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Perceptions of education quality in the context of the Bologna process in a regional university

This article considers perceptions of quality in higher education (HE). This work examines the academic staff perceptions of how education quality is affected by the engagement of the country's HE in the Bologna Process; particular attention is paid to a regional university. The study was conducted to understand academic staff perception of education quality in relation to Kazakhstani integration into European higher education area (EHEA). The article provides an analysis of the interviews with academic staff at a regional university in order to learn about the realisation process and the challenges faced by the university due to its accession to the Bologna Process and how the process affects the overall quality of HE. The perceptions of academic staff on HE quality and the extent to which the quality of HE has changed with the engagement in the new system are analysed.

Keywords: higher education, education quality, Bologna process, internationalisation, stakeholders.

Introduction

Higher education is one of the primary policy responsibilities of a country. However, in a rapidly changing educational sphere national higher education (HE) is increasingly affected by international pressures. Kazakhstan, as a central Asian country, is going through a period of rapid and far-reaching economic and social change, driven particularly by the impact of globalisation, internationalisation, increased economic competition and the transition to a knowledge-based economy [1]. These forces are leading to national education policy changes. For example, the HE sector in Kazakhstan has been significantly influenced by the European policy development known as the Bologna Declaration. Education of a high quality can help to strengthen a country's social stability as well as to improve human potential and its competitiveness [2], which can be considered as one of the aims of the Bologna Process. Kazakhstan's education sector was also prioritised as part of a national strategy of competitiveness. The concept of competitiveness is measured by the World Economic Forum's (WEF) Global Competitiveness Index, which is based on twelve 'pillars'. One pillar specifically relates to HE and training, covering quantity and quality of education [3].

The Ministry of Education and Science of the RK (MoES) has also made steps towards the realization of an ambitious competitiveness strategy by improving HE quality and providing a highly qualified workforce to aid the country's prosperity. In the World Conference on Higher Education Partners it was stated that, 'at no time in human history was the welfare of nations so closely linked to the quality and outreach of their HE systems and institutions' [4:1].

Main part

Since its transition to a market economy, Kazakhstani HE has undergone several significant changes. To increase HE quality with an aim to becoming a competitive country in the international arena, Kazakhstan took steps to join the Bologna Process (BP). First, the 1999 Education Law was changed. The new 2007 Education Law then brought in some market-orientated reforms that reflected the country's new social and economic demands. Second, in accordance with the new Education Law it was necessary to implement three-cycle degrees: Bachelors, Masters and PhD, which was a step towards becoming part of the BP. Brooks and Huisman state that the BP is '...an intergovernmental policy agenda supported by forty-six national governments, even beyond the geographical European borders' [5]. According to the European Commission, the aim of the BP is the creation of a 'European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in which students can choose from a wide and transparent range of high quality courses and benefit from smooth recognition procedures' [6]. The main objectives of the BP are: adoption comparable three-cycle degrees, establishment of a system of credits, such as the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), and promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance [7].

In the field of education, interest in quality is explained by the need for the improvement of education [8], and demands for greater efficiency [9]. Since it is an important issue, there is a necessity to know what exactly the term 'quality' implies. Fraser [10], however, claims that there is no agreed worldwide definition of this concept. The concept of 'quality', as stated by Harvey and Green [11], can mean different things to different people. Therefore, perceiving the concept differently gives rise to confusion, which makes quality an elusive concept [12].

Various scholars have focused on definitions of quality, particularly in the context of HE. For example, Watty [13] identifies two schools of thought on quality: the first related to context and the second related to stakeholders. Chua [14], for example, proposes another way of defining the quality of HE, also using various stakeholders in the education process, where quality is related to input, process and output (Fig. 1). According to Chua's findings, academic staff perception of quality is wider, believing that, to acquire high quality, HEIs should focus on all three aspects of activities: input, process and output.

