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The quality consulting services management in the university educational system

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Abstract

University education represents that specific form of education which allows people to develop particular skills/abilities and competences in a specific field of interest. The implementation of a quality management system according to a globally acknowledged standard may be an acceptable solution for a university, either private or public, to become more and more appreciated by delivering quality services which may even surpass the clients’ expectations. Management consultancy plays a very important part because of the knowledge and experience transfer which offers to those universities that are interested in implementing such programs.

Keywords: University education; public education; private education; services; consultancy; quality; quality management.

1. Introduction

The mission of a university is that of facilitating the achievement of a personalized education, one which has as main coordinates the adaptability and the power of providing or, even more, generating knowledge for both individuals and society. Therefore, the most significant role of a university is that of reshaping/remodeling both the economy and the society; it is, in fact, an open door towards personal education and development and it acts like a broker of cognition or as an incubator for worldwide cognition.

A university is not something isolated, but actually an entire network of schools, educational programs, companies. The educational process is modular as it satisfies multiple requests for personal development, study and career building.

The most important features of a university are its autonomy, the high rank of flexibility and adaptability, the ability of certifying not qualifications, but key skills and abilities, the ability of offering diplomas which certify performance levels. The professors act as facilitators and mentors, providing career opportunities, internships in specific business environments and personal development courses (Curaj, http://www.marketwatch.ro).

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Nowadays it’s a clear fact that facing quantity, quality becomes a fundamental stake. But it’s the country’s duty and obligation to provide the best opportunities for children. The primordial stake of any university is to assure education throughout the entire life, allowing people to achieve another qualification in order to rebuild their professional opportunities. Nowadays we face another dimension of the university. Decades and even centuries ago, this type of education was meant to be achieved only by individuals coming from bourgeois families. It represented some sort of civil right only for a minority of people. Nowadays, the tendency to democratize the university education system is to bring huge opportunities, in favor of not only the individuals but entire countries, giving them the impulse they need in order to develop themselves. I don’t state the fact that this type of education should be accessible to everybody, regardless their abilities and cognitive capacities. Moreover, the latter two features should be the main coordinates according to which people can attend the lectures of a university (Haddad, http://www.gandul.info).

The main stake now is to direct people towards qualifications in different professions, because the most important part of a university is not the diploma, but the creativeness you achieve during the 3 or 4 years of intense study.

A **Quality Management System (QMS)** is a set of interrelated or interacting elements that universities use to direct and control how quality policies are implemented and quality objectives are achieved (URL http://www.praxiom.com). A process-based QMS uses a process approach to manage and control how its quality policy is implemented and quality objectives are achieved. A **process-based QMS** is a network of many interrelated and interconnected processes (elements).

Each process uses resources to transform inputs into outputs. Since the output of one process becomes the input of another process, processes interact and are interrelated by means of such input-output relationships. These process interactions create a single process-based QMS.

ISO 9001 is by far the world’s most established quality framework, currently being used by around 897,000 organizations in 170 countries worldwide (URL http://www.bsi-global.com), and sets the standard not only for quality management systems, but management systems in general. It helps all kinds of organizations to succeed through improved customer satisfaction, staff motivation and continual improvement.

ISO 9001 is one of a series of quality management system standards. It can help bring out the best in the organization by enabling firm to understand his processes for delivering his products/services to the customers.

The QMS consultants may provide services in the following phases of a QMS realization process:
- initial appraisal,
- identification of goals and objectives,
- design and development,
- implementation,
- evaluation,
- ongoing maintenance,
- improvement (URL http://www.vaz-ev.de).

Advice from a QMS consultant should be appropriate in each or all of these phases, according to the needs of the organization. For the organization to achieve its overall objectives for the quality management system, it is essential that due importance be given to the selection and utilization of a competent QMS consultant and use of his services (Crăciun, 2009).

In what regards the process of involving universities in promoting service qualities we have to take into consideration aspects such as:
- training qualified personnel in services and establishing some basic requirements;
- receptivity regarding both the employees’ and customers’ requirements;
- encouraging customer fidelity;
- accessibility of the services offered to customers and performing them with ease;
- avoiding making promises if they are unlikely to be respected;
- giving the customers the feeling that they are important by approaching them politely;
identifying, encouraging and promoting those who stand out from all the rest in doing their job.

