Developing a System of Quality Enhancement in a Post-Conflict University Environment – the Kosovo Experience

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Abstract

The University of Prishtina began to rebuild itself after the conflict in Kosovo in 1999. However the protracted lack of resources and professional training had taken their toll, resulting in the deterioration of the quality of teaching and learning at the University. Although Kosovo is not a member of the Bologna process, the achievement of its goals has informed the higher education policy direction in Kosovo since the conflict. In February 2007, after legislation was already in place, the University of Prishtina Senate decided to set about creating a systematic quality assurance and enhancement system. This process was not without its challenges. This paper seeks to discuss the process and challenges of developing a system of quality assurance and enhancement in a post-conflict environment at the University of Prishtina.

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The University Context

The University of Prishtina was established by the Assembly of the then Social Autonomous Province of Kosova, on the 18th of November 1969 when the 'Law on Establishment of the University of Prishtina' was adopted. The enactment of this law gave the University legal status and defined its mandate as providing academic services, research, artistic work, professional consulting and other fields of academic activities. The University currently has 17 Faculties with 1556 teaching staff, 379 administrative staff and approximately 31072 full and part time students.

After the events leading up to and surrounding the conflict in Kosovo in 1999, the University set about reinventing itself according to the new circumstances within which it found itself. This task was both urgent and necessary to facilitate the future education of a large under skilled and unemployed youth population. However the protracted lack of resources and professional training had taken their toll, resulting in the drastic deterioration of the quality of teaching and managerial skills at the University.

In 2003 new legislation was introduced in the area of higher education. This combined with an overarching strategy for higher education paved the way for reform. Following this in 2004, the University Senate adopted the 'Statute of the University of Prishtina' which outlined the regulations and processes of the University. Although Kosovo is not a member of the Bologna process, the process has informed its higher education policy from an early stage. All these events laid the foundations for and positively put the onus on the University to develop, sound quality assurance and enhancement systems to ensure continued quality education.

It is fair to say the concept of delivering a quality education to its learners has been a priority for the University since its establishment, but given the circumstances in the country and particularly the vicissitudes of the University of Prishtina experience; the University has not always been able to manage quality according to its desired standards.

The Reform Process

In the mid 2000's the University struggled to improve standards to modern European levels: Curricula were static and syllabi poorly drafted, assessment was overwhelmingly terminal, classroom interaction remained minimal as a result of the large class sizes and limited facilities, students faced heavy course loads and faculties were increasingly dependent upon underpaid and overworked lecturers. A major obstacle to any type of reform was the scarcity of available funds. While the primary and secondary stages of education were increasingly supported by the international community the same support did not exist for the University.

The initial momentum for the development of a fully fledged quality management system came in February 2007, when the University Senate passed a decision regarding the implementation of a Quality Assurance Office responsible for the organization of quality related training and the development of internal assessment mechanisms along the Bologna action lines (i.e., student evaluation of courses, programs and curricula review, institutional self-assessment).

Following the Senate's decision, the University began by organizing itself two quality assurance related workshops for senior management. At this point the commitment of the University was clear but again its financial situation proved a difficult obstacle to overcome. The support of an international organisation, in this case the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) was both useful and timely in assisting to further the University's goals.

With the support of the OSCE the process of establishing a quality assurance system began in earnest with a series of capacity building initiatives, beginning with the senior management of the university. These initiatives included workshops and lectures presented by international experts and study visits to foreign universities considered advanced in the implementation of quality processes.

After initial capacity building activities it was decided to focus on the structures that would oversee the development and implementation of a quality assurance system at the University. As a result the 'Quality Assurance Office' was established in February

2007 followed by the 'Quality Assurance Committee' at the level of the University which was established in October 2007.

