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An attempt to analyse the implementation of higher education quality assurance standards in Poland: A case study

Key words: quality assurance, higher education, Bologna Process, standards and guidelines, ENQA

S u m m a r y: A significant improvement of quality assurance in the higher education institutions is one of the aims of the Bologna Process. In 1995 ENQA (*the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education*), in collaboration with several other organisations, presented a set of standards and guidelines for quality assurance in higher education.

The paper examines a few questions concerning the state of implementation of the internal quality assurance standards and guidelines defined by ENQA at Polish universities, using the case study of one of the leading private technical schools in Poland, the Polish-Japanese Institute of Information Technology in Warsaw. The study is based on an anonymous survey, conducted in an electronic form, and an examination of the School's procedures and regulations. The results of the survey and the procedures included in the School's regulations were confronted with the criteria on quality assurance defined by ENQA (concerning such aspects as the Institution's policy and procedures for quality assurance, monitoring of programmes and awards, assessments of students, the quality of teaching staff, learning resources and student support, information systems and public information). The findings have shown that there is a noticeable progress in the pro-quality activity in Polish schools, though there still remains a lot of room for further improvement. It seems that the most important challenge nowadays is to build a good system of communication between all the School's stakeholders.

1. Introduction

In developed, knowledge-based economies the higher education sector plays an important role in the economic development of the country, as it is supposed to pro-

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vide it with highly-skilled human capital and cutting edge R&D. Therefore, high quality of the performance of higher schools should be considered as a key element of a pro-growth policy. It is indeed one of the main objectives of the so-called Bologna Process—a series of reforms in the area of higher education in Europe started in 1999, when a group of Education Ministers from 29¹ countries (including Poland) signed the Bologna Declaration (1). Its overall goal is to create the right conditions for increasing the mobility of citizens, adapting the educational system to the needs of the labour market, increasing the attractiveness and strengthening the competitive position of the educational system.

2. Problem background and literatures

The question of quality in higher education has been recently gaining attention as a subject of academic discussions. Some common approaches include the following (2):

- total quality management;
- performance indicators;
- EQM (external quality monitoring).

The consensus concerning a common definition of quality in higher education is far from being achieved. Some practical steps were taken, however, to establish some uniform standards for the member countries of the Bologna Process. At the meeting in Berlin in 2003 Ministers of Education from the signatory countries invited ENQA (*the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education*) “to develop an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance” (3). In 2005 ENQA, in collaboration with several other organisations (EUA, EURASHE, and ESIB), presented a set of standards and guidelines for quality assurance in higher education. The document comprises standards for both external and internal quality assurance procedures. It has become a base for restructuring national quality assurance system into a harmonised pan-European system.

3. Objective

The aim of the article is to present a few questions concerning the state of implementation of the internal quality assurance standards and guidelines defined by ENQA at Polish universities, using the case study of one of the leading private technical schools in Poland, the Polish-Japanese Institute of Information Technology in Warsaw (PJIIT).

¹ During the next eight years the number of countries that signed the Declaration increased to 47.

4. Research and methodology

The article focuses on data derived from a research (4) on the quality assurance process in the PJIIT that was done in 2009 and the examination of the School's procedures and regulations (5), (6), (7). The PJIIT² is one of the best non-state institutions of higher education in Poland. It was founded in 1994 on the basis of a bilateral agreement between the governments of Poland and Japan. There are 4 faculties: Information Technology, Information Management, Japanese Culture and New Media Art. The biggest and oldest faculty, Information Technology offers 3-level studies and has a right to grant the habilitation title.

There was an anonymous survey on the didactic process quality assurance conducted in an electronic form. The survey comprised 340 respondents—students (279) and staff (81³) of the Institute. It was based on open-end questions.

The results of the survey and the procedures included in the School's regulations were confronted with the criteria on quality assurance included in ENQA's "European standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance within higher education institutions". Several conclusions were drawn and a number of suggestions for improvement were presented.

