THE SELF-ASSESSMENT PROCESS IN UNIVERSITY ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICES

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SUMMARY
The purpose of this paper is to identify the results of an European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) self-assessment model. A case study methodology is used based on 10 university administrative services provided by a public university in Spain. The findings show the steps that administrative services can follow in order to apply this exercise in a successful manner, and the results of this process (strengths, weaknesses and improvement actions). It provides lessons for managers from other universities who wish to develop a self-assessment exercise.

Keywords: Self-assessment, EFQM model, Quality management, Higher education

1. INTRODUCTION

Total quality management (TQM) can improve the activities and performance of private firms and public organisations. Focusing on the latter, public services have showed a different interest in quality. For instance, TQM has had a limited success in educational administrations [1], and this sector has applied the excellence models less frequently than other public services [2].
TQM started to gain importance in higher education institutions (HEIs) in the late eighties and early nineties. Pressure from a variety of stakeholders (students, the government, the business community and the local community) led HEIs to make an effort to improve their efficiency and efficacy, aiming to satisfy this array of increasingly demanding customers. Such pressure resulted in changes in HEIs [3-5], which led them to implement various strategies. In this respect, many administrators have seen quality practices as a useful strategy [6,7]. In addition, service quality may be a mean of achieving long-term competitive advantage in higher education [8]. This way HEIs began to worry about quality and develop TQM programmes, or formal assessment processes, on a periodical basis. For instance, excellence models (e.g. the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award -MBNQA- and the European Foundation for Quality Management -EFQM-) have been applied to HEIs as a tool for improvement.
In this context, formal bodies were set up to carry out periodical quality assessments in HEIs. Several countries have developed HEI self-assessment systems and mechanisms, usually composed of initial self-assessment processes that are then complemented with external assessment practices [9]. For instance, in Spain there is an agency designated for the

deployment of these assessment processes in HEIs (National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation –ANECA–).

Several studies have analysed the self-assessment process [10-14]. However, although there are an increasing number of universities adopting self-assessment [5], little empirical literature exists analysing the self-assessment process in the education sector from an academic point of view.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the stages and results of the self-assessment process, in order to identify the main strengths and weaknesses detected in self-assessment, together with any improvement actions derived from it. More specifically, universities may be evaluated in three major areas: teaching, research and service. This paper focuses on the study of quality assessment in services, indicating strengths and weaknesses detected in self-assessment and in the improvement actions defined, which, it is hoped, may prove useful to managers of other HEIs.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

HEIs may use models based on quality awards, or models created specifically for self-assessment in academia. Regarding the former, mention must be made of the standardised quality models, such as the MBNQA model in the USA [15,16], the EFQM model in Europe [17,18] and the Deming Prize model in Japan [15, 19]. Alongside these models, several academic studies have developed instruments for measuring quality management applicable to both manufacturing and service organisations [e.g. 20-22].

In relation to the deployment of models created for academia, HEIs may also use models such as the European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS) accreditation [23] and the Malcolm Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence for Education [24]. It is worth analysing those studies which have developed empirically validated instruments for quality measurement in HEIs [25], or for the measurement of administrative quality in universities [26]. In Spain, ANECA has been promoting the use of self-assessment methods for the implementation of quality systems in administrative services using a procedure similar to that used by the EFQM model [27].

Generally speaking, organisations may resort to different approaches to self-assessment: questionnaire, workshops, pro-forma and award simulation [18]. Irrespective of the approach chosen, the generic stages for self-assessment are the following [18]:

- Developing management commitment.
- Communicating self-assessment plans.
- Planning self-assessment.
- Establishing teams and training.
- Conducting self-assessment.
- Establishing action plans.
- Implementing action plans.
- Review.

Although models and scope vary, a common objective of self-assessment processes is to identify strengths and areas for improvement in order to develop an action plan, [12,14,28], which could be linked to strategic planning; measure performance; involve people in developing a process improvement approach to quality; and raise understanding and awareness of quality related issues [10-13, 18, 29].

