

A Study on Quality Assurance Activities in Higher Education in North Cyprus

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at examining the current internal quality assurance processes in higher education institutions in North Cyprus. The qualitative study showed that there are serious efforts in the area of quality assurance. Yet there are some problems in the process of planning and implementation. Limited strategic planning activities, lack of staff participation, limited infrastructure and financial support, the political situation of North Cyprus impeded the quality assurance processes. The study also showed that teaching, learning processes and sources are not given enough consideration and therefore needed improvement.

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Introduction

Globalization has a significant impact on socio-cultural spheres in the 21st century (Gidley et al, 2010). In the process of globalization the interaction between cultures and societies with the help of information and communication technologies caters mobility among them. Therefore, in this competitive global world the notion of quality becomes an important issue. Higher education is one of the areas that needs certain standards to assure quality. In order to adapt to the developments of the global world, higher education institutions should be prepared to meet the contemporary challenges (Erçetin, 2006). Quality assurance systems, which are one of the reform efforts generated in the Bologna Declaration in June 1999, are mainly concerned with giving autonomy to universities, which in return demands for accountability. Quality assurance system is aimed to assist universities to adapt to change as societies demanded by using their own measures of quality assurance (Massaro, 2010).

The Bologna Declaration was signed by ministers responsible for higher education in 29 European countries (EAC, 2009) and has the main goal of promoting an international European higher education system that will acquire a world-wide degree of attraction (EHEA, 2009). In the Bologna Declaration the ministers agreed on the following issues: Adopt a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, implement a system based essentially on two main cycles, establish a system of credits, support the mobility of students, teachers and researchers, promote European cooperation in quality assurance, promote the European dimension in higher education (EHEA, 2009).

The studies on developing quality assurance systems in higher education started before the Bologna Declaration, in January, 1998. With the establishment of ENQA (European Network for Quality Assurance) these studies in the following years have gathered pace. In the report published by ENQA the standards

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were stated in three parts that cover internal quality assurance of higher education institutions, external assurance of higher education, and quality assurance of external quality assurance agencies (ENQA, 2005). The internal quality assurance guidelines are concerned with policy and procedures for quality assurance, approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards, assessment of students, quality assurance of teaching staff, learning resources and student support, information systems and public information. The external quality assurance guidelines cover use of internal quality assurance procedures, development of external quality assurance processes, criteria for decisions, processes fit for purpose, reporting, follow-up procedures, periodic reviews and system-wide analyses. The external quality assurance of agencies supervise the effectiveness of the external quality assurance processes. These agencies should have legal basis and comply with the requirements of the legislative jurisdictions (ENQA, 2005).

In Turkey there are 54 private and 102 public universities. Turkey received a candidate status for European Union in 1999. Therefore, for the integration to the EU the Turkish government has accepted the criteria of the Bologna Declaration (Süngü and Bayrakçı, 2010). In 2005, within the context of the quality assurance activities, the Interuniversity Council (ÜAK) has established a new commission called Commission of Academic Assessment & Improvement in Higher Education (YÖDEK) in order to develop internal and external quality assurance systems for higher education institutions in Turkey. The commission has the aim to evaluate and improve all the activities related to education, instruction and research (Süngü and Bayrakçı, 2010).

According to the Bologna Process National Reports on Turkey in 2007-2009, concerning internal quality assurance in higher education institutions, most of the Higher Education Institutions (HEI) have published a strategy for the continuous enhancement of quality. They also have arrangements in place for the internal approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards. Some HEI's have described their programmes in terms of learning outcomes. Student assessments at most of HEI's are designed to measure the achievement of the intended learning outcomes applied in a consistent way. Most of HEIs publish up to date, impartial and objective information about the programmes and awards offered. With regard to the development of external quality assurance system the external quality assurance system operate at a national level and cover all higher education in Turkey. Self-assessment report, external review, publication of results and follow-up procedures are all included in the external quality assurance system. Yet a peer review of the national agencies according to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance has not already taken place ((Bologna Process. National Reports: 2007-2008).

Cyprus is an island which is divided into two political parts, as North and South. South Cyprus joined the EU in 2004 as the Republic of Cyprus. The whole island is considered to be part of the EU. Yet EU legislation is suspended in North Cyprus (Silman and Caglar, 2010). South Cyprus as a member of the EU is involved in the quality assurance activities to improve higher education institutions. In September 2007 the Cyprus Agency of Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Education was established to assure the quality of higher education in the "Republic of Cyprus" (South Cyprus). The agency has the authority for evaluation of the state universities, evaluation and accreditation of the private universities, the recognition of higher education qualifications, publication of the list of all the recognized institutions of higher education operating in the Republic of Cyprus and to provide advise to the Minister of Education and Culture on all matters related to all matters under its jurisdiction (Cyprus Ministry of Education and Culture, 2011).

