

Quality Assurance in Education – Slogans, Myths and Good Practices

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UDC:

Abstract:

Quality Assurance is a basic concept potentially useful in all fields of human society's activities – including education. But its approach is usually difficult for different reasons, more or less subjective. In addition, existing motivations and barriers of Quality Assurance in an organization are very few known and rarely clear for every stakeholder.

In these circumstances, some good practices in Quality Assurance may be very useful and relevant, if they are shared by involved people.

This paper is an attempt to clarify the content (what?), promoters (who?), reasons (why?), actions (how?) as well as the consequences and best practices - to be used as counter-arguments - of most known and harmful myths circulating today in Europe about Quality Assurance (and particularly about Quality Assurance in Education).

Key words: *Quality Management, Quality Assurance, education, myths, beliefs*

INTRODUCTION

One of major benefits of my work as trainer/ consultant/ auditor in Quality Management (QM) field is the opportunity to meet people being professionally involved in this field and to listen to the trials & tribulations of many dedicated management professionals within the business environment as well as to those belonging to some newcomers in QM field, mostly within public service providers environments (especially in education, public administration, and healthcare).

A topic that frequently arises in discussions is related to the fundamentals of Quality Assurance (QA) because, despite the fact that everyone states to want QA, there is still little consensus on basic questions like *what to do* and *how to do* in order to achieve QA.

In addition, the worldwide well known QA model defined by the international ISO 9000 standards (including the sine-qua-non terminology and principles as well as a set of basic requirements) is unfortunately, 20 years after the publishing of their first edition, either not very well understood or, in worst cases, "a priori" rejected (without credible arguments and without offering a better alternative!).

In my opinion, this lack of consensus is based mostly on some people's belief in persistent myths related mostly to <Quality>, <Quality Assurance> and <Quality Management> concepts.

According to some usual dictionaries, a <myth> may be defined as

- "An unfounded or false notion, a fiction or a half-truth"
- "A person or thing existing only in imagination, or whose actual existence is not verifiable"
- "A belief or story that illustrates a cultural ideal; stories that help explain how to live"
- "A mistaken yarn, theory or hypothesis"

In Quality Management field, these myths are particularly counterproductive - especially if they are accompanied by politician slogans - mainly because they are impeding the development and maintenance of a successful, effective and efficient QA system.

1.SOME MYTHS OF QUALITY ASSURANCE

1.1 The myth <Implementing QA will assure we have a quality organization>

This idea is certainly wrong, as long as QA is related only to those processes which are providing products/ services to be delivered to customer (other existing processes remaining not included). It is known that a "quality organization" may be obtained only by implementing TQM (Total Quality Management, the most efficient approach in QM) – involving every organization's process, stakeholder, manager and employee.

1.2 The myth <QA may be implemented without a QA/ QM system and QA program>

This belief is obviously wrong if there is

no quality to be assured!! Before searching to achieve QA, the quality of provided product/service must be built, established... Therefore, prior to implement a QA program it is necessary to ensure that everything necessary is in place in order to allow for quality performance. This does represent the so-called <QA system> including:

- defining, understanding and sharing the organization's mission, vision and values
- defining written policies, goals, objectives and procedures governing organization's processes
- providing organization's necessary adequate human, material, informational, energetic and financial resources
- implementing an effective "performance appraisal system" that sets standards for quality performance and achievement of the organization's mission and vision

Once all this is in place, it is possible to implement a QA program in order to ensure that the organization's goals and objectives are being met and that all its managers and employees are motivated to provide quality.

1.3 The myth <QA can be developed and maintained without Quality Management>

This is also a fiction because the true QA approach is simultaneously an organizational philosophy [10] and one of the four basic components of Quality Management (QM) approach, i.e. (according to ISO 9000:2005) [8],[11]:

- *Quality Planning* - as "part of QM focused on setting quality objectives and specifying necessary operational processes and related resources to fulfill the quality objectives"
- *Quality Control* - as "part of QM focused on fulfilling quality requirements"
- *Quality Assurance* - as "part of QM focused on providing confidence that quality requirements will be fulfilled"
- *Quality Improvement* - as "part of QM focused on increasing the ability to fulfill quality requirements"
- *Quality Management* - "coordinated activities to direct and control an organization with

regard to quality" (Direction and control with regard to quality generally includes establishment of the quality policy and quality objectives, quality planning, quality control, quality assurance and quality improvement). According to a non standardized definition of QM: "a new approach to the art of management that seeks to improve product/service quality and to increase customer satisfaction by restructuring traditional management practices".

Implementing QA means inclusion of preventive actions to the already existing effective Quality Control (including inspection and corrective actions), within a QA/ QM system.

The misunderstanding of these basic concepts and of their relationships is one of the reasons why well designed QA programs may fail to achieve long-term success.

