

What do internal stakeholders think about quality assurance in higher education? Literature synthesis

Que pensent les parties prenantes internes de l'assurance qualité dans l'enseignement supérieur ? Synthèse de la littérature

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Received: 10/12/2023

Accepted: 11/03/2024

Published 08/03/2024

Abstract :

This article aims to explore the perception of quality assurance in higher education by internal stakeholders. Data were collected through a documentary survey and synthesized using content analysis. The analysis revealed that the stakeholders considered have different attitudes to quality assurance, ranging from acceptance to resistance. In addition, they perceive many barriers to its implementation in the sector.

The main contribution of this research is to lay a theoretical foundation for understanding the positions adopted by internal stakeholders towards quality assurance in higher education.

Keywords: Quality assurance; Higher education; Literature; Stakeholders; Perception

JEL Classification: I23

Résumé :

Le présent article vise à explorer la perception de l'assurance qualité dans l'enseignement supérieur par les parties prenantes internes. Les données ont été collectées par le biais d'une enquête documentaire et synthétisées à l'aide de l'analyse de contenu. L'analyse a révélé que les parties prenantes considérées ont des attitudes différentes vis-à-vis l'assurance qualité qui varient de l'acceptation à la résistance. De plus, elles perçoivent de nombreux obstacles qui entravent sa mise en œuvre dans le secteur.

La principale contribution de cette recherche est de jeter des bases théoriques pour comprendre les positions adoptées par les parties prenantes internes à l'égard de l'assurance qualité dans l'enseignement supérieur.

Mots clés: Assurance qualité ; Enseignement supérieur ; Littérature ; Parties prenantes ; Perception

Classification JEL: I23

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1. Introduction :

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are not isolated and abstract entities. They operate in a dynamic environment that includes many actors with diverse interests. These actors, known as stakeholders, affect HEIs' decisions and are, in turn, affected by theirs.

Two types of stakeholder are distinguished: internal stakeholders or the university community, such as managers, teaching and administrative staff and students, and external stakeholders, such as government, employers and the public. Moreover, in the face of international trends, the environment has undergone unpredictable changes that have obliged HEIs to adapt their organizations by adding new bodies and actors they didn't need. These include Quality Assurance Managers (QAM) and Quality Assurance Units (QAU), created to meet the objectives of improving practices and accountability to the external environment. This diversity of actors makes quality assurance in higher education more complicated than in industry (DAAD/IUCEA, 2010).

As there is still no unique definition of the notion of quality, the literature recommends defining it from the viewpoints of the various stakeholders to ensure that it is accepted (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2007; Houston, 2008; Schindler & al, 2015).

In this article, we focus on internal stakeholders' perceptions of quality assurance. Our research questions are as follows: **How is quality assurance perceived by internal stakeholders? Who are these stakeholders? What are their attitudes to quality? What do they see as the main obstacles?**

To answer these questions, we conducted a documentary research using secondary sources. This method consists on "*observing reality indirectly, through documents which are, in a way, the traces left by the phenomena we want to study*" (Del Bayle, 2000). Data were obtained from 63 documents, including 43 articles published in scientific journals, 03 papers communicated at international conferences, 11 books, 02 book chapters and 04 doctoral thesis. Data analysis was based on content analysis.

