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The End of Quality?

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From quality control to quality assurance: how to change behaviour

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Abstract

The Hogeschool van Amsterdam was nationally widely acknowledged for their system of quality control. However, this did not lead to high ranking in quality surveys. We concluded that we put too much emphasis on controlling quality instead of assuring quality. Assuring quality means that every employee is aware of the quality standards we want to achieve. Therefore, attention should be directed from instruments to behaviour. To help employees in thinking and acting according to quality standards, we developed a model with explicit criteria. This enables groups of employees to discuss about quality standards in concrete terms.

Outline

Over the last five years, The Hogeschool van Amsterdam (HvA)¹, a university of professional education, has established a sophisticated system of quality control. Emphasis was put on measuring the outcomes of our processes and relating them to the goals we have set. The comparison should lead, if necessary, to further improvements. Throughout these years, the HvA had developed for instance an instrument like STEM, a yearly survey among all students, measuring their satisfaction. Next to this a planning and control cycle was implemented, based on a structured planning and monitoring of activities. Unfortunately, this did not lead to an overall increase of the quality of our programmes. In a nation-wide survey on overall quality of higher education, the HvA is not ranked in the top 10 of best professional universities.

¹ The Hogeschool van Amsterdam is the largest institution of its kind in the Greater Amsterdam region. It has over 19500 students, 1600 staff members and 70 study programmes clustered in 21 institutions. The 70 study programmes cover the fields of technology, maritime sciences, commerce and administration, information,

What did we do wrong?

- We were too much focussed on the controlling aspects, that is, on measuring afterwards.
- The system of quality control was made explicit mainly by instruments.
- We had no agreement beforehand on quantitative criteria.
- Quality control was too much an isolated activity of or two employees within an institution.

The overall conclusion was that, although quality control was well developed and implemented, it could not be considered as an integral part of our behaviour. Quality control was mainly seen as a necessary, but also annoying, activity. Personnel had difficulty in translating outcomes of surveys into concrete actions. Outcomes easily lead to a need for more data, more questions and more instruments. It also turned out that colleagues had different ideas about what certain criteria, guidelines and protocols actually meant. This led to a wide range in behaviour of teachers and tutors, leaving students from time to time confused about what was to be expected from them. Also, on the level of board of directors and staff members, no explicit criteria were formulated. Last, but not least, various institutions had difficulty in focussing on the main issues for improvement, planning too many activities and getting frustrated by not getting everything done.

How could we change the perspective from control to assurance? First of all, we had to realise a simple but basic assumption; it is people who make quality. Next, we should make this basic assumption our leading principle. And finally, in order to raise the quality of our programmes, more emphasis should be put on quality assurance instead of quality control, without putting away the valuable instruments we have developed. To change behaviour we should, instead of putting our main effort into evaluating and measuring, be more aware of qualitative standards we want to achieve before we actually start. That means, beforehand, developing shared ideas about the standards of quality we want to achieve.

To change the perspective from quality control to quality assurance, a model was developed, with the aim to help institutions to make clear their criteria. As a leading perspective were taken the criteria of the national board of accreditation in higher professional education. They were translated into to relevant criteria, specifically adjusted to the mission and objectives of the HvA. This model is a means to establish shared ideas about quality standards. It makes it possible to discover differences in views and opinions because it enhances discussion.

Quality assurance as an overall concept of quality means, next to thinking and talking about quality standards, a clear perspective on its role in the planning and controlling processes. The planned activities throughout a year are as follows:

- setting qualitative and quantitative standards on the basis of shared conclusions about the quality of the present situation;
- selecting the main topics of improvement for the next year;
- defining actions and preferred outcomes;
- integrate actions in the yearly overall plan of activities;
- evaluating and reporting every three months on progress.

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