In order to foster a quality culture in the University, the Quality Assurance Office organized, in 2007 and 2008, a number of seminars and workshops with prominent international experts in the field of quality assurance for academic staff, administrative staff and University students. Study visits were organized to Ireland, University representatives participated in the E4 Quality Assurance Forum in 2007 and 2008, and lastly the University in cooperation with its partners; the Ministry for Education, Science and Technology, WUS Austria, University College Cork Ireland, University of Wuppertal Germany and the University of Salzburg Austria applied to the European Commission funded 'TEMPUS' Programme with the project "Fostering and Developing the Quality Culture at the University of Prishtina" which was successful.

Quality Assurance Committee

The Quality Assurance Committee was set up as a subcommittee of the Senate which reports to Senate via the Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs and Research who is an ex officio member and the Chairperson. The Quality Assurance Committee was tasked with providing leadership, guidance and support in the establishment and implementation of internal quality procedures compatible with national and international guidelines. The Committee consisted of the Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs and Research; the Quality Assurance Officer, the Quality Assurance Assistant, eight to nine academic staff from different faculties; one representative of the Student Parliament and one representative of the administration. The Committee is responsible for all internal issues related to quality that aim to develop, enhance and maintain the high level of academic and administrative services at the University of Prishtina. It is also responsible for the promotion of a quality culture University wide, reviewing national and international developments in quality assurance and the creation and review of the quality guidelines.

Every Faculty within the University has a Coordinator for Academic Development who is responsible for advising on the management and implementation of ECTS and Quality Assurance in that Faculty.

Quality Assurance Office

The Quality Assurance Office was set up as an independent office under the Academic Development Office with technical and financial assistance from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

The Office aims at supporting the academic and administrative units of the University in the continuous enhancement of the quality of their services and to ensure compliance with the University Statute, legal frameworks as well as the European Network of Quality Assurance (ENQA) Standards and Guidelines. The Office takes guidance from the Committee and it is within the purview of the Office to assist academic and administrative units to undertake self evaluation exercises, to complete peer reviews and to assist with the formulation of action plans based on these reviews.

Quality Mechanisms

Guidelines

The Quality Assurance Committee developed quality assurance guidelines for the University which are expressed in the form of a document that contains policies and procedures on the process of quality assessment and the subsequent formation of action plans following review panel recommendations. These guidelines were approved by the University Senate and are in compliance with the University Statute, the Ministry Administrative Instruction on the Evaluation of Higher Education Institutions and the ENQA Standards and Guidelines.

The 'Quality Assurance Guidelines' at the University were published in both Albanian and English, are available online and are therefore transparent and easily assessable. The guidelines are substantially based on the Irish model of self evaluation guidelines.

The quality assurance process envisages involvement of peers external to Kosova as well as labor market representatives in the evaluation panels.

There are also a number of data collection instruments for quality assurance; these include questionnaires for academic staff, questionnaires for administrative staff, and questionnaires for students. In May 2008 for the institution review of the University, student and staff (academic and administrative) questionnaires were distributed in all the Faculties/Departments of University. In total, the Quality Assurance Office

processed 3141 student, 174 administrative and 554 academic staff questionnaires. This was the first time in the history of University that surveys were administered for quality assessment purposes to this extent. Results of these questionnaires were used by the Committee to produce a SWOT analysis for the University upon which the Self Evaluation Report was based.

In addition to the quality surveys mentioned above a course evaluation by students is organized at the end of every semester (usually in December and April) through anonymous questionnaires and this is coordinated by the Deans in cooperation with the department heads under the leadership of the Vice-Rector for Teaching and Research and with the approval of the University Senate. The results of these questionnaires are used by departments in order to assist continual improvement to the quality of teaching and learning at the University.

Implementation

In February 2008, the University started the process of internal quality review and there are plans to review all the academic and administrative units following the approved quality assurance guidelines and procedures, in the next five years.