This review suggests that self-assessment may be a tool for continuous improvement, because it identifies strengths, weaknesses and improvement actions. The implementation of such improvement actions will make it possible to improve the efficiency and quality of services in

HEIs. Based on these ideas, the research questions are the following:

- How has EFQM self-assessment been carried out in university administrative services?
- Which results have been obtained (strengths, weaknesses and improvement actions)?

3. METHODOLOGY

To respond to these two research questions, the case study methodology has been used. Case studies can involve either single or multiple cases and the evidence may be qualitative, quantitative or both [30,31]. The interest of this research is to show a self-assessment exercise from 10 cases using quantitative and qualitative evidence.

Data collection combined several methods: interviews, direct observation, organisation documents and feedback from administrative services in a Spanish public university. This way, the findings have been validated by employing the triangulation technique, which reinforces the belief that the result is a valid one, and not a methodological artifact [30,32].

The sources of primary data were the direct observation of the provision of the service, answers from the team members and employees to the questionnaires based on the EFQM model, and the semi-structured interviews with the team members of each service. This information was used to analyse the objective and stages of a self-assessment exercise.

The secondary data were provided by certain internal documents from each service, i.e. self-assessment plan, written material produced during the process (e.g. forms containing strengths, weaknesses and improvement actions, forms containing action plans), objectives, indicators, materials from the training sessions, and improvement plans. This information was used to contrast the primary data and identify the main strengths, weaknesses and improvement actions.

The 10 services chosen were those taking part in the self-assessment process during the 2003-4 and 2004-05 academic years at the University of Alicante in Spain. These 10 services took part in the quality scheme for the services at the University (2003-2007) and carried a follow-up of the degree of implementation of the improvement actions in 2008.

4. RESULTS

The University took part in the Quality Scheme for Spanish Universities (approved by the government), through the assessment of a number of degrees and services. The University quality manager developed a quality scheme aimed at assessing the administrative services from academic year 2003-04 to academic year 2006-07. The University quality manager developed a quality scheme aimed at assessing the administrative services using the EFQM model. The purpose of this process was to evaluate the situation in each service, and to develop a plan for the improvement of the service, as part of the overall quality improvement strategy of the University.

The services analysed in this paper used the workshop approach to prepare a report based on EFQM criteria, in such a way that for each criterion, the team members showed the situation of the service and listed a number of strengths, weaknesses and improvement actions. With this report and the report from the external assessors, the team members prepared an improvement plan.

The process started with the approval of the plan by top management. After that, the top manager called a meeting during which, alongside the quality manager, he explained the plan

to those responsible for each service involved. The purpose was to inform them about their participation in the process and receive their agreement to participate. Next, the academic responsible for the quality area, acting as facilitator, addressed all the employees in each service in order to familiarise the staff with the quality scheme. Following this, the teams were created, and the training and self-assessment began. The process finished with the preparation of the improvement plan, which was submitted to top management. Based on the self-assessment stages listed in the literature section, Table 1 shows the process followed by the services analysed.