5. Results and findings

European standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance within higher education institutions (8)

5.1. Policy and procedures for quality assurance

5.1.1. Standard

Institutions should have a policy and associated procedures for the assurance of the quality and standards of their programmes and awards. They should also commit themselves explicitly to the development of a culture which recognises the importance of quality, and quality assurance, in their work. To achieve this, institutions should develop and implement a strategy for the continuous enhancement of quality. The strategy, policy and procedures should have a formal status and be publicly available. They should also include a role for students and other stakeholders.

5.1.2. Guidelines

Formal policies and procedures provide a framework within which higher education institutions can develop and monitor the effectiveness of their quality assurance

² <http://www.pjwstk.edu.pl/?strona=1756> [online, accessed: 2011-05-02].

³ One could choose both the options.

systems. They also help to provide public confidence in institutional autonomy. Policies contain the statements of intentions and the principal means by which these will be achieved. Procedural guidance can give more detailed information about the ways in which the policy is implemented and provides a useful reference point for those who need to know about the practical aspects of carrying out the procedures.

The policy statement is expected to include:

- the relationship between teaching and research in the institution;
- the institution's strategy for quality and standards;
- the organisation of the quality assurance system;
- the responsibilities of departments, schools, faculties and other organisational units and individuals for the assurance of quality;
- the involvement of students in quality assurance;
- the ways in which the policy is implemented, monitored and revised (8).

The realisation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) depends crucially on a commitment at all levels of an institution to ensuring that its programmes have clear and explicit intended outcomes; that its staff are ready, willing and able to provide teaching and learner support that will help its students achieve those outcomes; and that there is full, timely and tangible recognition of the contribution to its work by those of its staff who demonstrate particular excellence, expertise and dedication. All higher education institutions should aspire to improve and enhance the education they offer their students.

Formal regulations at Polish universities include documents such as the Statute, Rules and Regulations of the student government body and anti-plagiarism procedures. The Statute includes clauses concerning the participation of students in the decisive bodies of the School; there are included quota requirements, e.g. that least 20% of the Senate members must be students (7, paragraph 20). There are also internal, detailed instructions concerning procedures for conducting student surveys assessing teachers. The surveys are nowadays a common practice, they can assume different technical shapes (from traditional, paper questionnaires distributed and filled in in the classroom to electronic surveys that can be completed in a span of a few weeks at the student's convenience). Regardless of the form they are supposed to be anonymous. They may consist of closed-end questions with a limited number of answers available (e.g. Did the lectures start punctually? Always/usually/often/seldom/never). There is usually some space left to be filled in with the students' comments. The aims of conducting the surveys are multiple—students have an opportunity to express their opinion about the way they are taught and teachers receive the feedback that they can use to improve the quality of their work. The superiors are given an assessment instrument; sometimes there are created rankings of the best teachers and their photos are placed on a wall in a visible place (the so-called Hall of Fame).

The main problems connected with conducting the surveys and using them as a valuable, reliable instrument of teacher assessment are as follows:

- students are not willing to participate in completing surveys; the average participation rate does not exceed 30%, despite various prizes that are offered to students to encourage them to devote their time and effort to completing the forms (varying from a chance to win a small gadget, e.g. a pen-drive to an ability to customise their schedule of classes). The reasons that they present include: lack of time (they argue that writing down comments on the work of all their teachers would take a few hours), lack of belief that the results of the opinions that they may present can have relevant impact on the quality of teaching and staff employment decisions and some fear that, despite all the precautions taken, they will not remain anonymous;
- teachers also have mixed feelings about the usefulness of the surveys' results. They appreciate the chance to receive student feedback and admit that they find some of the opinions helpful. However, they also express opinions that the small number of participants does not ensure reliability of the study and there is a danger that the most disappointed students, who received the worst grades will decide to use the opportunity to express emotional, subjective, sometimes even unprintable opinions.