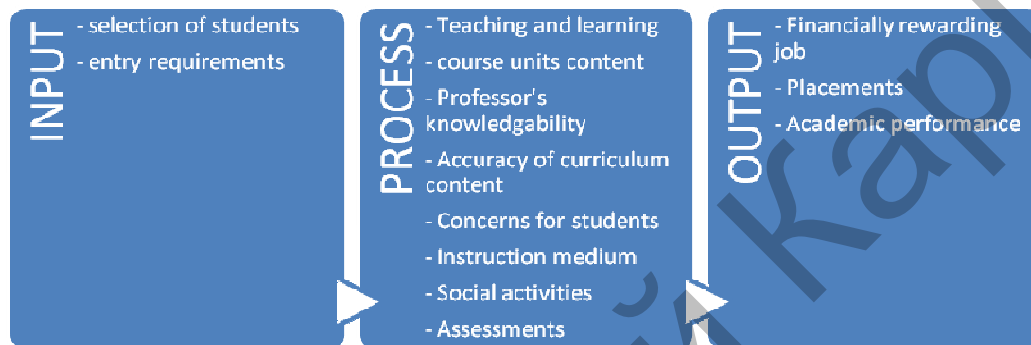


Figure 1. The Input — Process — Output framework of quality by Chua (2004)

An approach to differentiating quality was given by Hawes and Stephens [8], where quality can imply 'efficiency in meeting set goals', 'relevance to human and environmental needs and conditions', and 'something more', in relation to the pursuit of excellence and human betterment (ibid: 11) (for full models see Fig. 2). Although, the approach is built on defining quality in primary education, it could be claimed that the approach also has relevance to HE and could be applied in the analysis of the current study.



Figure 2. Quality framework by Hawes and Stephens (1990)

Harvey and Green [11] provide a useful framework by analysing quality into five different but inter-connected categories, namely: exception, linked to the idea of ‘excellence’; perfection or consistency, which focuses on process and the set specifications it aims to meet; fitness for purpose, which judges quality in terms of meeting stated purpose; value for money, which assesses quality in terms of return on investment or expenditure; and transformative, indicates a process of fundamental change (for full model see Fig. 3).



Figure 3. Quality framework by Harvey and Green (1993)

The above-mentioned five categories of quality have been employed as a framework for research on stakeholders' perceptions of quality in HE by a number of researchers, including Lomas [15] and Lagrosen et al. [16]. Lomas's research study was on UK universities of senior managers' perceptions of quality on the basis of Harvey and Green's model, which is also applicable to the current study. Lomas in his small-scale research found that 'fitness for purpose' and 'transformation' is the two most appropriate definitions of quality in the context of HE. Lagrosen et al.'s analysis of quality dimensions concluded that the notion of 'excellence' best matches the students' view of quality. Another research study on perception of quality by teachers and students was done by Iacovidou et al. [17], who identified seven dimensions of quality, in which the most important are teaching and learning facilities. These dimensions also include library resources, computers, laboratories; competence of the lecturers and students; and teaching and learning processes.

A number of researchers, such as Harvey and Green, Harvey and Knight [18], Cullen et al. [19] tend to agree that quality can be defined by seeking the views of those who are stakeholders in the educational process. For instance, Harvey and Green [11; 10] claim that the best answer to a complex question is by analysing it from different perspectives, as quality might mean 'different things to different people'. They also contend that 'this is not a different perspective on the same thing but different perspectives on different things with the same label'. For example, they argue that the notion of quality can vary between particular participants in a process: university, students, academic staff, employers, auditors or the government. Taking into consideration the 'stakeholder approach' by Harvey and Green [11; 10], the stakeholders of HE need to be clarified. For example, Srikanthan and Dalrymple [20] present the four main stakeholders: (1) providers, which comprise funding bodies and the community at large; (2) users of products, which comprise current and prospective students; (3) users of outputs or employers; and (4) employees of the sector, who are the

academics and administrators. Hewit and Clayton [21] similarly identify groups of HE stakeholders, such as government and its agencies, university officials, employers, staff, and students.

A group of researchers [22] divided HE stakeholders into two kinds: internal and external. External stakeholders include employers, the government, and partners with whom HEIs cooperate. Internal stakeholders consist of academic and management staff of HEIs, and students [22]. These stakeholders take an active part in the process of education. Westerheijden [23] claims that valid definitions of quality should be closely related to a specific HE process. This study will therefore refer to the perception of HE quality based on the perceptions internal stakeholders, of academic staff, at a regional university.