Table 1. Self-assessment process

Step 1 – Developing management commitment The commitment has been obtained through the approval of the plan, the written communication to each service concerning their participation in the process, and the support to the improvement actions. This has reinforced the commitment of the staff participating in the self-assessment and also the implementation of the improvement actions identified by each service
Step 2 – Communicating plans The communication took place in two ways. Firstly, a letter, written and signed by the manager, was sent to the person responsible for each service; secondly, a talk was given to all the employees in each service. The letter was used to inform the service that it would take part in the process. The talk, which lasted between twenty and thirty minutes, covered the following points: (a) the characteristics and goals of the assessment programme, together with the reasons for assessment; (b) the assessment methodology, including how the teams should be created (who the members are and what their work consists in); and (c) a few conclusions on the importance and usefulness of the process for the service. This presentation allowed all the employees to know that their service was to be assessed, what was going to be done and why.
Step 3 - Planning self-assessment The services used the workshop approach. This entails the creation of teams that meet periodically in order to identify strengths, areas for improvement and improvement actions for each of the criteria in the model. Once this has been done the team prioritises the improvement actions and agrees on an action plan
Step 4 – Establishing teams and training Each service created a team. The training for the services consisted in a 20-hour course on the EFQM model and methodology, divided into eight sessions, and taught by an assessor and trainer from the ANECA. Training was necessary and useful because it allowed employees to become acquainted with the model and acquire a working methodology in order to understand how self-assessment may succeed, and also in order to overcome one of the obstacles mentioned in the literature, i.e. not knowing where to start.
Step 5 – Conducting self-assessment This procedure consisted in workshops and training sessions, with the support from the quality area. The purpose of the workshops was that the team should identify strengths, areas for improvement and improvement actions, the basis for the self-assessment report. The training was aimed at helping the teams, every month, to draft the self-report. Finally, the quality area was responsible for processing the results of the employees' and users' surveys, and to revise the results of the work by each team. The result of these workshops was a self-assessment report containing these strengths, areas for improvement and prioritised improvement actions, for each criterion. Once the self-report was finished, it was circulated to the whole of the university in order to receive other opinions and add these to the final report. This was done through the webpage of each service and, for some of them, by sending a copy to a group of people related to such service. Some services received suggestions while others did not. The result was a list of suggestions for some services which were added to the self-report.

Step 6 – Establishing an action plan
Each team prepared its action plan according to the self-report and the external report. The result of this step was an action plan reflecting the improvement actions, the tasks required to implement them, the person in charge, the deadlines, resources, financing, follow-up indicators and person responsible for follow-up.

Step 7 – Implementing action plans
The improvement plan was approved by the manager of the University. The people responsible for each service met with the management and the quality area in order to report on the result of the process (i.e. on the action plan). The purpose was also to obtain both the management's approval for the actions corresponding to each service and the manager's commitment to carry out the actions or to submit to the governing board those for which the University would be responsible. The result of this meeting was to obtain commitment, both from the person responsible for the service and from the manager, regarding which actions were to be implemented.

Step 8 – Review
If the improvement actions have been approved by the management, they are much more likely to become implemented. However, when such actions are implemented, some kind of monitoring must be carried out. This review consisted in periodically monitoring the degree of implementation of the actions, which can be done by the quality area or by the head of the service.

The improvement plans for the 10 services show some features common to all services and some specific to each one. Based on these improvement plans and the answers to the questionnaires derived on the EFQM model, it appears that the strengths and weaknesses common to all the criteria in the EFQM model are the following.

Leadership. The leader is easily accessible, ready to listen to the staff in the service, considers their opinions and personally serves the customers. Also, there is a good personal relationship both inside the service and with other services and stakeholders at the University. However, there is no schedule for either internal (with staff) or external (customers/users) meetings, which leads to lack of communication.

Policy and strategy. The employees are aware of their responsibilities, the day-to-day objectives are met, the processes are known and are subject to review for improvement, everything in an informal manner. However, no information is obtained from the service users and suppliers, objectives and indicators are not formally defined, and there is no systematic review of objectives and indicators in order to assess the service as compared to previous years.

People. There is a good work atmosphere, the relationship between the employees at the service is satisfactory, there is delegated responsibility and each member is responsible for his or her actions. Although there is a training scheme for the University, respondents claim it is a general one and sometimes it is not tailored to their needs. There is no self-assessment of the functions in the service, and no formal communication scheme with periodical meetings, either between the staff in each unit with their immediate manager, or between the unit managers and the person responsible for the service.

Partnerships and resources. In general, the software available is suitable, and new technology is applied, with positive usage of the means and tools available at the service for its day-to-day management activity. However, although the relationships with other units (for some service) are acceptable, they are often scarce and informal, and are not used in order to define improvement actions. Neither is there a strong environmental concern, and the facilities and environmental conditions are unsuitable.

Processes. The processes are identified and some of them are defined, with standardised documents. However, the processes, objectives and indicators are not defined formally, there are no mechanisms in place measuring customer satisfaction, and there is no system reviewing objectives.