2. Quality assurance in higher education:

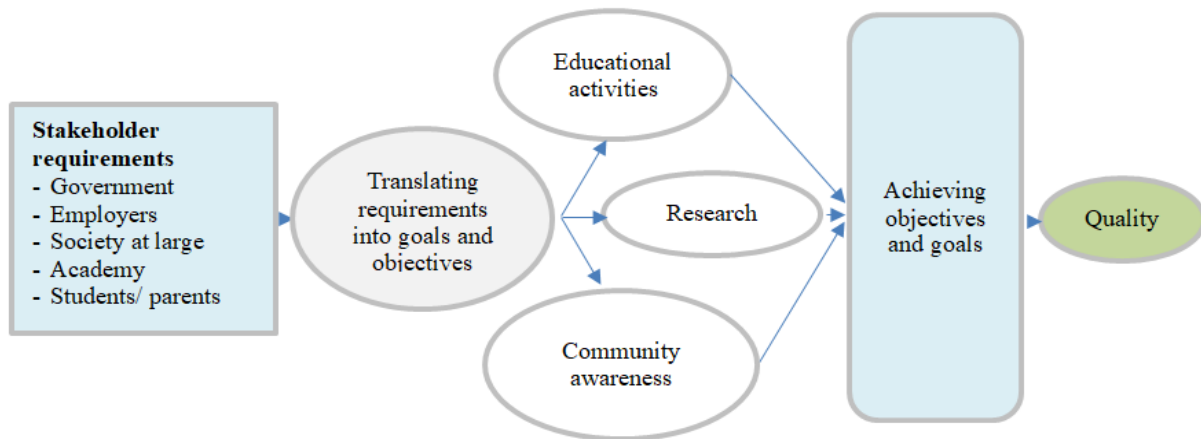
In the literature, there is still no single, common definition of the notion of quality in higher education. The term has different meanings and has been defined in different ways (Cheng & Tam, 1997).

Quality assurance is a user-oriented concept (Harvey & Green, 1993). It is interpreted and defined in different ways by different stakeholders (Elassy, 2015; Matei & Iwinska, 2016) to legitimize their vision or specific interests (Nguyen, 2016). In simple terms, everyone associates quality with what he expects from the establishment. The concept can take on different meanings, sometimes contradictory, depending on the various interests of the stakeholders involved (Vlăsceanu & al, 2007). For example, students associate quality with the processes of performance, teaching and learning, because they think only about the services they receive. Teachers, on the other hand, link it to bureaucracy and burden, as they worry about the procedure and responsibility it will entail (Elassy, 2015).

(DAAD/IUCEA, 2010) summarizes the concept of quality as a matter of negotiation between the academic institution and its stakeholders. In effect, each stakeholder formulates its

requirements and expectations, which the institution translates into missions and objectives to be achieved in order to achieve quality. This negotiation process can be illustrated as follows:

Figure N°1. Quality as an object of negotiation between the concerned parties



Source: (DAAD/IUCEA, 2010)

The comparison between stakeholder requirements and the achievements of the academic institution brings to light the notion of perception, which varies from one individual to another. Perception can be defined as "*the process by which an individual becomes aware of the elements that characterize his environment, and relates them to his own frame of reference*" (Le Duff, 1999).

3. Stakeholders in higher education:

The term "Stakeholder" is derived from "Stockholder" to indicate that other parties have a stake in the entity (Mercier, 2001). The term was first used in 1963 by the *Stanford Research Institute* to designate the groups essential to a company's survival (Mercier, 2001). Since then, there has been a proliferation of definitions in the literature. The most widely used is that proposed by (Freeman, 1994) which considers a stakeholder to be "*any group or individual who can affect or be affected by the achievement of the company's objectives*".

Stakeholders are agencies, organizations, groups or individuals who have a direct or indirect interest in the development action or its evaluation (OCDE, 2002). They may be internal or external, primary (those with a formal contractual relationship with the entity) or secondary (such as the media, government, the public, etc.) (Mercier, 2001). Their interest must be legitimate, giving the holder the right to intervene (Amaral & Magalhaes, 2002).

In the higher education sector, two types of stakeholder are distinguished: internal stakeholders and external stakeholders. This study focuses on internal stakeholders, i.e. the university community, which is made up mainly of the following actors:

3.1. University managers:

University leaders are the quality assurance practitioners and managers at the top of the hierarchy (Pham & Starkey, 2016). Their role as initiators, leaders and responsible for quality is seen as an important factor in the adoption and implementation of the quality initiative in universities (Mulu, 2012).

The success of quality assurance as a change process, and which is considered the most powerful of change agents (Kogan & Hanney, 2000), requires a strong commitment from managers.