The work provides an analysis of the interviews with academic staff at 3 levels at PSU in order to learn about the realisation process and the challenges faced by the university due to its accession to the Bologna Process and how the process affects the overall quality of HE. The study answers the following research question: What does HE quality mean in the Kazakhstani context, how is quality affected by the stakeholders' differing approaches to defining the concept, and what is the effect on HE quality of joining the Bologna Process?

Representatives of the administration level identify quality in teaching and learning facilities and competency of the lecturers as the most important dimensions of quality. In addition, one of the respondents stated that HE quality can be understood as having graduates equipped with the professional skills and knowledge that are required and can be put into practice after graduation.

The PSU administration staff's view of quality is consistent with the findings by Iacovidou et al. [17], who found that academic staff perception of quality is closely related to the institution's teaching and learning facilities and the competency of lectures and students. Two ideas from the literature review might be relevant here: the 'exceptional' approach by Harvey and Green, which focuses on exceeding high standards by equipping HEIs with the most up-to date facilities, and 'quality as standards of efficiency' [8; 12], which identifies efficiency as 'having the right tools for the job', including teaching facilities and library resources, and making the best use of the resources available.

On the question of how the quality of education changed with Kazakhstan's engagement in the Bologna Process, there are some conflicting opinions. One of the respondents commented that there are no fundamental changes. Another interviewee stated that only positive changes were occurring. The third interviewee's response was:

«It is too early to talk about changes in education quality; on the one hand, it can be claimed that there are positive changes, but, on the other hand, we are facing challenges due to transformations and it is hoped that the process will lead to the improvement of education quality, not otherwise».

When asked about the relevance of HE in Kazakhstan and especially at PSU to global demands, the respondents' answers were that the country is in the process of improving education quality, and that becoming a member of the Bologna Process could facilitate this improvement.

Heads of the faculties perceptions of quality were that it includes complex characteristics of education services. Answers from both participants were linked to the consumers of education. One of the respondents commented:

«Quality in the context of HE is compound characteristics of educational services, which should correspond to the expectations of consumers and compulsory norms demanded by society».

In addition, HE quality should include competences such as professional — being able to use knowledge in practice; social — an ability to socialise with different people in various situations by taking into account their culture and customs and beliefs; and communicational — an ability to communicate.

Another response was: «Quality in HE is the level of correspondence of a given qualification of graduates to the requirements expected of the participants in the educational process. Quality includes quality of educational programmes, methods of teaching and the competitiveness of graduates in the world employment market».

In addition, from the heads of the faculties' point of view, factors such as the process of educational organisation, level of teaching and teacher competences, systematised students' examination and assessment and library resources with computer facilities can affect HE quality. They believe that all the above-mentioned dimensions should be in place to provide education of high quality.

Surprisingly, the findings from the heads of faculties concerning important factors in education quality are similar to those of the administration level, which corroborates the findings of Iacovidou et al. (2009). These similarities might be explained by the fact that all the participants are working in one university and are familiar with the problems and challenges of the university, and therefore it is possible that their views are similar.

Respondents' views on HE quality mostly related to expectations and requirements of customers or participants in the process; therefore, referring to Harvey and Green's framework, it is possible to state that heads of the faculties view quality as 'fitness for purpose' and concerning provision of resources could closely link to the 'exceptional' notion of quality. Referring to Hawes and Stephens' (1990) approach, the faculty heads' perception of quality is connected to 'relevance to the customers' needs'. However, there is one more dimension that was stated by one of the faculty heads, which is related to the competitiveness of the graduates in the world work market; 'education has an instrumental value in securing access to a particular job', which indicates that students' education is for the purpose of finding a job after graduation. This is consistent with Chua's [14] framework, where quality is regarded as an output of the educational process, and as employability after graduation. Robeyns [24; 70] argues that this is the 'instrumental personal economic role of education'.

To the question on how the Bologna Process affects the quality of HE in the country, the response of one of the faculty heads was:

I believe that our country's participation in the Bologna Process will bring only positive results. However, it is too early to feel or to see the results right now, because today the Kazakhstani HE system is going through a 'transition time' or 'period of change' as many new procedures are in the process of implementation.

Overall, the comments of both the faculty heads regarding the question were positive, expressing the belief that it should bring only positive results in the process of quality improvement.