Customer results. By means of the process, surveys have been carried out in order to gauge

customer satisfaction, with positive results. This has made it possible to identify strengths and weaknesses (e.g. customers do not know whom they must address themselves to in order to solve a specific problem, and the signaling and access to the service are unsuitable). Although the customers have been identified (informally), no periodical assessment is made of customer satisfaction, and there are no performance indicators.

People results. As a result of the process, a survey has been carried out, showing that the employees are happy with their work and there are good personal relationships between the members of the service (positive work environment). However, there are no systematic assessments of staff satisfaction, nor performance indicators.

Society results. Although this issue has little influence upon services, in general employees have said that there is little concern for environmental matters. In this respect, there are neither measures or indicators making it possible to examine society's perception of the service or to objectively measure the results.

Key performance results. In general, employees consider that the objectives are met, in spite of the fact that they are not formally defined and there are very few, if any, measure indicators. Therefore, the service does not possess any systems in order to assess, evaluate and review results.

On the basis of these strengths and weaknesses, the following improvement actions can be suggested.

Leadership. Periodical meetings, both at an internal level (with employees) and at an external one (customers/users), in a formal or informal manner. This would help to analyse the work and collect opinions from employees and other stakeulders.

Policy and strategy. Preparation of a strategic plan, a service chapter, or transforming the improvement plans of the self-assessment process into objectives. This would make it possible to define objectives and indicators, which could later be measured and analysed to facilitate decision-making.

People. Including the specific characteristics of each service in the organisation's yearly training scheme; assessing performance based on productivity; implementing a communication scheme with employees. This would improve job training and staff motivation.

Partnerships and resources. Formalizing meetings with other services or external organisation; approval of an environmental and a prevention scheme. This would increase the information coming from other units aimed at improving service processes, and develop concern for environmental and work safety issues.

Processes. Identifying and managing service processes. This will facilitate day-to-day work, as work processes will be documented, and will help to define objectives and indicators. As a result, efficiency and quality at work can be improved.

Customer results. Carrying out customer studies, for example, through surveys every two years, in order to receive their opinions, and using indicators indirectly showing customer satisfaction. This will make it possible to gauge customer satisfaction and to make decisions improving those issues least valued by the customers.

People results. Assessing the work environment in a systematic manner, for example, through surveys every two years, and using performance indicators. This will make it possible to detect strengths and weaknesses concerning the work environment, objectively measure certain employee results, and take actions aimed at improving the work environment and employee satisfaction.

Society results. Preparing an environmental scheme for the whole of the organisation.

Key performance results. Implementing a system analysing, evaluating and reviewing results, for example, based on indicators which can be assessed yearly by the management of the service and the organisation's quality area. This contributes to service management and allows the person responsible to use the data for decision-making.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study has led to several implications for practice. Regarding the self-assessment process, the results show that all the services have gone through all the stages of self-assessment as suggested by EFQM [18], which underlines that it is important to develop all the stages for this exercise to succeed. This involves starting out with management support and finishing with: (a) an improvement plan approved by the management and (b) a follow-up. On the results of the self-assessment process, this exercise is a quality management practice for continuous improvement; it identifies strengths and weaknesses, from which improvement actions can be defined. The improvement actions will make it possible to improve the efficiency and quality of the service and increase the level of quality management in the service. In this respect, it is important to carry out some follow-up, to verify the degree of implementation of the improvement actions. For example, efforts in implementing improvement actions (e.g. use of a set of measures such as those based on satisfaction surveys of staff and customer, amongst others) and the follow-up may help managers to refining and improve service quality in HEIs.

The improvement actions identified may help other managers of university services to set up objectives aimed at improving the quality of their services and to adopt quality practices, which would improve their level of quality management.

This study has several limitations, which are related to the case study methodology. Firstly, it is difficult to extrapolate the results learnt from these cases to other situations, while avoiding over-generalizations. Secondly, there is the researcher's bias, which has been reduced by means of the triangulation technique. Therefore, future research could focus on comparing these results with other case studies in HEIs, and performing a quantitative analysis on HEIs.

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