3.2. Academics (teachers):

Academics are the key players in HEIs and the key element in the teaching and learning process (Barandiaran-Galdós & al, 2012; Elassy, 2015). They provide teaching and student support, and carry out activities related to research, management and consultancy (Gordon & Whitchurch, 2007). These multiple functions place them on both sides of the quality assurance process, i.e. those who propose the mechanisms to be implemented, but also the users (Scharager Goldenberg, 2017) . Their support and commitment to quality improvement work is therefore crucial in determining the quality of educational products.

3.3. Students:

There is much debate in the literature about the role of students in the context of higher education. Students are sometimes seen as raw material or products developed for customers who are future employers and society (Hickman & Akdere, 2017) and sometimes as customer recipients and users of educational products (O'Mahony & Garavan, 2012; Hickman & Akdere, 2017; Golowko & al, 2017).

According to (EUA, 2007), students are considered customers or consumers that HEIs seek to satisfy through the implementation of quality assurance and accountability measures. However, (Green, 1994) criticized this approach, questioning whether students were able to identify their needs in order to judge the quality of the services offered.

Other authors see students as co-producers (Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018) forming part of the teaching process. (Elassy, 2015) shares this view and points out that many educationalists see students as partners in HEIs and see education as a mission and a transformative process. (Harvey & Knight, 1996) also share this view and see students as participants in the education process.

In addition, and for other authors, the student is a client in relation to the services provided, but a participant/partner when it comes to the teaching and learning process (Yorke, 1999; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2002)

Although the position of students has not yet been firmly defined in the literature, (DAAD/IUCEA, 2010) considers that a university has a multiple product system and a multiple customer system.

3.4. Administrative staff:

These are professional administrators and managers offering skills in functional areas such as student life services, finance and human resources (Gordon & Whitchurch, 2007). These actors, although not directly involved in academic and research work, have an impact on teaching and learning processes and curriculum development (Alzafari & Kratzer, 2019).

3.5. Quality Assurance Managers (QAM):

The Quality Assurance Manager (QAM) is a new function that has emerged in higher education. These are new actors - mainly professionals - who have been incorporated into universities

(Scharager Goldenberg, 2017) in response to quality assurance policies. The QAM, as the name suggests, is a person in charge of implementing and managing quality within his or her institution. According to (Whitchurch, 2008), he is a member of a third space that has emerged between the professional and academic domains. He is a mixed professional with no organizational boundaries, working on short- and long-term university-wide projects (Whitchurch, 2008). As such, he is considered a quality expert within the institution.

Regarding access to the position, a QAM can be a professional or an academic (Scharager Goldenberg, 2017) or ideally both, as the function is heterogeneous and cuts across academic work and professionalized coaching (Gordon & Whitchurch, 2007).

According to (Scharager Goldenberg, 2017), there is a broad consensus in the literature that there is no particular experience, clear profile or specific training for a person to access the position of QAM and fulfill its roles and missions. Rather, it's a matter of practice itself. Nevertheless, the same author's empirical study of professional staff in charge of quality assurance management at Chilean universities identified 04 key competencies for the QAM function, namely: *decision-making and problem-solving, assertiveness and the ability to tolerate work under pressure.*

In another fairly recent study, (Jingura & Kamusoko, 2019) identified the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes that quality practitioners must have for effective quality management in higher education, regardless of the role and missions assigned to them. These competencies are grouped into 4 main areas: *quality knowledge, quality mechanisms, quality assessment and quality research and innovation.*

3.6. Quality Assurance Units (QAU):

QAU are permanent services responsible for developing and implementing quality procedures. They are made up of specialized staff representing the various actors in the HEIs, and are generally chaired by the QAM responsible for steering, leading and guiding the members. In this way, they serve as a support structure for the self-evaluation process (Scharager Goldenberg, 2017).

QAU may comprise academic and/or professional staff. In the case of academic staff, in addition to their academic duties, they have to perform administrative and managerial tasks, and combine these with each other (Scharager Goldenberg, 2017).

