

Education Quality Assessment from the Perspective of Stakeholders on the Example of Armenian Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

This paper deals with education quality assessment from the perspective of stakeholders on the example of Armenian higher education institutions. It is established that the National Quality Assurance Center of Armenia (ANQA) has separated seven key domains to recognize and assess the quality: institutional capacity, educational programs, knowledge management, student-centered approach, information management, funding, quality culture. For each of them there are certain criteria and standards that are applied by universities as a guide for the development of their own strategy.

Keywords: education quality, assessment of the quality, assessment criteria, labor market, stakeholders.

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Introduction

Improvement and development of the educational system is one of the most important components of the education quality assurance system. For the purpose of improvement it's expedient to involve all the parties participating in this process, in broader meaning, the whole society, as the development of society is conditioned by education. All this is the basis for the development and implementation of strategic programs aimed at improving the quality of education that the universities implement. If we observe one of the clear definitions of quality, which is as follows: quality as an equivalence goal, then it is not difficult to notice that under this general definition every educational institution should pursue the goal set out by its own strategy, making it equivalent to the universally accepted quality standards. There are general provisions of quality assurance defined by both international structures (whose member is the Republic of Armenia). The National Quality Assurance Center of Armenia (ANQA) has separated seven key domains to recognize and assess the quality.

1. Institutional capacity (high quality student service);
2. Educational programs (educational programs compliance with modern market requirements);
3. Knowledge management (the relation between research works and curricular, knowledge applicability);
4. Student-centered approach (creating a working atmosphere for harmonious collaboration of a student and a lecturer, the role of a lecturer);
5. Information management (inter-university, international and national information collection and coordination);
6. Funding (the relation between funding mechanisms and provision of quality education);
7. Quality culture (culture of an educational institution).

The responsibility for developing and improving the quality assurance policy is left to the university. It extends to the following functions and actions of the University: teaching, research works, learning support services, facilities, accommodation, furnishing and equipment, community services and the like.

In this context various **survey methods** are used by stakeholders (students, graduates, employers etc) as a tool. And the stakeholders, as the most important link in the quality management system, are the most important part of the modern education system.

Results and discussion

The assessment of the education quality by students is an alternative and innovative method in measuring the education quality in the system of higher education, as well as in the assessment of the effectiveness of the implementation of educational reforms. From the perspective of higher education institution it can serve as a tool to measure the learning outcomes, as well as that of an identifying method to regulate the possible ways in achieving the set out outcomes. Education today is obviously oriented towards the "free development of the personality" of the future professional, creative initiative, independence, competitiveness, mobility¹.

Education is connected with the development and self-realization needs of a person. As a social institution, it aims to meet the person's educational needs that are closely connected with his/her basic, as well as other social needs.

Meeting the educational needs forms a system of expectations among stakeholders regarding both the outcomes and the process of activities of a higher education institution. On the other hand, the stakeholders have some kind of notion about any institution, as well as that of the activities of any other educational institution. Based on these very notions and expectations the assessment and satisfaction ratings by stakeholders (including students) are formed.

Today the education quality is the main issue of the field of education. According to the "State Program on the Development of Education in the Republic of Armenia in 2016-2025" the main priority of the vocational education is to enhance the education quality. The need "to increase the number of young people and adults with professional skills significantly by 2025 for the purpose of finding decent jobs and reducing unemployment and to promote entrepreneurship", are defined as objectives and outcomes (8: 11).

Education is related to all aspects of social life. Accordingly, all the functions of the institution of education serve to not only functioning of one social institution, but also to society. In this context the quality of higher education is important, which is directly connected to and influences the institution of education, as well as other institutions vital for activities of society, namely-the development of economy, health care, agriculture. In other words, the quality of vocational education is one of the most important indicators of the development and functioning of a state.

In the process of implementing programs aimed to define, research and enhance the quality of education, first and foremost, we're confronted with differences regarding the definition of the concept of education quality and its perception by various stakeholders.