The steps that could be suggested to improve the rate of student participation may include the following:

- arranging for the surveys to be completed during some of the last lectures/classes of every course at the end of the term (in an electronic form, to ensure anonymity). Thus the time needed to complete the survey thoroughly would be divided into more convenient units;
- publishing some comments concerning the results of the survey on the School's web page (a good practice used e.g. at the Faculty of Management and Economics of Gdańsk University of Technology). One could find there methodological comments as well as instances of very good and less fortunate teaching practices (e.g. the disapproval of reading long lines of continuous text from slides by the lecturers, humorously dubbed a few years ago by students of the PJIT as "All of Poland reads to kids").

Another common tool of quality assurance at Polish universities are periodic inspections of teachers' work. In most cases lecturers visit the classes conducted by their assistant teachers, and heads of the chairs visit the lectures. After the inspection the supervisor completes the inspection form and discusses the conclusions with the teacher. Each institution has its own inspection form. The form may include closed-end questions, e.g.:

- did the class start on time? Yes/no;
- was the material presented in a comprehensible and clear way? Yes/no;
- were the didactic materials used of good quality? Yes/no.

There is usually some room left for additional comments and recommendations of the supervisor.

As far as this form of quality assurance is concerned, the crucial success factor is the didactic competence and authority of the supervising teacher. If the supervisor is generally respected as a good teacher himself or herself, the supervisee is more likely to trust the comments received.

5.2. Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards

5.2.1. Standard

Institutions should have formal mechanisms for the approval, periodic review and monitoring of their programmes and awards.

5.2.2. Guidelines

The confidence of students and other stakeholders in higher education is more likely to be established and maintained through effective quality assurance activities which ensure that programmes are well-designed, regularly monitored and periodically reviewed, thereby securing their continuing relevance and currency.

The quality assurance of programmes and awards are expected to include:

- development and publication of explicit intended learning outcomes;
- careful attention to curriculum and programme design and content;
- specific needs of different modes of delivery (e.g. full-time, part-time, distance-learning, e-learning) and types of higher education (e.g. academic, vocational, professional);
- availability of appropriate learning resources;
- formal programme approval procedures by a body other than that teaching the programme;
- monitoring of the progress and achievements of students;
- regular periodic reviews of programmes (including external panel members);
- regular feedback from employers, labour market representatives and other relevant organisations;
- participation of students in quality assurance activities (8).

Programmes at Polish universities must comply with the Ministry standards. For example, there are certain subjects and core programme content that must be taught in a defined number of hours in all schools that offer the fields of study. For example, all undergraduate programmes in management must contain at least 45 hours of microeconomics, 60 hours of the basics of management, 60 hours of law, etc. Schools have the freedom to enrich their programmes. Changes in programmes are discussed by Programme Committees and Faculty Councils. Some-

times curricula of some majors are consulted with the representatives of the business environment.

Students of technical schools tend to appreciate the focus on practice, limiting the theoretical part (redundant, in their opinion) to the minimum and adjusting the programmes to market requirements. They appreciate the following qualities of programmes:

- diversification of specialisation programmes;
- a rich choice of electives;
- the logical order and consistency of material taught during lectures and classes;
- coordination of the material taught among chairs;
- unified and clear rules and requirements of passing the courses.

It seems that there is a need to work out procedures of receiving a regular feedback concerning the usefulness of programmes from employers, graduates and representatives of the labour market.

5.3. Assessment of students

5.3.1. Standard

Students should be assessed using published criteria, regulations and procedures which are applied consistently.

5.3.2. Guidelines

The assessment of students is one of the most important elements of higher education. The outcomes of assessment have a profound effect on students' future careers. It is therefore important that assessment is carried out professionally at all times and takes into account the extensive knowledge which exists about testing and examination processes. Assessment also provides valuable information for institutions about the effectiveness of teaching and learners' support.

