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ACCREDITATION VS. CERTIFICATION ACCORDING TO ISO 9001:2000-POSSIBLE WAYS OF IMPROVING QUALITY IN POLISH HIGHER EDUCATION

Abstract

Last decade in Polish higher education can be considered as a specific debate on the issue of the education quality. The most striking problem touched upon in the discussion is the worrisome discrepancies in the level of educational services rendered in the universities. There are 2 main reasons being indicated for that: the disproportionate development of Polish non-public sector as well as the changes in the terms of financing higher education. The latter have determined seeking for other sources like extending educational offer by paid studies-unfortunately at the cost of the education quality. All these facts have impelled the academic society to set a system of assuring and maintaining relevant educational standards in the form of accreditation procedure. One of the consequences is new law recently introduced in this field. Another, according to the authors, complementary solution is the implementation of Quality Management System confirmed with the requirements according to ISO 9001.

Introduction

The aim of the article is the presentation of the possible ways of improving Polish higher education in the light of accreditation and ISO 9001:2000 requirements. Recent legal regulations concerning higher education institutions provide for a uniform accreditation and quality evaluation system. Accreditation-so far associated with a voluntary initiative of a given university, which reflected its special care and interest in the quality of education it offered-has become a statutory obligation. Now, to demonstrate its extra concern for the quality of higher educational services a university will need an additional accreditation and/or a certificate stating that the quality management in this higher education institution complies with the ISO 9001 standard.

It should not be expected, however, that legal regulations would put an abrupt end to the ongoing debate about quality of higher education. In the present situation the discussion will be dominated by the reflection on the direction in which accreditation and evaluation of education quality in our country should develop.

The Polish accreditation system

There are 2 possible ways of understanding accreditation in Polish higher education. The first of them is the university accreditation considered as the activity of a university society, and the second one-state accreditation, which is the result of recently passed legal regulations (Figure 1).

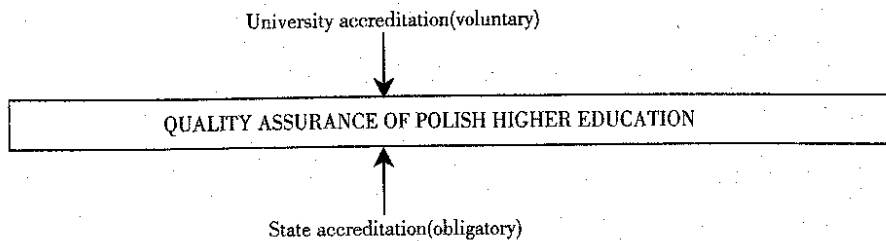


Figure 1. The Polish accreditation system

The university accreditation can be considered as a primary accreditation. The first university accreditation unit started its activity in 1994 and it was Stowarzyszenie Edukacji Menedzerskiej "Forum" (Association of Managerial Education "Forum"), then Komisja Akredytacyjna Uczelni Medycznych (Accreditation Commission for Medical Universities), the biggest one Uniwersytecka Komisja Akredytacyjna (University Commission for Accreditation), Komisja Akredytacyjna Uczelni Technicznych (Accreditation Commission for Technical Universities), Komisja Akredytacyjna Uczelni Rolniczych (Accreditation Commission for Agricultural Universities) and Fundacja Promocji i Akredytacji Kierunków Ekonomicznych (Economic Polish Quality Standards). Over 10 years of functioning, Polish university accreditation units issued more than 400 certificates in total confirming the fulfillment of specific quality requirements. Similar amount of institutions has been verified by the State Commission of Accreditation within 2 years [1][2][3][4][5][6]. In the present situation, when all universities are subject to state accreditation, this is the university accreditation or/and ISO 9001 certificate, that gives the evidence for increased interest in education quality improvement. That is why the debate on quality in higher education is hardly expected to stop. It's worth mentioning, however, that some of the university accreditation commissions have not started their activities yet, what is strictly connected with the standards' definition made by State Commission of Accreditation. [7]. Perspectives concerning the development of accreditation system and education quality verification system will be certainly the subjects to further consideration. One of the perspectives is the identification of opportunities for using quality management system in higher education. The innovative approach to the management based on the philosophy of total quality management provides for continuous improvement of services and products. Transferring the philosophy to the academic platform gives the priority to the improvement of education quality in the university's strategy. Realization of this assumption requires application of efficient system solutions, and what is most important, locating the quality management in the university's management process. Total Quality Management is not a fad or fashion that will disappear next season. It is a revolutionary concept that is taking root and fundamentally altering the way organizations do business and are managed. We found out, that universities should be treated also like other business organizations. The Faculty of Commodity Science of Poznan University of Economics is the first organization in Polish higher education, which received the ISO 9001:2000 certificate. The aim of the Faculty is to achieve a high level of education quality. Based on this, the question has arisen: is the university accreditation system the only and sufficient solution that guarantees development of educational services quality at the Polish universities?