Teachers perception of quality in HE were various. In response to the question on the definition of quality in HE, the participants gave various definitions. The answers could be divided into two categories. The first came from teachers who regard quality in HE as having physical and human resources [25]. Physical resources include a modern technical base, rich library resources, and a good study environment, including campus facilities. Human resources include highly qualified and competent teaching staff with PhD degrees.

The second set of answers came from teachers who believe that quality in HE is a correspondence to the demands of customers, society and the country in order to form professional competencies which are adequate to the demands of the work market. There was another response that might be added to the second category, that education of high quality will give the graduate a good job opportunity after graduation.

An experienced teacher raised the issue of state educational standards set by the MoES. The content of the taught courses and the number of study hours should correspond to those stated educational standards, and teachers have to comply with those standards, which might be another perception of quality of HE.

It is possible to link these perceptions of quality to the framework provided by Harvey and Green [11] and Hawes and Stephens [8]. The first category of answers has a link to quality as 'exception' by Harvey and Green and 'quality as standards of efficiency' by Hawes and Stephens, regarding the need for resources and for an environment with all the technical facilities that are needed in the process of study to achieve high standards. The second category, which concentrates on customers' needs, might be linked to 'fitness for purpose' [11], and 'quality as relevance to needs and context', where quality is judged by the extent to which the education provided meets its stated purpose and customers' expectations and is related to the demands of today's world. The third category could also be linked to the 'excellence' notion of quality [11] and to 'efficiency in meeting set goals' [8]; in the case of Kazakhstan, the goals and aims are set by MoES, and teachers have to reach those goals through effective teaching.

To the question on how quality has changed since the process started, there were diverse responses, with negative views from experienced teachers and positive views from young teachers. Young teachers' responses were that all the current changes were helping to further the development of the country's HEIs and to maintain the quality of the system in correspondence with the demands of society in all aspects of life. Another positive view was that the process expanded the opportunities of Kazakhstani HEIs and PSU to acquire international experience in providing high quality education to students.

Negative views were expressed in the following way:

«Everything is subordinated to the forms and standards, not to the content of education».

The response of another experienced teacher was:

«The quality of education declined, which could be related to the fact that the engagement of Kazakhstan in the Bologna Process coincided with the transition to the new economic and political conditions of the country».

Although the experienced teacher expressed opposition towards the new system, all the participants realised that the process is irreversible and that the country need to move forward in order to achieve the aim set by the MoES.

In the study, attempts have also been made to ascertain if there is agreement by stakeholders of academic staff at PSU in the discussion on quality of HE. This has been achieved to some extent. The data suggest that there is some agreement in views of HE quality among stakeholders at every level. For example, participants from the administration, faculty heads and teachers levels agreed that preparing students for the workplace and the correspondence of qualifications to the needs and expectations of consumers and society were very important dimensions of HE quality. There was also consensus in relation to HE quality that participants at each level focus mainly on teaching facilities, technology and human and library resources. Finally, participants emphasised students' attitudes and commitments towards learning, which are a key factor and an indicator of the progress of education quality improvement.

The teachers' expertise and subject knowledge and their professional competence were emphasised as one of the most significant dimensions determining the quality of HE. This dimension is also an important element of the European Standards Guideline, where it is stated that teaching staff should be 'qualified and competent' (Standard 1.4) [26; 17]. The responses of academic staff are consistent with Chua's (2004) findings where the author concluded that academic staff perceive quality as relating to the whole education system, including input, process and output.

Stakeholders at all three levels agreed that quality in HE produces graduates who are equipped with a range of skills and knowledge for the future workplace. This is the notion of quality most often mentioned by the heads of faculties and teachers; it matches 'fitness for purpose' and quality 'as relevance to needs and context', which is consistent with a research study of the UK's senior managers' views of education quality conducted by Lomas [15].

The highly ranked notion of quality, from academic staff responses, was as 'exceptional' by Harvey and Green and 'as standards of efficiency' indicating efficiency in 'having the right tools for the job' by Hawes and Stephens. PSU academic staff regarded the provision of resources, teaching and technical facilities and a suitable environment for study in order to achieve high standards as important dimensions in HE quality.