According to the Bologna Process National Reports on Cyprus in 2007-2009, there has been some efforts on the national implementation of the standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). For internal quality assurance most of the higher education institutions published a strategy for the enhancement of quality and made arrangements for monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards higher education institutions also published up to date, impartial and objective information about the programmes and awards offered. For the external quality assurance South Cyprus established two independent bodies, The Council of Educational Evaluation-Accreditation and The Evaluation Committee of Private Universities which aim at the external evaluation and accreditation of the private universities and institutions (Bologna Process. National Reports: 2007-2008).

North Cyprus is not part of the European Union. Yet, for a possible political agreement between North and South Cyprus, and integration to the EU, there are quality assurance activities in higher education

institutions in North Cyprus. There are six universities, which operate separately from one another with limited co-operation and collaboration, in North Cyprus. The standards of the qualifications awarded by these universities are regulated by the state of by YÖDAK (The Accreditation Council of Higher Education). A quality assurance system was proposed and planned to be implemented over a period of five to six years. YÖDAK's role in this process would be establishing a framework to describe the purposes and processes necessary for quality assurance and standards (Williams, 2010). Currently, in North Cyprus there are some internal quality assurance activities undertaken under the supervision of YÖDAK, but no external quality assurance efforts yet. The aim of this research is to examine the current internal quality assurance activities in Higher Education Institutions guided by YÖDAK in North Cyprus.

Method

Data Analysis Procedures

In this study, qualitative research method was used. Content analysis was used to determine where the greatest emphasis was placed in the data. The following subquestions have guided the study:

1. What is the current situation of internal quality assurance activities undertaken at the universities in North Cyprus from the views of the Bologna Committee members?
2. What are the common problems experienced in the implementation process of these activities from the views of the Bologna Committee members?
3. What are the ways of solving these problems from the views of the Bologna Committee members?

Study Group

The participants of the study comprised 5 Faculty members of the Bologna Committee established by YÖDAK, who are actively involved in the planning and the supervision of the quality assurance activities. There are 6 members in the committee. Each member is a representative of the 6 universities in North Cyprus. All six members are faculty staff of different faculties of the six universities. They are all professors. Three of the members are male and two of them are female. One member did not volunteer to participate in the study.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview schedule has 10 questions related to internal quality assurance activities and participants' recommendations on how to improve these activities. The interview schedule was reviewed by two experts experienced in qualitative studies, from the Department of Educational Sciences at a private university in North Cyprus. The draft interview schedule was later piloted with two faculty members who were previously involved in Bologna studies. The interview questions were based on the internal quality assurance guidelines. Two of the sample questions in the schedule are as follows:

1. What are your general opinions about the current internal quality assurance activities undertaken at the universities in North Cyprus?

Probe: Are there independent agencies which supervise these activities?

Probe: Are there Strategic Planning activities at the universities?

2. Are there problems in the process of the implementation of these activities? If yes? What kind of problems have you witnessed?

The interviews took on average 30-40 minutes. The interview schedule was reviewed by two experts, who are experienced in qualitative research studies and knowledgeable on the internal quality assurance

activities, from the Department of Educational Studies. The interviews were tape-recorded by the researchers and transcribed verbatim. Content analysis technique was used to determine where the greatest emphasis was found in the collected data (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). Coding categories emerged after the review of the relevant literature. After the review of the interview schedule new categories emerged. The coding was revised upon the feedback of the qualitative research experts.

Results

The results of the analysis have been organized around eight main themes as follows: General views on quality assurance activities in North Cyprus, policies and procedures for quality assurance, assessment of students, monitoring and periodic review of programmes, teaching and learning processes and sources, information systems, public information and how to improve quality assurance activities.