If QA can be seen also as a system of checks and balances to ensure adherence to the organization's mission, vision and standard operating procedures, QM may be represented by its system of motivating concepts, principles, methods and tools as well as by its integrative managerial philosophy (i.e. objectives, policies, strategies, actions, etc.) [10]. Therefore, a QA program implemented without adherence to a strong and committed QM philosophy is destined to fall far short of expectations. This QM philosophy (based on focus and commitment, responsibility and authority, mutual trust, open communications, continuous improvement and leadership) forms the culture of the organization and must be one that encourages continuous improvement in an open, supportive and positive atmosphere.

1.4 The myth <QA is only management's responsibility>

This is another mistaken hypothesis since, in order to be successful, QA should be everyone's responsibility in an organization [10]. QA is not a management project or short term activity that will finish when some established goals have been achieved. It is rather an on-going process to ensure the necessary continuous improvement over the whole lifetime of the organization. Therefore, every member of the organization (managers and employees) has a personal responsibility to ensure that QA process will succeed.

2. SOME MYTHS OF ISO 9000 STANDARDS

Romanian QA experts are now aware that, during its 44 years of "socialism building", Romania, like all other former "socialist countries", adopted a quality counter-productive approach - the so-called "State Quality Control" represented by 12.000 compulsory standards, mandatory quality over-inspections of finished products in companies, all being State owned till 1990, and especially the famous State Quality Police which punished everyone unable to provide quality products! Consequently, all about 7000 Romanian "socialist" companies which operated before 1990 have fully ignored the Quality Assurance and Total Quality Management principles, techniques, methods and tools – as well as their benefits!! [9]

Now, two decades later, we have over one million for-profit organizations registered in Romania of which only about 1,5% implemented a QM/ QA system (being certified ISO 9000). In addition, only 17 Romania-based organizations were able to implement the Total Quality Management (represented by the so-called "Excellence Model" developed by EFQM), being awarded with the "J.M.Juran Romanian Quality Award" (which adopted the same model and its assessment criteria)... Unfortunately, EFQM did not succeed till now to award any Romanian company !!...

2.1 The myth <ISO 9000 is a "product standard">

Wrong – ISO 9000 is a standards family which includes different standards related to QM/ QA terminology and principles as well as a model and requirements for developing, implementing and maintaining an effective QM/QA system. This model incorporates the features on which world's experts in the QM field have reached a consensus as representing the international state of the art. A management system which follows this ISO 9001 model - or "conforms to the standard" - is built on a firm foundation of state-of-the-art practices.

The ISO 9000 standards family concern the way an organization goes about its work, and not directly the result of this work. In other words, this standard concern processes, and not products - at least, not directly. Nevertheless, the way in which the organization manages its processes is obviously going to affect its final product.

The ISO 9000 family of standards represents an international consensus on good management practices with the aim of ensuring that the organization can time and time again deliver the product or services that meet the customer's quality requirements as well as applicable regulatory requirements, while aiming to enhance customer satisfaction, and achieve continuous improvement of its performance in pursuit of these objectives. These good practices have been distilled into a set of standardized requirements for a QM/ QA system, regardless of what the implementing organization does, its size, or whether it's in the private, or public sector.

International editions of ISO 9000 standards were published in 1987, 1994, 2000 and 2008. They were soon followed by European and national editions published in some dozens of languages.

2.2 The myth <ISO 9000 is an "authorization">

Wrong – ISO 9000 is a voluntary (thus not at all compulsory or mandatory) worldwide known reference for the QM/QA system of an organization. It provides many important advantages:

- Improved consistency of service/ product performance
- Higher customer satisfaction levels.
- Improved customer perception
- Improved productivity and efficiency
- Cost reductions
- Improved communications, morale and job satisfaction
- Competitive advantage and increased marketing and sales opportunities
- International acceptance and recognition
- Facilitated trade in international markets

2.3 The myth <ISO 9000 certification is compulsory>

Wrong - it is possible to implement ISO 9001:2008 without seeking to have the resulting QM/ QA system audited and certified as conforming to the standards, by an independent, external certification body. Like all ISO standards, ISO 9001:2008 is a voluntary standard.

An organization can implement ISO 9000 standards solely for the internal benefits they bring in increased effectiveness and efficiency of its operations, without incurring the investment required in a certification program. Therefore, deciding to have an independent audit of implemented QM/ QA system, in

order to confirm that it conforms to the ISO 9001 standard, is a decision to be taken only on business grounds – if, for example:

- it is a contractual, regulatory, or market requirement,
- it meets customer preferences,
- it is part of a risk management program,
- it will motivate organization's staff by setting a clear goal for the development of the organization's management system.

