ reports (8). To this end, a brief mention of this form of assessment is given here.

Every programme of study is externally assessed unless the programme is examined by an external examination body where the examination questions are written and marked by this body.

Degree programmes without exception have normally two external examiners. These examiners are well known academics in the field of study which forms the core of the degree programme and are appointed by the institution offering the programme from other institutions of higher education.

The appointment is usually for 3 to 5 years and the remuneration is limited by an annual fee which is very small and hence of a token value. These examiners oversee the entire assessment practice and become involved in every aspect of it. Some of their important duties include, approval of the assessment processes, examination papers, other assessed work such as assignments and coursework, projects and so forth.

They attend an external examination committee meeting at the end of each term/semester and approve final marks/grade given by the internal examiners. Prior to the meeting, external examiners see all students’ assessed work and meet with staff and students.

2. THE PILOT PROGRAMME

To promote and secure Turkish Universities’ reputations internationally, particularly within OECD and EU countries, YÖK with support from the British Council in Turkey piloted a programme of Teaching Quality Assessment (TQA) and Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in 13 selected Turkish Universities during the 97/98 academic year (4). The Pilot Programme was implemented in collaboration with the Higher Education Funding Council of England.

2.1 Prior Studies

Prior to the instigation of the programme to adapt the British model of quality

assurance on a pilot basis in Turkey a seminar was arranged by YÖK to bring in comparative perspective on external quality assurance in different countries. Speakers from France, the Netherlands and the UK made presentations on the practice in their countries and participated in a panel session.

The main conclusion to emerge from the seminar was the convergence, internationally, on external quality assurance systems which focus on a self-evaluation (at institutional, subject or programme level), supported by standard quantitative data, which are then considered through a peer review visit leading to a published report. Mainly, there is a national QA (Quality Assurance) agency responsible for such external assessments (except, for example in the USA and Germany), but this may be 'owned' by the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) or independent of them; mainly it is independent of direct control by government or one of its agencies. There is usually no direct link between the quality assessment results and HEIs' funding [except for the RAE in the UK].

A second conclusion from the seminar was about the importance of getting started, and starting simply, probably without a funding link and without gradings. An important realisation was that all countries' QA systems have changed and continue to evolve, so that wherever Turkey starts it will evolve probably with the convergence already noted.

Four Study Tours were organised for Turkish participants by the British Council, to provide deeper comparative perspectives and insights on external quality assessment. The Study Tours to France, the Netherlands, UK and USA all took place in the week of 29 November to 6 December 1997. The participants were chosen by YÖK, and were briefed during a second seminar.

What emerges from the reports of the four Study Tours is the same convergence evident in the first seminar, on a system based on self-evaluation and a strong internal QA system, supported by performance measures and followed by external review by peers and a published report.

The differences lie in the lack of any national agency (or coherence) in the USA, and the emphasis on the institutional level in France and the USA, compared with the subject level in Holland and the UK.

The systems of the Netherlands and the UK seem more attuned to the needs of Turkey at the present, given its lack of developed university-level systems. These two systems are very close to each other, and the best aspects could be combined, in particular the university-owned QA agency with an independent inspectorate looking at its work; this could help to solve the problem of ensuring consistency within a subject area in Turkey, in the absence of external examiners.

From France, the usefulness of a standardised set of performance measures, and eventual integration into institutional evaluation, could be added to the mix.

These countries all have no direct link between quality assessment and funding, except for the RAE in the UK, and therefore it would seem wise to avoid this at least

initially in Turkey.

What also emerged from the Study Tour reports is that the purposes of external quality assessment are variants of a mix of the following:

- accountability
- improvement
- information
- accreditation

3. ADAPTING THE UK SYSTEM IN TURKEY

It was stated by the HEFCE (4) that within an organisation, quality assurance is a system that ensures that quality control is in place and is working effectively. Therefore, HEFCE clearly sees quality control as part and parcel of quality assurance and the core element of it. Such a definition is somehow different from the BS5750 (En 29000 and ISO 9000) stated and standard definitions.

HEFCE also believes that for some products and services, including higher education, it is additionally usual to have processes external to the organisation, which check periodically the effectiveness of the internal systems of quality assurance (5). These external evaluation processes in higher education are referred to in the UK as "quality assessment" (QA) or TQA, where they focus on the subject level, but institutional evaluation, accreditation or "quality audit" where they focus on the level of the corporate organisation.

The term accreditation should not be confused with the "accreditation process" used by professional institutions which is different. The "accreditation process" is an external audit carried out by a professional institution to ensure a programme of study (mainly degree and technician programmes) satisfies the profession's academic and vocational requirements for a given designation ie Chartered Accountant or Chartered Engineer. For instance, the engineering graduates who complete an accredited degree programme would, subject to satisfying other requirements, use the designation CEng after their names.

A comparative study (9) clearly indicated that the UK system of accreditation practised by professional institutions is the most comprehensive system in the world, and this system is adopted by many countries. It is pertinent to note that the USA, the UK, Canada and many other countries accept each others' accreditation through an agreement known as the Washington Accord.