General Views on Quality Assurance Activities in North Cyprus

In the interviews the researchers asked the interviewees to give their views on quality assurance activities and state the problems faced in the planning and implementation process of these activities. All the participants believe that these activities, which are organized by YÖDAK, continue in a harmonious way in parallel with the Bologna process. They implied that YÖDAK enhanced its knowledge on the issue of quality assurance systems. One participant emphasised that North Cyprus with the help of these quality assurance activities managed to break the embargo in the higher education area. Therefore these activities are very important for the quality and the accreditation of the universities in North Cyprus. All the participants stated that there are limited strategic planning activities in universities, which are necessary for the continuous enhancement of quality. In addition, they said that there are no independent agencies to monitor these activities. The participants stated different problems faced in the planning and implementation process of the quality assurance activities. These problems are as follows: reluctance of the university staff to do extra work, limited infrastructure and administrative support, the administrators' lack of determination and devotion, lack of expertise, participation, and contribution. One participant mentioned the political and governmental aspects of the problems: worries about future, ambiguous higher education policies, limited budget, political problems of the country, the negative image of the country, unrecognition of North Cyprus and not being part of the Bologna process.

Policies and Procedures for Quality Assurance

In response to the question on policies and procedures for quality assurance, the participants gave different answers. One participant implied that YÖDAK has prepared a regulation for quality assurance activities. Yet administrative structures in line with the new regulation have not been upgraded in the universities of North Cyprus. One participant stated that YÖDAK has started working on policies and procedures. He added that except one university, the other five universities have not initiated internal quality assurance activities. One participant also mentioned that YÖDAK has taken a serious step for these activities. Yet due to the political problems, limited budget and ambiguous higher education policies these activities could not be implemented effectively. One participant emphasised that policies should be given the priority. According to him procedures could come after the policies spontaneously.

Assessment of Students

In response to the issue of student assessment one participant said "we should look at universities separately. There should be by-laws and regulations related to student enrolment requirements and student evaluations. Curriculum should include objectives and learning outcomes." One participant said that limited student numbers encouraged the universities to attract students from African and Turkic countries. Therefore these universities could not give enough attention to setting new criteria, rules and procedures for student assessment. One participant said that there are limited student assessment procedures but need to be developed. One participant implied that the student assessment procedures are not suitable for European Quality Assurance standards. One participant said that in one university there are

new regulations in the syllabus design in line with the European Quality Standards and ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) activities. He added that in this university there are attempts to issue Diploma Supplement in line with the European Credit Transfer Accumulation System.

Monitoring and Periodic Review of Programmes

Three of the participants implied that there are limited monitoring and periodic review of programmes handled by YÖDAK. Two participants said that there is no any monitoring and review system and therefore should be developed. One participant believed that monitoring and periodic review of programmes have not started yet. According to him universities have anxiety about this issue because of the lack of a monitoring and review system. One participant said that various memberships were obtained from European institutions and universities. For diploma Supplement and student/academic exchange programmes our universities have better performance in monitoring and periodic review of programmes than student assessment. One participant implied that there are internal quality assurance activities in one university in North Cyprus. Therefore monitoring and periodic review of programmes by YÖDAK will be applied to this universi

Teaching, Learning Processes and Sources

Almost all the participants implied that teaching and learning processes in universities are not given enough importance. They all suggested that these processes should be improved. One participant said that academic staff should be evaluated independent from the academic promotion criteria. The academic staff should be elevated to the level required by the European Quality Standards. They should be able to teach effectively and involved in research studies. One participant said that academic staff teaching in Social Sciences should publish articles in the SSCI (Social Science Citation Index) journals. They should also work towards promotion in the academic ladder which would help them improve their knowledge. One participant said that there are too much work to be done in the area of performance development, staff selection and training. One participant mentioned that teaching and learning processes should be improved especially for the accreditation of the universities in North Cyprus.

In response to the issue of teaching and learning sources one participant suggested that instruction methods, programs and course contents should be improved. One participant implied that the working hours of the academic personnel should be reduced. Two participants suggested that learning sources should be improved. One participant implied that the infrastructure of the universities are inadequate for the implementation of the teaching and learning processes. Wei-ping and Shuo (2010) in their article titled "Development on Quality Assurance of Teaching and Learning discuss the quality assurance efforts in a university in China. The authors discuss the two recent efforts in teaching and learning and put forward the general principles for quality assurance, namely project approach, assignment of responsibility and reporting. Project approach aims to prevent the teaching activities from becoming a repetitive routine. The assignment of responsibility implies assigning the responsibility for following the routines to the individual course coordinators and to the management of the study program. This will ease the implementation and follow up of the curriculum and semester plans. Reporting aims to generate reports showing whether the quality assurance has been performed in accordance with the requirements in the system. The universities in North Cyprus can benefit from these applications and adapt them to their quality assurance system.

