An EFQM Excellence Model
for higher education quality assessment

Maziar Arjomandi
The University of Adelaide
maziar.arjomandi@adelaide.edu.au

Colin Kestell
The University of Adelaide
colin.kestell@adelaide.edu.au

Paul Grimshaw
The University of Adelaide
paul.grimshaw@adelaide.edu.au

Abstract: The long-term advancement in the higher education sector, where the universities have to conduct their activities in a more business-like fashion requires a permanent strive for excellence. On the other hand, there is still no consensus on how best to assess and manage quality within higher education institutions. The present article discusses the adaptation of a quality model based on the European Framework for Quality Management (EFQM) for systematic measurement of quality in higher education sector.

Introduction

The issue of quality management in higher education institutions has been on the agenda in many countries for many years. Different Quality Assurance (QA) models based on the Total Quality Management (TQM) philosophy have been implemented in various countries such as USA, UK, Malaysia and Japan (Kanji & Tambi, 1998; Kanji and Tambi, 1999; Barnard, 1999; Chua, 2004). The concept of TQM was firstly introduced in 1951 and since then has been known as one of the most effective strategies by different organisations (Zink & Vob, 2000). TQM was initially used for the measurement of quality in the higher education sector in 1993 (Clayton, 1993).

In 1998 the EFQM Excellence Model was established by 14 European large companies (Hides, et al., 2004) and was initially developed as a model to underpin the European Quality Award, called European Model for Business Excellence. However the last few years have seen increasing numbers of non-for-profit organisations using the model to improve their activities. Most European universities have implemented EFQM as the basis for the measurement of their activities (Steed, 2002; Tari, 2006; Boele, 2008; Spasos, at al., 2008).

The EFQM model, similar to other quality measures focuses on customer needs and quality attributes embraced by the customers. In this paper, the perception of quality in higher education by different group of customers is discussed. It is then followed by introduction of EFQM Excellence Model as the basis for adoption of a measure and self-assessment tool in higher education area.

Perception of quality in higher education

Chua (2004) interpreted the quality for higher education in terms of the Input-Process-Output (IPO) framework, derived from West, et. al. (2000)'s viewpoint of quality. 'Input' refers to the entry requirements, 'Process' to the teaching and learning process, and 'output' to the employability and academic standings.

Harvey and Green (1993) proposed a pathway consisted of five steps toward quality: Quality as exceptional, quality as perfection or consistency, quality as fitness for purpose, quality as value for money and quality as transformative. They advise that quality as transformative can incorporate the other dimensions to some extent and the first four steps are not the end products.

The preceding discussion illustrates that managing quality in higher education is very challenging due to lack of consensus on its definition. It is due to two reasons: firstly, quality has different meanings for different stakeholders and, secondly, the product of higher education has a very complicated nature. Becket and Brookes (2008) identified the ambiguity in the definition of quality in higher education and the need for quality assurance for the fundamental gaps in the adaptation of any quality model.

Despite different definition for the quality in higher education, the fundamental idea of quality assurance is known and that quality is a concept that should be owned by every single individual. Quality assurance refers to the planned and systematic actions necessary to provide adequate confidence that a product or service will satisfy given requirements for quality (Borahan and Ziarati, 2002).

One of the hardships in understanding the concept of quality in higher education is related to customer satisfaction. Customers refer to all people purchasing products and services directly or indirectly. Customers of higher education include its students, actual and potential employers of its graduates, funding institutions and research fellows (Zink and Vob, 2000). Most of the time, these multilateral groups of customers are hardly accessible or agreeable. Also the satisfaction surveys with employers often pose considerable methodical challenges.

Nevertheless, despite debate surrounding the concept of quality and customer satisfaction, current international competition and national benefits of advancement in higher education impose higher education to define a measure for performance assessment and a model for self-evaluation. For a simplification of the process, universities may be evaluated in the three major areas of teaching, research and services (Tari, 2006). In teaching, the customers are students, their parents and future employers. The quality of the education can be assessed by the unemployment rate as well as the satisfaction of the students, their parents and the employers. In research, the customers are industries, funding institutions and research communities. The measure of quality in this aspect is research income and the publication rate of the universities. In service, the customer is the general public that seek the quality of higher education to its influence its prosperity and advancement of community.

