

QUALITY OF EDUCATION: FASHION OR NECESSITY?!

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“If to yesterday’s efforts we added some new ideas and developed something, today we would step forward comparing to yesterday. You don’t have to idle your time away but do it better. Later this will reward you with brilliant results. You don’t have to go along the same path you have been accustomed to go, - this is the mystery, only having realized it you will reach success”

Kazuo Inamori

One of the quality theory models, undoubtedly, is quality management. At the end of the 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st this model becomes perhaps the most fashionable in management theory. We can say straight away that what can be fashionable it is not always right and reasonable. Is it in reality so? It is hard to pretend to exhaustive analysis in this article however, it is purposeful to pay attention to some things. Another argument – history knows plenty of examples when different theories wouldn’t grow from “infancy” stage, wouldn’t pass on to a practice level, at best they would remain only a mass of pompous slogans. Speaking about quality, such attitude, undoubtedly, has its own positions. Alternative approach has positions as well which claims that quality management ideology and philosophy is not only a common short-term campaign, but a serious universal movement.

In recent years, quality is quite a lot discussed in Lithuania too. We should agree, that not only discussed but something is being done about that. It is not always well and in the right way but done. And this is much better than to speak in vain but do nothing. It is quite logical to claim this because watching discussions on quality questions especially in the education sphere we can safely assert that there is more speaking here (very often simple twaddle) than real doing (quality improvement, guarantee and so on). Not one educational organization describes quality as a crucial priority of activities. However, to describe and declare is one thing and to really seek that quality is quite different (Lamanuskas, 2009). This is because of various known and unknown, objective and subjective reasons. Lithuania as the other post soviet countries about two decades ago from half - close space comparatively quickly occurred into the space of great transformations. From this point of view, bigger or smaller mentality remains in the consciousness of people make them behave in one way, speak in another, and think quite differently. There are a lot of manifestation examples of this phenomenon in educational sphere too, especially in that which is related with the questions of quality improvement. Moreover, collision of post-soviet and so-called western mentality causes unique people’s behaviour, thinking and other models. The question what the quality of education is about in such context is urgent. Fashion and/or necessity dilemma in Lithuanian context is open, requiring profound discussions.

Different processes are taking place in every educational organization. In some of them, there are more of them, in others less. In some places, they are complicated (e.g. in higher schools), in other places, they can be simpler (e.g. non-formal educational institutions). However, in all places they are relevant and have to be carried out qualitatively, in other words, to satisfy fixed requirements. Some of the processes are important because service (future production) quality depends directly on them, the others don't have direct influence on service/future production. It is obvious, that all these processes, both basic and secondary are equally important and only acting closely with each other they can guarantee success of organization activity (systematic approach).

Another important aspect is quality standards. It is not a secret that almost no attention is devoted to them in educational institutions. Quite often there are attempts to create some distinctive standards whereas, on an international scale ISO family standards are recognized and function. It is understandable that educational institutions are specific, they differ greatly, let's say, from business organizations. Nevertheless, international ISO standards can and have to be applied. It is necessary to understand that not everything is regulated by standards (for production or service). A lot depends on other factors, which are not regulated. There are a lot of such factors in education structures. Standard is very important when organization is looking for recourses (raw material). As a rule, in educational organizations they are people who study/learn. Let's say, "the new" Lithuanian higher education reform, as a matter of fact, has turned the quality management conception upside down. Generally speaking, this year both universities and colleges invited to study all wanting. The main criterion is the ability to pay for studies. The logic of the standard is simple. If we were talking about raw material, so the standard for raw material would be a window, the size of which is clearly fixed and invariable. If all wanting don't fit in, it means that don't. However, "the window" isn't being extended for everybody to fit in. So-called "window" in Lithuanian higher education sector has been stretched so much this year that it is not clear what in fact, the criteria for future students are.