The quality of higher education is a multi-dimensional, multi-level and dynamic concept. Study of official and unofficial documents regarding the quality of education and surveys conducted with groups of stakeholders have revealed that different social groups have different perceptions about the quality of education giving different interpretations.

In professional literature the scope of quality assurance activities is determined by the structure of vocational education system and the size. The quality management, enhancement, monitoring and assessment are the quality assurance process implementation guarantees. The education provided by an educational institution is efficient to the extent consistent with its set objectives. The most high quality institute is considered the one that clearly sets its objective and implements it effectively. The objective may be meeting the needs of stakeholders. But various stakeholder groups have different perceptions regarding the **educational needs** and **education quality**.

For the purpose of revealing the issues related to the quality of education in higher education system, from our part we've carried out qualitative sociological survey among Master students studying at state and private universities functioning in Yerevan. The goal of the survey was to identify the educational needs of Master students in the context of quality assurance. The survey was conducted through focus group discussions and in-depth interview methods attended by state and non-state university Master students and part-time learning system students. To ensure data integrity, in-depth interviews were conducted with employers and professors, as well.

¹ See <http://en.unesco.org/events/23rd-ordinary-session-international-bioethics-committee-ibs-and-joint-session-ibc-and>, according to 09.06.2016.

The qualitative surveys conducted by us among students show that students find it difficult to define the major components ensuring the education quality and they link the higher education quality directly to the concept of "high-quality specialist", noting that high quality education is the one, as a result of which the higher education institution produces highly qualified specialists. But the concept "highly qualified specialist" is often commented on as superficial and of unconscious nature.

During the focus group discussions the stakeholders define the major component of education quality as "possession of applicable knowledge and skills". Moreover, a similar view occurs only as a result of discussions and appears to be formed mostly during discussions, but not as an already formed view about the discussed topic.

It should be noted that in this case, too, during discussions the respondents were faced with a deadlock, when trying to define or explain which one was considered to be applicable knowledge, and which one-not.

Interestingly, as a result, the stakeholders connect the quality assessment of the activities of an institution with the fact of being involved in another institution (in this case the labour market as a social institution). This fact once again testifies to the role of the educational institution in the development of other institutions and the interrelation of higher education institution and labor market, as well.

We believe that the difficulty of defining the concept of education quality is connected with unclear understanding about expectations from the received education and the implementation of the process. In other words, students not always clearly understand what learning and higher education are as an outcome and what points are needed to measure the quality and efficiency.

The data of the survey conducted by individuals of various local and international organizations show that the availability of the final diploma is of more importance to stakeholders than that of the content of education.

According to the report on the "**Higher Education in Armenia: Analysis of Existing Issues**" for many professors and students, as well as that of the vast majority of broader society the higher education diploma is valued as a certificate or a document enabling the promotion of professional advancement rather than a fact attesting to the higher education and knowledge. It's possible to receive a higher education diploma without much effort. Sometimes even not a bribe, but simply paying the tuition fee is enough, taking into account the fact, the higher education institutions exist by means of funds raised from these fees, so, as a rule, students are not left out from the education system (5: 28).

This opinion is reconfirmed also during focus group discussions conducted with students, during which we encountered such assessments as "...receive a diploma, I don't care the rest", "now who cares what specialist you are, but it's important to have a diploma", "we make more efforts to get a diploma than knowledge during study years" and so on.

Thus, during the discussion of education quality assessment methods and that of the assessment analysis by stakeholders it is becoming important not only objective and measureable units definition, but also revealing assessor's system of values, educational experience (academic performance, studying at other educational institutions etc.) and other factors, that directly or indirectly influence the quality assessment process.

The assessment and standpoints among students regarding the education quality are not always based on their own experience or factual data. Survey data have shown that they are of more projective character. In particular, discussions conducted among students' studying both in full-time and part-time learning systems, show that quality of education changes depending whether students study in full-time or part-time system, but as a result of applying detailing and clarifying issues, it's becoming clear that formation of similar opinions is primarily based not on personal experience, but it is formed based on the opinions of referent groups and social capital.