Student assessment procedures are expected to:

- be designed to measure the achievement of the intended learning outcomes and other programme objectives;
- be appropriate for their purpose, whether diagnostic, formative or summative;
- have clear and published criteria for marking;
- be undertaken by people who understand the role of assessment in the progression of students towards the achievement of the knowledge and skills associated with their intended qualification;
- where possible, not rely on the judgements of single examiners;
- take account of all the possible consequences of examination regulations;
- have clear regulations covering student absence, illness and other mitigating circumstances;

- ensure that assessments are conducted securely in accordance with the institution's stated procedures;
- be subject to administrative verification checks to ensure the accuracy of the procedures.

In addition, students should be clearly informed about the assessment strategy being used for their programme, what examinations or other assessment methods they will be subject to, what will be expected of them, and the criteria that will be applied to the assessment of their performance (8).

There are usually some general, formal regulations concerning the rules of student assessment, included in the Rules and Regulations of Studies. For example, one may find a clause defining the maximum number of allowable unjustified absences (5, paragraph 10). The main problem that each school has to solve seems to be the proper information policy. There should be clear procedures concerning informing students about the rules of grading. A good practice is to include them in syllabi, before the beginning of the course. Quite a difficult problem to solve remains the treatment of justified absences. Teachers and methodologists have to decide to what extent they should have impact on the final grade. As far as classes that are highly communicative in nature (e.g. seminars in foreign languages) are concerned, the presence and active participation in class are crucial elements of student assessment and absences are difficult, if not impossible, to make up for, regardless of their reason. Other classes, whose target is to develop textbook knowledge (e.g. mathematics or literature) can have different grading procedures and a decision to organise an additional test for a student with justified absences would not disturb the didactic course. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that all the rules should be just, comprehensible and clearly communicated to students.

The syllabi are a part of the knowledge resources of each school and as such are the school's competitive advantage. Therefore, they should not be easily accessible to competitors. Yet students should have constant access to them. A good solution seems to be placing the documents in an electronic form on a school server. Students could have access to them (as well as to other didactic materials) after logging in using the student password.

Another question of utmost importance for quality assurance in Poland is the way of conducting tests and examinations. There is a discreditable tradition of treating cheating as a sort of an innocent sport, or even an admirable, brave way of helping friends in need. The very nomenclature is suggestive—Polish people would rather use the word “copying” instead of “cheating”, the former being less pejorative in nature. Therefore, institutions should work out clear procedures of conducting tests and examinations. The good practices, worth spreading, are as follows:

- written tests and exams should be conducted in rooms that are spacious enough to accommodate students properly. The examinees should sit separately, reasonably far from one another;

- as it happens, especially in big institutions that have hundreds of students, which gives them some sense of anonymity, students sometimes ask their colleagues that are more proficient in the subject, to sit in for them. In order to avoid such a danger, students should be invited into the examination room individually, sign an attendance list at the entrance, show an ID with a photo to the examiner (and keep the ID, e.g. the school ID on the table throughout the whole examination). Cell phones and other electronic devices should be turned off and kept hidden till the end of the test.

5.4. Quality assurance of teaching staff

5.4.1. Standard

Institutions should have ways of satisfying themselves that staff involved with the teaching of students are qualified and competent to do so. They should be available to those undertaking external reviews, and commented upon in reports.

5.4.2. Guidelines

Teachers are the single most important learning resource available to most students. It is important that those who teach have a full knowledge and understanding of the subject they are teaching, have the necessary skills and experience to transmit their knowledge and understanding effectively to students in a range of teaching contexts, and can access feedback on their own performance. Institutions should ensure that their staff recruitment and appointment procedures include a means of making certain that all new staff have at least the minimum necessary level of competence. Teaching staff should be given opportunities to develop and extend their teaching capacity and should be encouraged to value their skills. Institutions should provide poor teachers with opportunities to improve their skills to an acceptable level and should have the means to remove them from their teaching duties if they continue to be demonstrably ineffective (8).

Schools have formal regulations concerning the staff employment criteria. They are included in documents of high importance, e.g. the Statute. The findings of student surveys show that students hold in high esteem the following qualities:

- outstanding knowledge;
- high level of education and competence;
- dynamism and young age;
- good rapport;
- student-oriented attitude;
- accessibility (face-to-face and e-mail);
- punctuality.