Information Systems

Two participants implied that our universities have adequate communication systems. Yet, they do not know how to use them. One participant added that there are enough information and data in the universities, but analysis and development of these information and data are not sufficient. According to another participant every university has the necessary information about students, academic staff, accounting etc. These universities manage to preserve these information. Yet they are not capable enough of using these information to build strategies and make decisions. One participant mentioned that " the

analysis of the issues such as alumni information system, surveys, communication with the industry-businesses, which are the important components of the quality circle are not in an adequate level. Therefore, each university should be involved in systematic work to improve these components." One participant suggested that our universities will function more effectively in utilizing their information systems if the problems of the political worries and recognition are solved. The participant added that if the academic staff can get permanent appointment to the universities, more firm steps can be taken for the development and the implementation of the educational policies.

Public Information

When the participants were asked to what extent the universities inform the public about the quality assurance activities, they all implied that universities provide enough information about these activities through the media (newspapers, radio, TV) and the web sites. Yet some participants implied that each university acts independently and that there is no any unity of purpose among these universities. One participant said that universities need to improve their transparency and accountability for the public. One participant mentioned that universities inform the public through their own newspapers and brochures, yet government also needs to make policies for publicity. One participant added that universities should give genuine information about their degress and quality of education. The international memberships are not the indicators of quality.

Suggestions on How to Improve Quality Assurance Activities

When the participants were asked to make suggestions on how to improve quality assurance activities, one partipant mentioned the following:

The significance of quality assurance should be explained to the owners of the universities and the administrators by YÖDAK: All the universities should comprehend that accreditation is very important and quality assurance actitives cannot be avoided, if they want to increase the number of their students. Quality assurance activities are vital for the institutionalization of the universities and competetion with other universities in the world. Yet new regulations are needed for quality assurance. The quality assurance activities and their implementations in Turkey and other European countries should be studied and adapted to our own universities.

One participant said that universities and other goverment institutions should understand the significance and the necessity of the quality assurance activities. Therefore these institutions should meet on a common ground for decision-making and implementation processes. Two participants implied that the government should also provide spritual and material support for these activities. One participant added that quality assurance activities should be organized around European Standards and Guidelines. Action plans should be made for the implementation of the critera mentioned in European Standards and Guidelines. One participant also suggested that benchmarking should be used to study the best practices of other developed countries in the area of quality assurance and how to adapt them to our country. State policies should be determined and firm steps should taken in solving the problems of image and trust. Answers should be sought to the question of how decline in the number of students can be solved. She added that people involved in the decision-making process should improve their vision and creativity. In addition, permanent staff system should be brought.

Discussion

The results of the study explored that due to the political situation in North Cyprus these activities are very important for the accreditation of the universities by the European Union and the enhancement of the quality in higher education. There are serious efforts in the area of quality assurance. Yet the study showed that there are problems in the process of planning and implementation. These problems are limited strategic planning activities, lack of staff participation, limited infrastructure and financial support, and the political situation of North Cyprus. The ambiguity in higher education policies impeded the quality assurance efforts.

The universities did not have new criteria, rules and procedures for student assessment procedures compatible with the European Quality Assurance standards. The universities do not have monitoring and periodic review of programmes although in some universities there are internal quality assurance activities.

The study also revealed that teaching, learning processes and sources are not given enough attention and therefore should be improved for the accreditation of the universities. Although universities have adequate information systems, they still cannot manage to analyse, use and develop the obtained information and use information to build strategies and make decisions. Concerning the learning processes, Akalpler (2009) in his study "The impact of the e-learning in the light of the EU's higher education program and accreditation processes in North Cyprus Higher Education" found out that e-learning in European standards has not been adopted into higher education in North Cyprus. The interviewees mentioned the following reasons for the reluctance of the universities to update their e-learning processes in line with the European standards: thinking that this adaptation is not necessary, there is no change tradition, there are no any e-learning courses in the universities, there is no existing accreditation agency for e-learning in North Cyprus and that only the Bologna process will create the need for accreditation.

The participants of our study suggested that new regulations are needed for quality assurance activities and their implementation. Turkey and other European countries should be benchmarked for their best practices and adapted to the universities in North Cyprus. There should be cooperation and collaboration between universities for decision-making and implementation processes. State policies should be made in order to take firm steps in solving problems related to quality assurance activities.

All the problems mentioned by the participants may stem from their mistrust to the solution of the political problem in Cyprus. Because the EU legislation does not apply to North Cyprus, the country is not yet part of the Bologna process. In case of a political solution, there are efforts to set certain standards and criteria in higher education compatible with the European standards. Yet over-emphasizing the lack of participation and enthusiasm, and insufficient administrative and governmental support for these activities create an impression that the participants are not very hopeful of the political solution between North and South Cyprus.

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