2.4 The myth <ISO 9000 is a very expensive, time consuming, paper-based and useless approach>

Wrong – since even if implementing a QM/QA system is initially a costly process, its final benefits may compensate far more these costs, if the developed QM/ QA system is developed and maintained simultaneously as an useful, effective and efficient system.

In addition, many people are not aware that implementation and operation costs of a QM/QA system may be minimized by adopting an adequate scope of this system and by using exclusively soft, electronic (instead of hard, paper-based) documents of this system.

3. SOME MYTHS OF QUALITY ASSURANCE IN EDUCATION

3.1. What is Quality Assurance in European Higher Education?

In 1998 the European Council recommended to European universities the introduction of Quality Assurance (QA) principles, systems and methods in higher education.

"This recommendation envisages the introduction of quality assurance methods in higher education and the promotion of European cooperation in this field. It recommends to the Member States to establish transparent quality assessment and quality assurance systems, which should be based on a number of common principles. These principles have been established in earlier European pilot projects in this field and relate mainly to the autonomy of the institutions responsible for quality assurance, the respect of the autonomy of the higher education institutions, the various stages in the assessment procedure and the publication of quality assessment reports. Also, Member States are recommended to take follow up measures to enable higher education institutions to implement their plans for quality

improvement, which may be the result of a quality assessment procedure."

(The Council Recommendation 98/561/EC)

In September 2003, European ministers of higher education put quality assurance at the centre of the Bologna Process by underlining "the importance of European cooperation in quality assurance".

Since 1998, both at European and national levels, dozens of QA agencies were established, hundreds of QA workshops were held and thousands of QA documents were published, all consuming important resources with the stated view to "generate trust and confidence in European higher education". [3],[4],[5],[6],[7]

Some of most important such organisations established at European level in this field are the following:

- *ENQA* (the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, www.enqa.eu) which "disseminates information, experiences and good practices in the field of quality assurance (QA) in higher education to European QA agencies, public authorities and higher education institutions".

- *EQAR* (the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education, www.eqar.eu) which "aims at increasing transparency of quality assurance, and thus enhancing trust and confidence in European higher education". EQAR will list quality assurance agencies that operate in Europe and have proven their credibility and reliability in a review against the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG). First agencies were admitted in EQAR in December 2008.

3.2 What is Quality Assurance in Romanian higher education?

Having in view the prospect of its inclusion in EEC and EU at 01.01.2007, Romania started to implement the 1998 recommendation of Council by adopting in 2006 a national "Law of QA in education" (satisfying the requirements of the so-called "ESU - European Standards and Guidelines", in their original version defined by ENQA [3], even if their French version [4] has changed some very basic concepts) and by establishing in 2005 the only dedicated national agency (ARACIS = Romanian Agency for QA in Higher Education / Agenția Română de Asigurare a Calității în Învățământul Superior, www.aracis.ro).

Romanian authorities decided even to establish simultaneously a similar agency

dedicated to QA in primary and secondary education, called ARACIP (Romanian Agency for QA in Pre-university Education / Agenția Română de Asigurare a Calității în Învățământul Preuniversitar), even if European standards and practices did not ask for it!

As a candidate member of ENQA and a member of the Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (CEE Network), ARACIS succeeded, during the years 2006-2007, to assess a few dozens of about 120 operational Romanian universities, according to its own nation-wide applied, methodologies, procedures, criteria and indicators.

During the academic year 2007-2008, two European non-governmental organizations - *EUA* (European University Association, www.eua.be) and *ESU* (European Students' Union, www.esib.org) audited the ARACIS's effectiveness and published their Audit Reports [1],[2]. These documents stated that, despite its important and numerous inherent weaknesses and inherited limitations, "ARACIS is substantially compliant with the European Standards and Guidelines" and recommended that "ARACIS should be admitted as a full member of the EQAR".

As some Romanian non-governmental organizations and mass-media publicly warned many times, the lack of credibility in Romania of ARACIS's operation and assessments is obvious. Thus, the formal goal of European QA in education - i.e. to "generate trust and confidence in European higher education" - was not at all attained in Romania. All what public and private Romanian universities obtained after 3 years of "work" (2005-2008) according to the ARACIS methodology is only unnecessary paperwork, ineffectiveness, inefficiency and public money wasting!!!...

As ARACIS itself recognized, with some exceptions, in Romanian universities there are unfortunately no quality standards, techniques, methods, tools and motivation. The main reason of this situation is, in our view, mainly the lack of adequate education and training in QM of their people. In addition, QA terminology and its values are very few known, understood and shared, by Romanian higher education's stakeholders. Other reasons are, in my view, related to many existing myths of QA in education, to some old counter-productive mentalities, attitudes and behaviors as well as to general resistance and reluctance towards change of academic environment.