The preceding discussion shows that the dominating factor in higher education quality is mainly the quality of process. Reinecke (2006) claimed that the expectations for quality improvement need to be "sold" to staff members and they should be made aware that quality is not an additional task. A model based on TQM requires the Quality Control (QC) to be implemented during the whole period of development of the process, including task definition, design, manufacturing and implementation, inferring that such models are appropriate for the assessment of higher education.

Adaptation of EFQM Excellence Model

The EFQM Excellence Model is a non-prescriptive TQM framework based on nine criteria. Five of them are 'Enablers' covering what an organisation does and four of them are 'Results' caused by 'Enablers' and the feedback from 'Results' help to improve the 'Enablers' (see Figure 1). The EFQM excellence model is based on the assumption that excellence is achieved through leadership driving policy and strategy, that is delivered through people, partnership and resources, and processes (Oakland, 2003).

The fundamental concepts which underpin the EFQM Excellence Model are: Results Orientation, Customer Focus, Leadership and Constancy of Purpose, Management by Processes and Facts, People Development and Involvement, Continuous Learning, Innovation and Improvement, Partnership Development, and Corporate Social Responsibility.
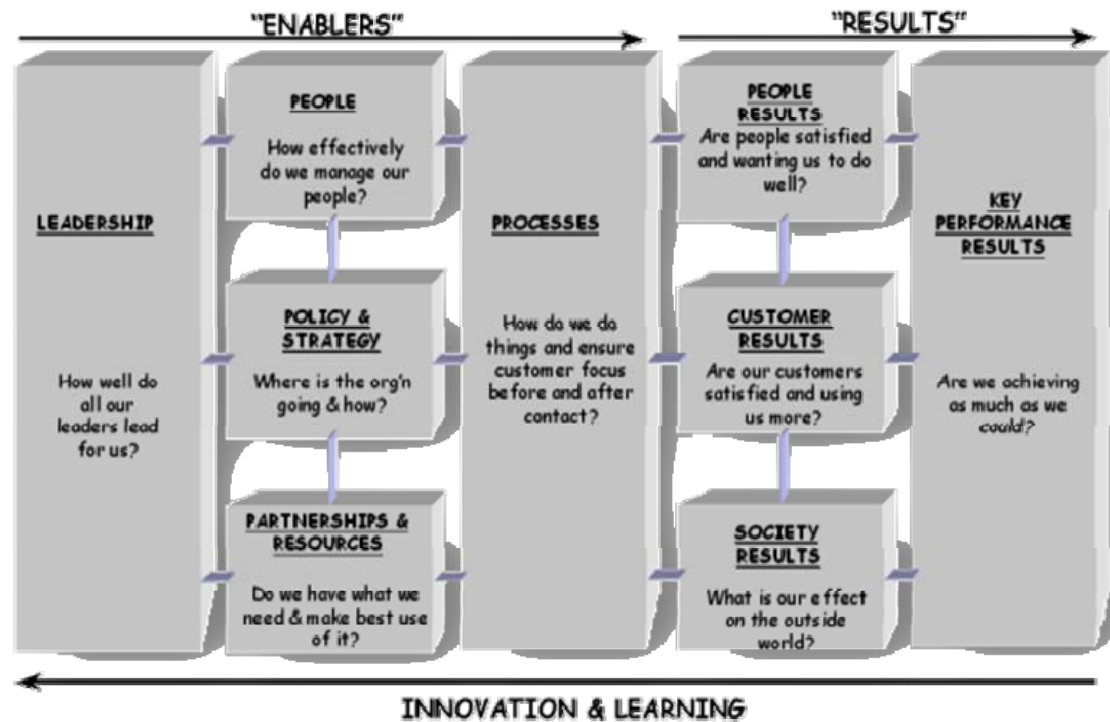
Figure 1: The EFQM Excellence Model (D & D Excellence, 2009)

Currently, the EFQM Excellence Model is used by many organisations as a self-assessment and planning tool. In this context it is used to find out where they are, where they want to go and what to improve, and how to get there. The model helps to identify the strengths and areas for improvement and also the actions that need to be taken toward the objective.