Teachers, on the other hand, also list some factors that, in their opinion, would have a positive impact on the quality of their work. Apart from a good financial mo-

tivation system, they also point at the necessity to build a good information system inside the institution, organizing methodological trainings and workshops on voice emission. Nowadays there also seems to be an increasing need to provide teachers with up-to-date knowledge on copyright laws (e.g. concerning the use of articles and photos from the Internet).

5.5. Learning resources and student support

5.5.1. Standard

Institutions should ensure that the resources available for the support of student learning are adequate and appropriate for each programme offered.

5.5.2. Guidelines

In addition to their teachers, students rely on a range of resources to assist their learning. These vary from physical resources such as libraries or computing facilities to human support in the form of tutors, counsellors, and other advisers. Learning resources and other support mechanisms should be readily accessible to students, designed with their needs in mind and responsive to feedback from those who use the services provided. Institutions should routinely monitor, review and improve the effectiveness of the support services available to their students (8).

Nowadays facilities such as a well-equipped library and free access to the Internet are a standard. Students welcome technical novelties that facilitate their work, e.g. the electronic management of library services (reservation of books, renewing items online, access to the electronic resources of the library) instead of traditional filling out call slips. The same concerns the organisation of work of the Dean's Office. Students appreciate such facilities as electronic student's book, electronic ID, E-Dean's Office (that allows, among others, for submitting various applications without having to visit the office in person), access to information concerning schedules, duty hours of teachers, or the financial situation and student status as well as various announcements, e.g. information about guest lectures or cancellation of classes.

Teachers would consider useful getting access to up-to-date lists of their groups, an opportunity to print examination record forms on their own and an option of targeting their e-mail messages to selected groups of students (instead of "spamming" the whole School). Foreign students and employees stress the necessity of translating all the important information into English.

Both students and teachers hold in high esteem the accessibility of the following facilities:

- student dormitories;
- modern, high-quality computer hardware;
- the state-of-the art software;
- Wi-Fi;

- places for individual work (equipped with computers);
- access to scanners and printers;
- air-conditioning;
- a spacious and well-designed canteen, with freshly made dishes at reasonable prices;
- vending machines with snacks and beverages in all buildings;
- a store with stationery, books and magazines.

Students also appreciate the organisation of interesting extracurricular activities, e.g. topic-specific clubs, certification oriented courses (Cisco, Microsoft, LCCI). They also see the need for a good information policy and induction programmes, especially for the first-year students. It would be a good idea to supply them with the campus map, information concerning enrolment to classes, FAQ, etc.

Teachers are also interested in technical novelties, they welcome the opportunity to use interactive boards, virtual laboratories and various ways of using e-learning platforms.

5.6. Information systems

5.6.1. Standard

Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes of study and other activities.

5.6.2. Guidelines

Institutional self-knowledge is the starting point for effective quality assurance. It is important that institutions have the means of collecting and analysing information about their own activities. Without this they will not know what is working well and what needs attention, or the results of innovatory practices. The quality-related information systems required by individual institutions will depend to some extent on local circumstances, but it is at least expected to cover:

- student progression and success rates;
- employability of graduates;
- students' satisfaction with their programmes;
- effectiveness of teachers;
- profile of the student population;
- learning resources available and their costs;
- the institution's own key performance indicators.

There is also value in institutions comparing themselves with other similar organisations within the EHEA and beyond. This allows them to extend the range of their self-knowledge and to access possible ways of improving their own performance (8).

The most important steps include building a system of collecting data concerning the employability of graduates and feedback from graduates and employers on the usefulness of the programmes. It can be done with the help of Graduate Clubs and Career Offices.

5.7. Public information

5.7.1. Standard

Institutions should regularly publish up to date, impartial and objective information, both quantitative and qualitative, about the programmes and awards they are offering.