3.3 European and Romanian Myths of Quality Assurance in Education

Analyzing basic documents and facts related to ENQA and ARACIS, as well as ARACIS's Audit Reports, many myths may be found. Some of them were already mentioned above but others are specific to the education field. Here below are mentioned only the most harmful actual myths.

3.3.1 The myth < QA in education means to assure the quality of education >

This is a mistaken approach since a basic concept such as QA can not be "translated" or explained according to the language theories and practices. See also myths 1.1 and 1.2.

3.3.2 The myth <There are no customers in higher education; therefore it is nonsense to speak about "customers' requirements", about the need to meet these requirements and about "customers' satisfaction" within higher education >

This is obviously a wrong approach because education is a service like many others (as for example: health care, public administration, trade, etc.) without pejorative connotation. There are therefore providers and customers of this service. An acceptable equivalent of "customer" term may be, in Romanian language, the term "beneficiary". As most important stakeholders of higher education, its beneficiaries may be internal (students, graduates, etc.) and external (employers).

3.3.3 The myth < ISO 9000 is to be implemented within big manufacturing companies and, therefore, it is not adequate for higher education organizations > and the slogan <Education is a public good and, therefore, there is a need for a distinct approach in terms of QA that takes into account the multiple facets of education's role in the society >

This is a particularly important wrong approach having in view that ENQA and some national agencies (including ARACIS) have until now ignored - or even rejected, more or less formally - the ISO 9000 standards, inclusively their basic QA terminology and principles, as well as the cooperation with other European/ national organizations involved in QA matters (like, for example, EOQ and EFQM) and with existing national experts in QM/QA field, avoiding thus possible and necessary synergies as well as preferring to try - in a parallel virtual reality - "to reinvent the wheel".

Despite these counterproductive attitude and behavior generated by such myth and slogan, about 30% of Romanian universities succeeded until now to implement a QM system according to the ISO 9001 standard! Other universities did the same abroad.

World's QA experts are of course aware that ISO 9000 standards are "generic management system standards". This means that same standards can be applied to any organization, large or small, whatever its product - including whether its "product" is actually a service - in any sector of activity (including education), and whether it is a business enterprise, a public administration, or a government department.

In addition, they know enough well the document *ISO IWA 2 - Quality management systems - Guidelines for the application of ISO 9001:2000 in education*. Its basic objective is to offer guidelines in order "to assist organizations that provide educational products to implement an effective QM system" and "to help educational organizations to relate the concepts in ISO QM system standards to education practices." According to its authors, "The QM system should be the simplest one that works well. It need only be comprehensive enough to meet the quality objectives for the educational organization. Quality Control is an essential process in a QM system. Accurate measurement is not easy when assessing human performances, and appraisal is usually conducted during the educational process."

CONCLUSIONS

1. The pursuit of quality is a noble goal that should not be impeded by people's reliance on different myths. Every organization - including the universities - has the potential for developing and maintaining an effective QA system and its associated QA program. It is thus crucial to dispel the myths and to concentrate on existing realities in order to achieve these goals.

2. If ENQA already recognized that QA concept comes from business sector (both from its manufacturing and service industries), it could and should also adopt ISO 9000 as worldwide harmonized and well known standards. In addition, these standards could represent a much more efficient strategy, their adoption being able to minimize the ENQA's costs of useless workshops on QA terminology... The ISO Technical Committee involved in ISO 9000 preparation worked very

hard, during many decades, in order to develop and adopt these standards using the best possible democratic methods. These voluntary standards were later adopted also by European Norm Committee (CEN, the standardisation organization of EC) and by each European national standardisation body (including the Romanian ASRO)... This means that *all EU Member States already agreed the content of all ISO 9000 standards!*... This argument should and could be very important for ENQA and other European organizations involved in QA in education!...

3. If ENQA would like to develop its own approach of QA, continuing to ignore the standards ISO 9000 as well as their concepts, principles and practices, a much more professional and pro-active approach would be to develop and publish a comprehensive own *QA-Glossary* (after harmonizing and agreeing all definitions with all ENQA members). A good example could be for example the glossary "*INQAAHE - Analytic Quality Glossary*" (<http://www.qualityresearchinternational.com/glossary/>) developed and published by INQAAHE - the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education, a world-wide association based in Netherlands which includes "some 200 organisations that are active in the theory and practice of quality assurance in higher education". (<http://www.inqahe.org>).

4. A public analysis of EUA and ESU Audit Reports on ARACIS - with the involvement of internationally recognized Romanian experts in QM - would be very useful in Romania in order to establish what and how should be changed in the actual Romanian approach of QA in education (including the 2006 Law on QA in education which was not reviewed within the two recent European audits of ARACIS).

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