4. Perception of quality assurance in higher education:

The literature on the perception of quality assurance in higher education analyzes several topics, such as: *the perception of the quality concept* (Pham & & Starkey, 2016), *the perception of the effectiveness of the quality approach* (Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018), *the perception of the impacts of quality assessment* (Liu & Yu, 2014), *the perception of barriers to quality* (Cardoso & al, 2015; Belimane & Chahed, 2022/3), *the perception of quality determinants* (Barandiaran-Galdós & al, 2012) ...Etc

In addition, the literature has addressed the perception of quality from the point of view of different internal stakeholders, such as: *academics* (Barandiaran-Galdós & al, 2012; Cardoso & al, 2015; Pham & & Starkey, 2016; Belimane & Chahed, 2022/3), *quality managers* (Pham & & Starkey, 2016; Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018; Belimane & Chahed, 2021/2), *students* (Liu & Yu, 2014) & *university managers* (Pham & & Starkey, 2016).

This article looks at the perception of quality assurance and the main obstacles encountered by two internal stakeholders, namely QAM and academics. Indeed, these two stakeholders are considered the most relevant as they are generally involved, in one way or another, in the quality assurance project in their schools.

In what follows, we first explore the attitudes adopted towards quality assurance, and then summarize the main perceived obstacles.

4.1. Attitudes to quality assurance:

4.1.1. Positions adopted by QAM:

(Scharager Goldenberg, 2018) studied the views of quality managers in Chilean universities regarding the meaning of quality in higher education. The results showed that QAM see quality as the successful achievement of objectives and as compliance with external standards.

Furthermore, (Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018) investigated the determinants of quality assurance effectiveness in German HEIs from the perspective of quality managers. The results revealed that the perception of quality assurance effectiveness is positively correlated with certain factors related to their institutional environment namely: *internal management support* and *cooperation with other HEIs*. In terms of managers' individual functions and motivations, two variables appear to be relevant and positively influence their perception, namely: *attitude towards the use of quality assurance results* and *mobilization of academic staff support*.

However, analysis of the literature shows that quality managers are not often asked to give their opinions on the approaches implemented. Yet they are in the best position to do so, and especially to identify the obstacles encountered.

4.1.2. Positions adopted by academics:

Academics are the key actors in improving teaching and learning, and are best qualified to assess the effects of quality assurance (Tavares, 2017). These actors have different perceptions that are sometimes positive and sometimes negative. According to (Manatos & al, 2016), academics can adopt a stance towards quality that varies from a favorable attitude to resistance. Indeed, (Huusko & Ursin, 2010) have specified that academics' perceptions are positive when their autonomy is not threatened and control mechanisms are avoided. They become negative when evaluation processes and procedures target their individual performance and autonomy (Newton, 2002; Cardoso & al, 2015). Indeed, some academics are individual experts accustomed to being autonomous in the development and control of their courses (Fisher, 1993) and may not like being asked to review their programs or rethink their teaching styles (Blankstein, 1996). As a result, they resist and view as threatening quality approaches that require customer involvement in program development (Fisher, 1993).

Moreover, academics' perceptions are negative, as they often associate it with an administrative burden and a bureaucratic process (Stensaker, 2011; Elassy, 2015) , and believe it diverts their attention from the really important aspects of university life, namely teaching and research (Newton, 2002). Resistance from academics is particularly evident in their reluctance to share information. Indeed, the results of the study carried out by (Scharager Goldenberg, 2017) reported that resistant academics lack a sense of community and common mission, and

prioritize their individualistic interests. This phenomenon, which the author called "*individual ego*", complicates the work they have to do in quality assurance units.

On the other hand, some studies have shown that academics sometimes accept quality assurance procedures without having a positive or negative attitude towards them. (Newton, 2002) explained that teaching staff, in particular, are not passive recipients who mutely accept quality systems. Rather, they adapt to the approach and reluctantly collaborate to avoid more unpleasant or problematic professional outcomes (Cartwright, 2007). Indeed, (Sousa, 2010) consider academics to be "*resilient compilers*" who combine passive resignation (...) with a mostly silent resistance. They provide the necessary information and apply the rules, but try to avoid being recognized as vassals of the system.