Keeping to process approach, which is fixed in ISO standards, every organization should effectively control all processes taking place within its boundaries. Everything what is going on in processes, later on in one way or another reflects itself in production/service. I need to say, that process control in educational organizations is rather problematic. If the control happens to be, then it is broken up, fragmentary. While controlling processes, we escape defect. It is obvious. Thus, we have clearly to know under what conditions one or another process is going on. We need to be able to assess these conditions, but be able to affect the processes (to influence), in order they went on properly. Not in vain, in recent years more and more attention is paid to statistical process control (SPC). It is a constituent part of statistical quality control (SQC). It is thought that this is a new thinking in quality sphere. The goal of statistical process control is to make processes work maximum effectively. Such thinking is based on three essential principles: any work or carried out activity is a consequence of some processes, all processes are variable, not stable and the decrease of variability is the key to success. From this point of view, the appliance of statistics in quality management is very urgent. I have to state once again, that Lithuanian educational institutions and especially comprehensive schools pay not sufficient attention to this. Very often, they limit themselves to quantitative indicators or just ordinary descriptions, stories about quality. It is even stranger when quality is described counting only on the learners' opinion. It is being forgotten, that while assessing qualitative indicators it is purposeful to turn them into quantitative. Of course, criteria are various and various ones should be matched. I have in mind, if it is sensible to count only on opinions and approaches to quality. Therefore, it remains to recommend educational institutions use more broadly the standard ISO 10017:2003 about statistical methods. This standard exactly regulates what statistical methods can be used in quality management. Attention should be paid to this, that statistical methods help to measure, describe, analyze, interpret and so on information even having limited (not full) data. Statistical methods for quality control can be useful in various spheres, but it is not

enough to control only. It is necessary that on the basis of available information it would be possible to influence processes in the direction of their improvement. Even if the stability of the process is rather poor, statistics can show how to solve one or another problem.

Management theory postulates three essential questions: a) what is, what was and what can we expect? b) why do we have this, what do we have (giving reasons)? c) how to improve quality indicators? This obviously reflects systematic approach in quality management. According to prof. Vasilkov, this is a chain of three essential elements – anamnesis-diagnosis-treatment (Vasilkov, Injac, 2008). This approach is particularly relevant in all educational organizations.

In recent years Lithuanian higher schools especially set themselves to improving the quality of studies. Practically, we will find in all universities' activity priority list that quality management and study quality improvement is one of the most important things. On the one hand, it is not so bad, on the other hand – usually there is no a clear quality management system. Separate existing fragments do not mean a system. Very often, the systems being created are amateur, i.e., do not conform to any international standards. It is obvious, that it is not enough to describe quality as priority. Quality does not improve by itself. Constant efforts are necessary for this and, first of all, institution administration understanding and attention. Understanding is particularly important in this sense, because nowadays very different quality conceptions exist; it is difficult to orientate oneself in their abundance. At last, a very urgent question for educational institutions is the question of financial investments into the implementation of quality systems. The results are very often not very bright or quickly noticeable. A part of results comes into light only after a certain time.

Speaking about Quality management in Lithuanian higher schools it is worth recalling that not only studies are being organized in these institutions. It is paradoxical that quality problems usually start and finish with the improvement of the quality of the studies, leaving the science process and other important processes aside without which study process itself in principal, is impossible.

The most important international documents such as Bologna Declaration (1999), Lisbon strategy (2000), Prague communicate (2001), Salamanca Convention (2001), Berlin communicate (2003), Bergen communicate (2005) and other emphasize quality assurance importance for the development of higher education. In Lithuanian juristic documents as well, more often attitudes related to quality management occur. For example, in LR Education law alteration law (confirmed on 17th June, 2003) an attitude is inscribed that education quality is the responsibility of education provider and schools must assure good quality education. Another Lithuanian example is the project “ Pupils' achievements external assessment and research guidelines for the years 2006-2012” in which it is set to create an integral education quality measuring system, which would allow to objectively assess education quality in all country schools (Pupils' achievements.....2009).

All this shows that quality management ideas rather quickly spread in educational organizations, despite not very small resistance. Only need is not sufficient for quality, the ability to take responsibility is more important. At last, high managerial competence is necessary. You can have necessary and timely information about processes taking place in the organization, however, this doesn't guarantee that suitable decisions will be taken up.

Thus, there is no doubt, that implementation of quality management systems in educational organizations is very urgent. One can ask why it is urgent? First of all, it is because that general quality management philosophy is more and more developing and becoming more acceptable. Quite often one can hear the opponents claiming that ISO standards don't suit for educational organizations. It is true, that ISO standards are rather universal; therefore, it is not easy to adapt them in the education sphere. On the other hand, such programmed universality gives more action freedom, forms conditions to assess specific character of every concrete organization. Quality management system forms conditions to control not separate, broken up processes or activities, but see them as a whole entirety. Undoubtedly, this is very important seeking to guarantee vital

capacity of concrete organization. The second obvious truth is that quality in education sphere is getting worse, competition gets stronger and this in its turn makes organizations search for ways and strategies of making their activities more effective. The third thing is that today in Lithuania and not only in Lithuania, job and education markets do not match. A gap is rather big. Thus, it is not enough to teach, we must know clearly what we teach, how we teach and who for we teach. Undoubtedly, quality management system implementation is a serious instrument to virtually improve the activity of all educational organizations.

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