5.7.2. Guidelines

In fulfilment of their public role, higher education institutions have a responsibility to provide information about the programmes they are offering, the intended learning outcomes of these, the qualifications they award, the teaching, learning and assessment procedures used, and the learning opportunities available to their students. Published information might also include the views and employment destinations of past students and the profile of the current student population. This information should be accurate, impartial, objective and readily accessible and should not be used simply as a marketing opportunity. The institution should verify that it meets its own expectations in respect of impartiality and objectivity (8).

Nowadays the main way of transferring information about the School's programmes is the Internet. Schools, as a rule, have their web pages, where they place information about their offer, history, facilities, enrollment procedures, fees, admission criteria, rules and regulations, etc. They also distribute paper brochures. It seems that nowadays the main medium of conveying information is the Internet and schools should concentrate their efforts on developing their webpages.

6. Discussion, implications, and limitations

The results of the research are limited by a number of factors. First, it concentrated on students and staff from one, non-state Warsaw school, the PJIIT. Second, in the PJIIT this kind of extensive in-school survey was conducted for the first time. Therefore one cannot present a comparative over-time study now. Moreover, not all students and employees decided to take part in the research.

Nevertheless, the results of the research should be considered as valuable and worth further consideration. Some areas for improvement were spotted as well as a number of good practices. The knowledge drawn from the survey can serve as

a good base for developing the School's internal quality assurance system. The surveys should be conducted regularly and the progress should be evaluated.

7. Conclusions

The issue of quality assurance in higher education has become a question of utmost importance, especially in the light of the Bologna Process. The discussion concerning the uniform definition of quality in the context of the academic didactic process is still in progress. Nevertheless, a set of practical standards and guidelines was elaborated on by ENQA and can serve as a useful tool for building and upgrading quality assurance systems in European higher schools. Polish universities have undertaken efforts to implement the standards in question. Judging from a case study of a leading technical non-state school one can come to the conclusion that there is a noticeable progress in the pro-quality activity, though there remains a lot of room for improvement. The key to success seems to be—apart from getting access to sufficient sources of finances—building channels of ongoing communication between all the stakeholders, based on mutual feedback.

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Próba analizy wdrażania standardów jakości w szkolnictwie wyższym w Polsce. Studium przypadku

Streszczenie: Znacząca poprawa jakości w instytucjach szkolnictwa wyższego jest jednym z celów procesu bolońskiego. W 1995 roku ENQA (Europejskie Stowarzyszenie na rzecz Jakości Kształcenia w Szkolnictwie Wyższym) we współpracy z kilkoma innymi organizacjami przedstawiło zbiór standardów i wskazówek dotyczących zapewnienia jakości kształcenia w szkolnictwie wyższym.

Niniejszy artykuł omawia kilka kwestii dotyczących stanu wdrożenia wewnętrznych standardów jakości określonych przez ENQA na polskich uczelniach na przykładzie jednej z najlepszych prywatnych szkół technicznych w Polsce – Polsko-Japońskiej Wyższej Szkoły Technik Komputerowych w Warszawie. Badanie zostało oparte na wynikach anonimowej ankiety, przeprowadzonej w formie elektronicznej wśród studentów i pracowników oraz analizy procedur i przepisów Uczelni. Wyniki zostały skonfrontowane z kryteriami dotyczącymi zapewniania jakości określonymi przez ENQA (dotyczącymi m.in. polityki i procedur zapewnienia jakości, monitorowania programów, oceny studentów, jakości kadry dydaktycznej, zasobów edukacyjnych i pomocy materialnej dla studentów, systemów informacyjnych oraz publikowania informacji). Wyniki badania pokazują, że nastąpił znaczący postęp w projakościowej działalności na polskich uczelniach, choć wciąż wiele pozostaje do zrobienia. Wydaje się, że obecnie najważniejsze wyzwanie stanowi zbudowanie dobrego systemu komunikacji między wszystkimi interesariuszami uczelni.

Słowa kluczowe: zapewnianie jakości, szkolnictwo wyższe, proces boloński, standardy i wskazówki, ENQA