4.2. Perceived barriers to quality assurance:

Numerous studies have explored the obstacles to implementing quality assurance in HEIs. Some studies consider that obstacles relate to *cultural change*, which proves difficult or even absent (Mulu, 2012; El Nacer, 2013; Hassan & Fan, 2016) and this is due to *a lack of training and awareness among employees* (El Nacer, 2013; Belimane & Chahed, 2021/1). However, other research has shown that weaknesses in quality assurance systems are linked to *formal, structural and procedural aspects* rather than to a change in organizational culture (Tavares, 2017). (Hassan & Fan, 2016) identified, on the basis of 60 scientific articles, the main obstacles hindering the implementation of quality in the education sector. These obstacles were classified into five main dimensions, namely: *lack of management commitment, lack of training, lack of resources and funding, lack of culture change & lack of comparative assessments or benchmarks*.

On the basis of this different classification and after analysis of the relevant literature, the main barriers to quality assurance were identified and classified into three main components, namely: *barriers related to management; barriers related to internal stakeholders; and barriers related to implementation and improvement process*.

4.2.1. Barriers related to HEI management:

- Lack of/insufficient commitment and support from management and senior staff (Ritchie & Dale, 2000; Tari, 2010; 2011; Mulu, 2012; Adadi, 2012; Hassan & Fan, 2016; Belimane & Chahed, 2021/2). For other researchers, it's a question of a lack of appropriate leadership in HEIs (Rosa & al, 2006);
- Incompetence in university leadership and governance (Mulu, 2012). The results obtained by (Khaled Salah, 2017) showed that this is due to the fact that university managers are not trained in modern management techniques ;
- Quality assurance policies, strategies and objectives are not sufficiently clear (Kells, 1995; Adadi, 2012; Belimane & Chahed, 2021/2) ;
- Rotation and instability of university managers (Mulu, 2012; Belimane & Chahed, 2021/2);
- Lack of funding and resources (Tari, 2010; 2011; Mishra & Pandey, 2013/1; Belimane & Chahed, 2021/2). According to (Mulu, 2012), it is sometimes a question of inadequate and poorly used resources;

4.2.2. Barriers related to internal actors and their involvement:

- Centralization in decision-making and non-involvement of employees in general (Mishra & Pandey, 2013/1) and academics in particular (Adadi, 2012; Khaled Salah, 2017);
- Low involvement of academics in the development of quality management procedures (Cardoso & al, 2013);
- Lack of commitment and support from internal stakeholders (Ritchie & Dale, 2000; Tari, 2010; 2011; Mulu, 2012; Safi, 2012);
- Lack of/weakness in training and acquisition of necessary quality knowledge (El Nacer, 2013; Mishra & Pandey, 2013/1; Hassan & Fan, 2016; Belimane & Chahed, 2021/1) ;
- Resistance to quality (Nguyen, 2016), particularly from academics (Mishra & Pandey, 2013/1; Hassan & Fan, 2016; Scharager Goldenberg, 2017);
- Lack of motivation (Safi, 2012) both material and moral (Adadi, 2012) ;
- Lack of team spirit and collaboration, especially among academics (Pratasavitskaya & Stensaker, 2010; Scharager Goldenberg, 2017);
- Academics' workload does not allow them to take on new quality-related tasks (Khaled Salah, 2017) ;
- The lack of adequate working conditions (Adadi, 2012).

4.2.3. Barriers related to the implementation and improvement process:

- The length of the implementation and evaluation process and not knowing where to start (Ritchie & Dale, 2000; Tari, 2010; 2011);
- Lack of coordination between departments (Amar & Zain, 2002);
- Difficulty in implementing improvement actions (Ritchie & Dale, 2000; Tari, 2011) ;

5. Conclusion:

The present study is based on a literature survey. Its aim is to provide a theoretical basis that will enable future studies to interpret and understand the different attitudes adopted towards quality assurance.

In this article, we have identified the main internal stakeholders, and then sought to understand their perceptions of quality in higher education in general, and the obstacles encountered in particular.

The focus was on academics and QAM. We judged these two stakeholders to be relevant with reference to the Algerian experience of institutional self-assessment. Indeed, academics and QAM were the most involved in the quality assurance process.

However, future research should focus on other stakeholders such as students, especially when the quality assurance approach concerns the improvement of training programs.

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