Although most of the programs which try to improve quality have as main targets perfecting the process of developing an activity and satisfying the clients’ needs, the techniques used differ from one organization to another. One of the main ways of drawing clients towards services organization is to design and to establish an emotional connection, based on specific aspects which differ from those of the competition and are easily recognizable by the customers.

2. Case study: Why doesn’t the private university education function correctly in Romania? (Stanciu, 2009)

Romania has lots of paradoxes, one paradox being the fact that private education is not always better than the public one. If we take a look at the university educational system, the situation is even worse. This is not likely in the case of other foreign countries.

The cost of primary school education and even that of kindergarten education is much higher than the cost of university education, despite the fact that there are better state financed alternatives.

Therefore, in Romania there are cases such as:

- the cheapest private kindergarten costs as much as 150-200E/month;
- the most expensive private university costs as much as 600E/year;
- there are some elementary private schools which cost as much as 20000E/year and many schools which cost 5000-6000E/year;
- the most expensive MBA program in Bucharest costs only 15000E/year.

The most plausible explanation for this paradox resides in the behavior of the Romanian educational services consumer. It’s already known the fact that Romanian consider elementary education to be much more important than higher education. But the difference is huge. As a society, the Romanians practically ignore the quality of the latter system of education. As long as they are offered a diploma, they ignore the rest. This time, the explanation is to be found in the employer’s behavior, employer who puts on the same level a diploma achieved at a doubtful private university and one achieved at a prestigious public university.

It’s very hard and even risky/hazardous to build a good private university. You have to take into consideration the high cost and important investments that a project like this requires. A frequently asked question in this case is the following: Why should I do this if the society has such low requirements and standards?

There are egalitarian societies, like ours, where there’s this social pressure of having a university diploma, once you have it, it’s not important anymore where from or in what did you graduate. It’s all just a matter of social and intellectual status, forgetting about the applicability of the cognitive acknowledgements. The employers have understood this, therefore the vicious circle can be closed now. If we add to this recipe the legal requirements established and imposed by a highly regularized and bureaucratic society according to which many professions need a university diploma, we then can create a destructive cocktail which blows up the entire private university educational system.

There are many voices which claim the Ministry of Education to harden the procedure of allowing universities to exist. But this is not the main issue. This procedure is quite easily accessible everywhere in the world. It has to allow even lower quality schools to become part of the system, as they have their own public. The difference has to be done by the society.

As a very relevant example I would like to take that of the United States of America, as it has both a public and a private educational system, both very strong. It’s not the same thing graduating from Harvard, Kellogg or MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) and getting your diploma from Ohio State University. In France we face the same situation: there is one thing to graduate from HEC (Hautes Etudes Commerciales) and another thing to attend the lectures of Bordeaux University. A very interesting fact, known by few people, is that Harvard University is not accredited. Because it does not want to be. It has higher standards than any accreditation procedures and it doesn’t need recognition from the part of a bureaucratic structure.
Another face of this problem is that public education competes with the private one from a privileged position. As long as there is a free alternative, regardless its quality, it’s very difficult to find a coherent /strategic marketing approach.

Private universities have appeared in Romania in order to satisfy the requirements of an increasing number of students, a process which began after 1989, after the fall of communism, in addition to public university professors’ wish to gain more money.

The simplest approach was that of accessibility by means of low prices and low standards. A society with no standards was perfect for this project, the result being that universities with no value had become a great business. But we don’t have to blame these universities, because the employers have all the fault. They are the ones who choose to validate the lack of knowledge.

In order to find a solution for the situation of private university education (and public education, at the same time), we have to turn our attention to the educational services market, at least in what regards the universities. This level of education should be supported by the individual, not by society. This way, the problem should be solved.

Governmental funds should be given to those who are educated, not to those who educate. The latter category should compete in order to get more money. This way, it’s more likely that they do a better job. Private schools should interact with the state, obtaining funds the same way public schools do. Applying this procedure, we should avoid situations like the following one: attending a private school in Romania for 8000E/year when you could do the same in France for only 1500E/year. But it arises another problem: it’s better for a child to go to school in Romania or abroad? The answer is more than obvious.

One of the solutions in order to make the Romanian university system (both public and private) globally competitive is to implement a quality management system. The consultants play a very important role in this process, because their experience is that key element which places a university in an international hierarchy.

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