The data obtained as a result of surveys conducted with employers and professors have revealed that they don't see any difference between the knowledge and skills obtained by students both in full-time and part-time learning systems. Whereas the students of the part-time learning system say that their education quality is much lower, because the professors do not pay enough attention to the complete learning of materials by students. It also contributes to the fact that the students have very little time for the complete learning of the academic program materials and during the months when they don't attend classes, they do nothing. Interestingly, students in the given context mention between lines, often unconscious, about the consistent ap-

proach of professors regarding the complete mastering of materials by students as an element of quality assurance in education. Whereas, during discussions the students raise the issue regarding the importance of both the form and availability of provision of taught materials. They also note that the professors should motivate, but not force students to learn.

Also the approaches by which students attempt to explain their low scores related to the education quality or low level of satisfaction with the quality of education are not mainly based on their own experience or actual data.

According to "dissatisfied" students, the taught materials are out of date and do not meet today's labor market needs. Whereas the survey results have shown that the students, who perform a professional work, in addition to learning, are more likely to assess the education quality higher, than those performing neither a professional work nor any kind of work at all.

Students implementing professional work note, that they apply the skills and knowledge they have obtained during the learning process. Surveys conducted by us testify to the fact that these students have given a high assessment to the education quality of their higher education institutions. They note that during the working process they understand the importance of knowledge and skills more clearly.

The same tendency also exists in the relationship between academic performance and education quality satisfaction level. Students with higher academic performance are more likely to assess the quality of education highly, than those with lower academic performance. In our opinion students' system of values, experience and the common positions in society regarding the learning process, the applicability of obtained knowledge and the labor market greatly influence the assessment of education quality. The education quality assessment criteria that are presented by students are of more general nature and mainly do not directly relate to the learning process.

According to students and employers the knowledge obtained at higher education institutions is of theoretical nature and that the practical courses are not sufficient to promote the acquisition of practical skills. On the other hand the educational practices are not organized properly and they do not enable students to develop practical skills.

According to the survey data, for the purpose of promoting the quality of education it's necessary to broaden and develop the practical assignments sector as much as possible. Develop and implement new educational practice programs, which will make the ties closer between universities and employers. Employers note that they will be more interested in cooperation with universities regarding the implementation of educational practices, if they are confident that students entering the organization will not only interfere with the usual activities of the organization, but, to some extent, will contribute their obtained knowledge to the activities of the organization. But according to employers students are reluctant to fulfill the assigned task often considering it "exploitation".

Employers as a measure of the quality of education note the existence of skills and knowledge among graduates to perform work responsibilities effectively. Particularly, they note the necessity of developing abilities among students to perform complex tasks without ready algorithms for the purpose of promoting the quality of education. The data of the surveys carried out among employers indicate to the fact that the graduation diploma is not a guarantee of quality of education and knowledge availability. According to them the education sector in the Republic of Armenia hasn't achieved such a development level yet when only the existence of a graduation diploma is a guarantee for the employer to invite confidently graduates to work. According to the forecasts of respondents the higher education institution is unable to provide such an indicator for a long time yet. The formation of a similar situation is affected by the educational system as an independent entity, as well as that of the social and economic condition of the country, cultural and values system characteristics of society.

Conclusion

Thus, when developing the methodology for measuring students' satisfaction with education quality, we think that it's necessary to take into account the fact, that there isn't a clear understanding among the quality education stakeholders about the definition of the concept "education quality" and its component elements yet.

Summarizing, it should be noted that there is misunderstanding among stakeholders about the concept “education quality”: Education policy makers comment on the education quality as compliance with state educational standards. Students speak about the education quality as compliance with labor market requirements. For professors the effectiveness of educational process is the guarantee of education quality, whereas, for employers – the speed and effectiveness of performing tasks or work requirements.

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