The culmination of the initial effort to establish a systematic quality assessment system came in the form of the review of the Faculty of Electrical and Computer Engineering. This process started with the Faculty establishing a coordination committee to prepare their self-assessment report. The peer review visit in this faculty took place at the beginning of November 2008. The review group consisted of two internal university members (a senior professor from outside the faculty and a member of the QA committee) and three external members (a Dean or head of department from Europe or the US, a Dean from or head of department from the region and a representative of the local labor market which employs graduates of the Faculty).

It should also be noted that the University has, also in this relatively short period of time, undergone a process of external evaluation in October 2008. This was carried out by the Kosovo Accreditation Agency. The Kosovo Accreditation Agency became operational in March 2008. The initial decision to establish the Agency was taken in

2004 with an Administrative Instruction of the Minister of Education, Science and Technology in Kosovo. In a very short period of time the Agency set up criteria and procedures for external evaluation and accreditation of higher education institutions and Faculties. Therefore the criteria for the institutional evaluation in 2008 were created by an external agency. The Kosovo Accreditation Agency developed its criteria for evaluation according to the Law of Higher Education in Kosovo and ENQAs' Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in European Higher Education area.

The review report by the panel of experts of the institutional review noted:

 "The UP[1] has set up several measures for internal quality assurance and quality management. These measures are interlinked and therefore promise valuable effects. The structures and measures are still quite recent and have to develop and perform over time.

The review team recognises the high ambitions of the UP. It encourages the university to continue its work to develop an integrated quality management system based on current achievements."

Outcomes and Challenges

To date there have been a number of positive outcomes of the process of establishing a system of quality assurance and enhancement at the University however a number of challenges have also presented themselves. It is at this time that the University must now consider these challenges and try to find appropriate mechanisms to overcome them.

To begin with, it is fair to say that there have been a number of positive outcomes as a result of the process. The trainings that were provided have become more useful over time and with the development and expansion of the process. The University has majoritivly succeeded in modernizing curricula. Also the process of creating a self evaluation report was seen as a valid and useful exercise by the Faculties and the University. The preparation of the self evaluation reports provided an opportunity to reflect on the good work happening at the University but also the many of the challenges that the University faces on a daily basis. Therefore just the task of

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[1] University of Prishtina

carrying out the process has benefited those involved regardless of the perceived longer term benefits to the University. It is again positive that many within the University consider the quality review system as a way of continuously improving the University into the future.

However there are a number of challenges that the University faces in fully realizing its goal of a fully operational system of quality assurance. Change management is a difficult process and even though additional quality assurance mechanisms have been created at the University, a culture of accountability is still lacking and very often evaluation is resisted by academic staff, particularly more senior staff. Academic staff have embraced the reforms to varying degrees and it is acknowledged that there is still a significant proportion of staff that do not understand the reforms.

The process also highlighted the need of increased stakeholder involvement in the process. The review report highlighted the lack of awareness among the student body of the process: *"Students report that the system does not appear very transparent and that they feel little consequences (especially regarding the teaching quality of older staff)."* While a large amount of feedback was obtained from students for the first review, it was only a fraction of the overall student population. No doubt this can be improved upon. Also similarly to staff, many students do not fully understand the reforms. It would seem that the whole University is on a steep learning curve and the question to be answered now is how to continue and embed this learning within the University community.

The relationship between the labor market and the University is in need of development. However due to the burgeoning nature of the labor market in Kosovo at the present time, addressing its skills needs is the proverbial case of 'chicken and egg'.

Quality assurance requires significant financial investment and at present the University is struggling with balancing financing this activity along with all the other reforms necessitated by the Bologna process. The fact the University is also in need of significant financial investment in its basic infrastructure, means that there are a number of issues that cannot be rectified in the short to medium term, which do not

require the endorsement of a quality process to identify. The Bologna process is important to the University to show it's willingness to be a respected part of the European higher education community, but Bologna is a costly process especially for those struggling with meeting basic University needs.

The University has undergone much change in a short time and in difficult circumstances. Important steps have been made to establish strong quality assurance mechanisms within the University however there remains much to be done.