Accreditation and certification-similarities and differences

"Accreditation" term has been used as first in the American system and in some of the European countries means "acknowledgement" [8]. Another definition describes accreditation as a confirmation, that a specific object or method meets the determined quality criteria. Therefore accreditation is considered to be "a quality guarantee" for educational activity granted to a school by a reliable institution. It acknowledges specific programme as to be in compliance with relevant

standards assuring required education quality level [9]. In the present dissertation the accreditation is regarded as "an external unit's acknowledgement of a university's competencies for providing educational services studies at specific faculties"

"Certification" word originates from Latin "certificare" = sure, assure. The present article refers to a definition specified in the European Standard EN 45012, according to which the certification is "an action of third independent party, providing evidence for products', methods' and services' compliance with specific standards". For identification of similarities and differences between accreditation and certification in higher education, as well as for indication of possibilities of complementation of these two solutions, the following three aspects has to be taken into account:

- comparison of accreditation procedure and certification process confirmed with the requirements according to the international standard for quality management ISO 9001,
- description of mechanism of education quality improvement in the context of accreditation and certification procedure,
- presentation of accreditation standards in the light of process management.

The above-cited definitions indicate that both accreditation and certification are carried out by an independent body. Using terminology characteristic for quality management, accreditation can be easily compared to third party's audit. [10] Both accreditation procedure and certification process are focused on the verification of compliance with some requirements, which results in recognition or lack of recognition of competencies with respect to accreditation, and granting certificate or its refusal with respect to certification. The success of accreditation process is determined by accreditation standards specifying precisely the requirements with regard to a given educational programme. Certification consists in verification of conformance with the requirements defined in the international standard concerning quality management ISO 9001. The crucial element differentiating both procedures is the fact, that accreditation has been directed towards institutions of higher education only, while the certification in accordance with ISO 9001 standard is considered to be of a more universal nature. Accreditation is automatically associated with quality assurance at a university and ISO 9001 refers to quality management in organization of any kind. Requirements specified in the standard are universal and can be applied in any organization [11]. Accreditation is conducted by experts. Accreditation units are usually closely associated with the academic society. "The auditors" are people having direct connections to particular university and strong competencies for evaluation of a given faculty.

Improvement of educational services in the light of accreditation procedure and ISO 9001

The mechanism of continuous improvement in the framework of ISO 9001 consists in process management. Each objective when being formulated is a real challenge. Action taken up in order to reach the objectives can be described as continuous driving "Deming's circle" [12]. Goal achieved stops to be a challenge and starts to be an internal standard, marking at the same time the lower limit of our abilities [13]. According to the ISO 9000 standard, process can be defined as a "set of interrelated or interacting activities which transforms inputs into outputs" [14]. One of the tools for improvement of quality management system is internal audit; second one is the follow-up carried out by certification unit.

Standard has different meaning in the context of accreditation procedure. In Polish accreditation system standards refer to the requirements defined for educational programmes [15]. Fulfillment of specific requirements means meeting criteria imposing minimum level of quality of didactic process. It's rather worrisome, that such important element as performance improvement of an organization

(in terms of ISO 9001) has not many equivalents in the accreditation procedure. The reason for this can be lack of tools initiating improvement process of education quality such as: internal audits, follow-ups of certification units, preventive and corrective actions, students' expectations measurement and management's reviews, which are typical for quality management system.

Complementarity of accreditation and ISO 9001 in the quality improvement process in higher education-conclusion

Accreditation procedure based on accreditation standards assuring adequate quality level in higher education does not provide for mechanisms securing and improving reached quality level. Given the above, education quality level achieved through the fulfillment of relevant standards (e. g. granting university accreditation), doesn't have to be interpreted as a guarantee for its stability. On the other hand, quality management system according to ISO 9001 is very often identified as assuring the constancy of achieved quality level of products and services. Essential element determining the organization's driving power for "Deming's circle" is follow-up audit, which consists in continuous monitoring of an organization by certification unit. The follow-up determines application of other internal improvement tools (internal audit, management review, etc.). With respect to accreditation, the situation is different. University is left to itself, and the improvement process of educational services depends only on internal motivation factors. Time period between accreditation and reaccreditation oscillates between 3 and 7 years, depending on the accreditation unit. Accreditation unit is obliged to the repeated verification of abilities for fulfillment of accreditation standards.

Given the process approach included in the framework of ISO 9001:2000 standard as a basis of considerations, the possible solution might provide for the accreditation requirements to be regarded as an essential "input" to processes realized within quality management in conformance with the requirements according to ISO 9001 in higher education (Figure 2).

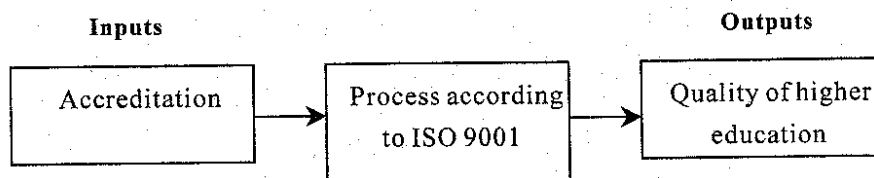


Figure 2. Accreditation and ISO 9001-complementarity

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- [4] <http://fundacja.edu.pl>
- [5] <http://kaut.agh.edu.pl>
- [6] <http://www.menis.gov.pl/pka/index.php>
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