The HEFCE also is of the view that all of these processes can have different purposes, which mainly relate either to ensuring accountability for meeting the intended specifications of higher education services, or to promoting their continuous improvement.

3.1 Pilot Programme Objectives

The main objective the pilot programme was in fact to develop an academic assessment mechanism and structure, eventually leading to the establishment of a

model accreditation and quality assurance system similar to other OECD and EU countries. This is expected to lead to evaluative information on institutions and programmes in both public and private sectors, whereby reports are produced and disseminated to interested parties and used by public bodies and the stakeholders in private sector, in structuring financial incentives as well as making recommendations for upgrading existing academic programmes.

However, in subsequent discussions between the representatives of YÖK and HEFCE's, and as a result of the initial workshops held with Turkish academics, the objective was refined. The Pilot Programme initiated in the 13 selected Turkish universities was primarily to demonstrate the value of academic assessment by conducting assessments of both teaching and research, starting with current British practice as a model to be modified to meet Turkish circumstances, and to prepare recommended procedures for Turkey.

3.2 Project Description and Timetable

Various meetings took place between the representatives of HEFCE and YÖK and meetings were arranged with representatives of the selected universities. These included study visits to France, Holland, UK and USA as well as training session for the selected 'visiting expert teams' and departmental coordinators. However, due to the Pilot Programme constraints no return visit was arranged to departments. However, the assessment team (visiting expert team) did meet once before each visit.

3.3 Evaluation of the Pilot Programme

Based on an evaluation meeting and responses to a questionnaire on the overall process and activities as a result of the Pilot Programme the following summarises the findings:

- Overall responses were overwhelmingly favourable on the quality and effectiveness of the programme.
- The programme adequately prepared the 'expert visiting teams' and RAE panel members as well as the departmental co-ordinators for the tasks in hand.
- The training sessions were relevant to the tasks and that the quality and delivery were good.
- There were some reservations about how well the planning and initial meetings covered the issues clearly.
- The quality of translations were consistently criticised, both for TQA and RAE.
- While more agreed than disagreed, there were concerns about the relevancy of the documents for application in Turkey for both TQA and RAE. There were some who were non-committal. This was attributed to a late realisation that more consultation should have taken place and more modification should have been made as there were many suggestions for revisions in written comments, and based on feedback from RAE panel reports and evaluation workshop groups (TQA and

RAE).

- There were some inconsistencies in the grading from the different assessment teams. This was reported to have been expected due to lack of infrastructure for such assessments in Turkey. It was reported that such inconsistencies in grades do not detract from the validity of the textual contents in the reports.
- It was thought by many that the programme was a good learning experience for all concerned.
- The Pilot Programme with some modifications would most probably be used as a basis for a system of quality assurance in the higher education sector in Turkey.
- A list of reports from the evaluation of the Pilot Programme for TQA and RAE as reported by YÖK is given in (4). These give details of various activities within the overall programme.

1. CONCLUSIONS

The YÖK's overview of the Pilot Programme (4), is that the large majority of universities, specialists and reporting assessors (expert visiting teams and chairs) agree that TQA based on a modified UK model is appropriate generally to Turkish universities, and would be easy to modify for this purpose. However, in this report it is clearly stated that a substantial number of people involved did not fully subscribe to this view and that many had reservations to specific aspects of the practice and its appropriateness for application in Turkey.

There are two important points which need further consideration. Dogus Institute of Higher Education (DIHE) which for a number of years offered Oxford Brookes BA in Business Management as well as Foundation studies in Business and Engineering has had problems convincing its Turkish academics of the merits of class observation. Considering, the full autonomy the academic staff in Turkish Universities have on all issues relating to assessment, it would be a very difficult task to include class observation in a QAmode for application in Turkey.

The Pilot Programme did not identify such an important problem. The discussion with representatives of those who participated in the Pilot Programme clearly identifies this as a major problem and attributes the reason for its non-emergence in the pilot study as cultural. The experience at DIHE clearly elucidates that development of a TQA practice similar to the arrangements in the UK is however possible if staff conceive the benefits of class observation and are fully involved in its planning and implementation. Time needs also be allocated to extensive period of familiarisation and training before full implementation.

The second important issue is the notion of having people from other universities acting as external examiners in the manner practised in the UK.

The experience at DIHE clearly indicates the uneasiness of Turkish academics in accepting the notion of having external examiners. That is to say that some external (or even internal) academics would make judgement on the assessment

process and its content (particularly the notion of receiving approval for the assessment documents, assignments, examination papers) and would be that their grading would be evaluated and their conduct openly discussed at the examination committees.

Doğuş University has decided to consider a Total Quality Management (TQM) model in line with International Standards Organisation (ISO) requirements (10). The outcome of the YÖK Pilot Programme will be further examined with a view to support the TQM model developments at Doğuş University.

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