The Model suggests using the RADAR Scoring Matrix as a tool for measurement. RADAR stands for **R**esults as the organisation achievements, **A**pproach as the plans and policies, **D**eployment as the extent to which the approaches are implemented, and **A**ssessment & **R**eview covering what an organisation does to assess and review both the approach and deployment of approach.

The adaptation of EFQM Excellence Model for higher education has been commenced since the establishment of the business version of the model. It has been successfully used by several universities across Europe and Asia, despite the fact that more research about the definition of the 'quality' and 'customer' is suggested (Spasos et al., 2008, and Chua, 2004). The excellence in the higher education in the EFQM Model is not limited to traditional measure of profit/loss but encompasses the areas such as leadership, people management and satisfaction. Hides et al. (2004) summarised the responses to the question of what the excellence is in the higher education as:

- achieving mission/vision;
- achieving/exceeding benchmarks and internal measures;
- best practice;
- community agreement;
- cost-effective;
- customer/stakeholder satisfaction;
- dissemination of good practice nationally and internationally;
- learning outcomes;
- making optimal use of all resources - financial, human, assets;

- match between desired and actual perception;

- positive atmosphere in staff and student environments - integration in teaching and research;

- quality of teaching and learning;

- relative to starting point - achieving targets;

Despite many successful stories about the implementation of an EFQM based model, not all researchers support the idea of adaptation of an excellence model based on TQM/EFQM for higher education. Becket and Brooks (2009) claimed that despite the benefits of TQM, there was a need to find a better approach for measurement of the quality due to the fact that an adopted industrial model failed to address the learning experience of a diverse student body.

Vroeijenstijn (2001) presents the following reasons for difficulty of adapting an EFQM model for higher education:

- A higher education institute is not a firm and does not produce graduates.

- Not clear what the product is.

- Who is the client of higher education?

- It is not a hierarchical organisation.

- The Excellence model can be used to analyse the management but not to assess the quality.

- The concept of quality is very complicated.

- The control of the quality has different accountability.

Despite the fact that EFQM model was not designed for the need of higher education, there are numerous recent evidences of its implementation in higher education sector (Beket, 2008, Bole, 2008, Borahan 2002 & Clayton 1993). Most universities are non-for-profit organisations however their relationships with the stakeholders in the main areas of their activities are formed based on profit. Even the measure of their research activities such as quality and number of scientific articles is assessed by the amount of grant income that the publications are lead to.