Because of Kazakhstan's engagement in the Bologna Process, with the aim of improving education quality and making it consistent with European standards, there is another definition of HE quality that has close links to the current Kazakhstan HE system: this is quality 'as a transformation' by Harvey and Green. Transformation involves a change from one state to another [15]. The process in Kazakhstani HEIs is being achieved by restructuring all HE systems and adding new categories that were not included in the old system, which will facilitate the achievement of the country's aim.

Conclusion

To conclude, the Kazakhstani HE system is undergoing a process of far-reaching restructuring. During this period, the quality of HEIs is a central issue for discussion. In the case of Kazakhstan's engagement with the BP there should be a more tentative and cautious approach to changes. Quality of education is an important issue in developing and developed countries. When constructing a new system that will provide education of a high quality, cultural factors and contexts should not be overlooked. The relevance of HE to society needs to remain an issue of great importance. The relevance of HE needs to be evaluated in terms of the degree of how it fits into what society expects and what HEIs do [1]. This idea, highlighted by Pigozzi, should be considered: «A quality education understands the past, is relevant to the present, and has a view to the future. ... A quality education reflects the dynamic nature of culture and languages, the value of the individual in relation to the larger context, and the importance of living in a way that promotes equality in the present and fosters a sustainable future» [27; 4].

Responses from the academic staff, on the improvement of HE quality in order to educate highly qualified human capital which can facilitate the prosperity of the country, and on the idea that the Bologna Process enables Kazakhstan to be recognised internationally, indicate the effect of globalisation and internationalisation on Kazakhstan's HE system. Moreover, the effect of these trends on the country is clearly shown by the country's ambitious aim to become a competitive country.

In relation to the literature on HE quality, although there are some similarities in defining quality of HE, there is evidence from the study that the concept of 'quality' as stated by Harvey and Green can mean different things to different people. The findings also reflect that the dimensions of quality which have been identified agree with the findings of other studies found in the literature review. This suggests that, despite culture and the unique environment of the HE sector in Kazakhstan, the opinions, views and perceptions of academic staff on HE quality are similar to those of academic staff in other countries.

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Болон процесі жүйесінде аймақтық университеттегі білім сапасының қабылдануы

Бұл мақалада жоғары білім сапасы туралы түсінік қарастырылды. Жоғары оқу орнын Болон процесіне енгізгеннен кейінгі білім беру сапасы қалай әсер ететіні туралы профессор-оқытушылар құрамының көзқарастары зерттелді; аймақтық университетке ерекше көңіл бөлінді. Зерттеу Қазақстанның

Еуропалық жоғары білім кеңістігіне кіруіне байланысты профессор-оқытушылар құрамының білім беру сапасын қабылдауын түсіну мақсатында жүргізілді. Мақалада Болон процесіне қосылуына байланысты университеттегі жаңа үрдістермен танысу мақсатында аймақтық ЖОО-ның профессор-оқытушылар құрамымен сұхбатқа талдау жасалған, сонымен қатар бұл процесс білім берудің жалпы сапасына қалай әсер ететіндігі қарастырылған. Академиялық қызметкерлердің сапа туралы және жаңа жүйені қабылдауда білім берудің сапасы қалай өзгертіндігі жөнінде ұсыныстар талданды.

Кілт сөздер: жоғары білім, білім сапасы, Болон процесі, интернационализация, мүдделі тараптар.

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Восприятие качества образования в контексте Болонского процесса в региональном университете

В статье рассмотрены представления о качестве высшего образования. Исследованы мнения профессорско-преподавательского состава о том, как влияет на качество образования вовлечение вуза страны в Болонский процесс; особое внимание уделено региональному университету. Исследование проводилось с целью понимания восприятия профессорско-преподавательским составом качества образования в связи с интеграцией Казахстана в Европейское пространство высшего образования (ЕПВО). В статье представлен анализ интервью с профессорско-преподавательским составом регионального вуза с целью ознакомления с процессом реализации и проблемами, с которыми сталкивается университет в связи с присоединением к Болонскому процессу, а также с тем, как этот процесс влияет на общее качество образования. Проанализированы представления академического персонала о качестве и показателях качества образования в новой системе.

Ключевые слова: высшее образование, качество образования, Болонский процесс, интернационализация, заинтересованные стороны.