The core activities of the higher education are: research, education and service. An Excellence Model can be used for assessment the quality of these activities in two phases: Process quality and product quality. Figure 2 demonstrate the input-process-output framework of quality classification for the three main activities of the higher education.
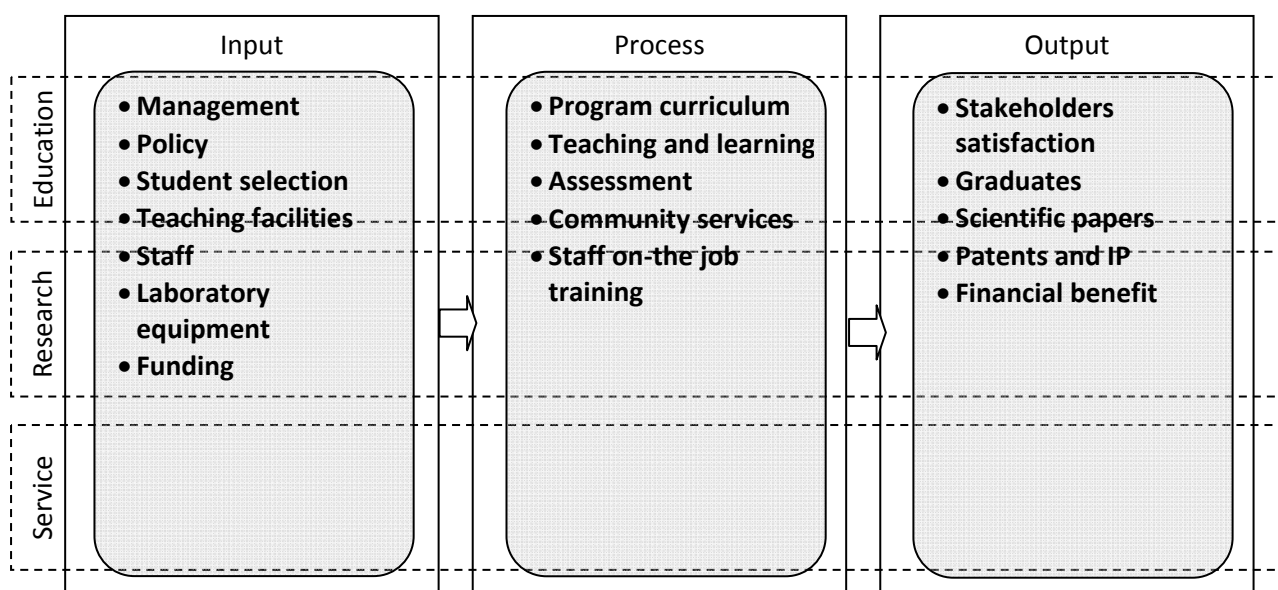

Figure 2: The input-Process-Output framework of quality in higher education

Every quality measure has to start looking at the formulated mission statement and agreed goals and aims. The mission statement encompasses the inputs, processes and outputs. The variety of the business of higher education requires a well-defined mission statement satisfying different stakeholders. It explains the direct effect and the level of management involvement in the achievement of the set level of quality requirements. The EFQM uses different tools to assess the quality of management and policies defining the management relationships with the staff and stakeholders.

From the point of view of quality assurance the management can be defined as a tool required by leadership to cope with the complex changes (Davis et al. 2001). EFQM Excellence Model provides a strong tool to help leadership to drive change. The EFQM self-assessment ability which focuses on 'strengths' not 'scores' and 'area of improvements' not 'weaknesses' provides such a toll for improvement.

Several universities used the 'Leadership subcriteria' as the entry point for self-assessment (Stepanov & Azaryeva, 2005 & Vroeijenstijn 2001). They used 'the goals' as the main criteria for assessment of management:

- The institution has clearly formulated goals.

- The goals express clearly the purpose to achieve.

- The goals have been formulated in consultancy with all stakeholders.

- The goals are well known to all.

- Institutional planning and decision making are guided by the goals.

- The institution reconsiders the goal regularly.

- The goals show the profile of the institution.

- The goals are translated in measurable goals and objectives.

- The goals and objectives are translated in clear policy plan.

It is required that every higher education institution defines its mission so that it can cover the core activities of the university. The concept of graduate attributes is one way of defining the university objectives in an educational focused business. It explains the relationship between the organisation and education related stakeholders like students, their parents, future employers and staff and guarantees the level of their satisfaction. Most of the time the other core activities which are research and service to community do not have a clearly defined objectives that can satisfy all the stakeholders. On the other hand, as the core business of the universities are strongly linked, the goals should be defined such the achievement of one and required policies do not conflict with the others.

Conclusion

This paper has presented a discussion on the requirement of using a model of quality assessment for higher education in universities. In an increasingly competitive market place, amidst limited funding opportunities, twenty-first century universities need to conduct their activities in a more business-like manner with the implementation of an EFQM Excellence Model as an appropriate quality assurance mechanism. The EFQM focuses on mission definition, leadership and the processes which are shared between the core activities of higher education. Conversely, the core activities of the universities are all intertwined and so the implementation of such policies and methods will guarantee the quality in all aspects of its activities.

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