

VALUES SUPPORTING QUALITY PROMOTED BY ROMANIAN UNIVERSITIES ON INTERNET

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Abstract:

The main of this paper is to analyze values of organizational culture that support quality promoted by Romanian universities via Internet. The research, of synchronous type, a qualitative one, subsumed to interpretive paradigm, focuses on the following research methods and techniques: critical analysis of the literature regarding the culture in universities, culture-quality relationship and adequate dissemination of messages on quality orientation, qualitative analysis of information from universities' websites. The study outcomes can be used by Romanian universities for a more efficient dissemination of quality related messages via Internet and organizational values they promote in conjunction with this aspect.

Key Words: *organizational culture, organizational values, Romanian universities, quality, Internet*

JEL classification: I23, O33

Introduction

Enabling organizations to use culture as a source of competitive advantage has been emphasized in the last decades of the last century, when cultural differences were identified between Japanese organizations and those from United States or Western Europe. It is the period when cultural studies gather momentum, highlighting values that lead to performance. In theory, there are clarified concepts such as organizational culture; the first studies in this direction were made by Clark (1972) and Pettigrew (1973). Concerns of wide scope are developed, especially among American and European researchers, toward understanding the source of high performance of Japanese companies (Nica, 2006, p 46). Subsequently, the literature in this area develops the idea that culture is an essential element that can contribute to the objectives of firms, especially in the context of globalization, characterized by action in a highly, global competitive environment. Competition operates both within the labor force and the clients. Under these conditions, managers must have skills for managing complex teams whose members belong to different countries and cultures; they must know how to exploit their cultural potential; they should ensure the marketing of products and services that address to clients who differ in terms of the values they hold.

The technological revolution that has occurred along recent decades, especially the emergence of Internet, has made possible global communication, access to information resources that enables comparative analysis, development of partnerships, and promotion of a virtually unlimited space.

Universities, whose central role is keeper of traditions, but also conductor in the creation of new values, observer of the environment and initiator of changes in society, are now undergoing a process of transformation as well. On the one hand, new technologies provide opportunities, resulting in the possibility of accessing new markets, participation in international scientific projects with major impact on the image and quality of the provided educative products / services, and numerous threats as a result of the fierce competition at global level which they are involved in (in terms of target market - students that will be attracted, available funds, researches' outcomes and possibility of their application), a decrease of students' recruitment because of a significant population migration, etc.

Under these conditions, the quality of provided service should be the focus of management's concerns, being the source for ensuring further universities' development or even their existence. In higher education, for a long time, quality was imposed from outside, by measurement and control of externally received accreditation, audit, evaluation (Iacovidou, 2009). It is the same case for the Romanian Higher Education, where the government, by the educational ministry, established the rules for quality assurance in higher education (Order No. 3928 on April 21, 2005 regarding quality assurance of education services in higher education). In this way, national commissions established to provide quality education aimed at achieving social objectives, as adaptation of the educational offer to labor market changes, attaining some general aims. In recent years, however, universities have started to adopt internal quality monitoring systems in order to create competitive advantage to ensure their future development in the new market conditions.

Regardless of the definition of quality, there are different opinions, but a consensus has been reached in the international academic communities as to [Ekong et.a., in Sârbu et.a., 2009, p. 385]:

- attaining and maintaining the highest possible standards, proved by mechanisms of identifying and meeting social needs;
- a commitment to the systematic identification of opportunities, of strong suits and weak areas;
- the efficient use of resources;
- renewing the education curricula and teaching methods;
- developing permanent programs of staff specialization and training;
- the capacity to adjust rapidly to the needs of students and other interested parties;
- the elaboration of realistic assessment procedures;
- supplying adequate financial resources.

Harvey considered that quality assurance in higher education involved the need to continually improve the quality of students' experience, through staff development, innovation in teaching and learning, research and scholarship activity (Harvey, 1994, in Raj, 2006, p. 7). Whatever the mode of defining quality in education, it is necessary to consider stakeholders' needs. In their works, Cheng and Tam mention internal stakeholders (students, staff) and external ones (employers, government, institutional management, prospective students, professional organizations) which must be considered by a quality management system in universities (Cheng and Tam in Iacovidou, et. a, p. 2). Some models that universities have implemented are those adapted to International Standards Organization (ISO), British Standards Institution, Baldrige National Quality Award, The European Foundation of Quality Management, and in recent years - the principles of TQM (Total Quality Management). In this paper, we refer both to internal and external systems of quality assurance, to identify how organizational values supporting quality are communicated through channels based on new technologies, namely the Internet.

Quality assurance is directly related to organizational culture, as shown by studies carried out mainly by Rad. Pearson mentioned that a quality management system such as TQM was a management approach in which the application of practices like teamwork, relationship with internal customers and partnership with suppliers represented tools for cultural transformation and which involved a major cultural change within the organization (Pearson, 1995, in Rad, 2006, p. 106).

Organizational culture includes all rules, beliefs, values, customs and practices of the organization (Ott, 1989, in Goodman, 1994, p. 179) or a set of assumptions shared by members of a group as those that allow solving problems of adaptation to the external environment and integration in the internal environment; they provided good

enough results to be considered valid and therefore, to be adopted by new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems (Schein, 1992). Members of the organization acquire and learn these values and norms and they consider them as a model of problem solving, behavior and thinking within the company. This model is transmitted by seniors to the newcomers in the organization.

Fundamental values and beliefs of an organization are related to the following three important areas in its operation (Kenneth, Kiser, 1993, in Sashkin etc., 1993):

- Attaining the objectives (focusing on customers' needs);
- Human resources (their involvement in decision making);
- Coordination of work efforts (implementing a participative leadership style, performance appraisal and reward system of the employees).

Values orientation reflects also orientation towards quality. There are values and dimensions of organizational culture consistent with it, as there are values that prevent or constitute barriers to the development of quality in academia or, more generally, in the organizational environment. For example, a strong culture necessary to promote quality, is based on values as entrepreneurship, risk taking, stability-flexibility balance, attention to detail, collaboration, creativity, learning orientation, power of anticipation, long-term orientation, innovation, due to organic structures, while a low culture, characterized by lack of participation, discrimination, bureaucracy, uncertain climate, short-term orientation and so on, associated to a mechanical structure, is a barrier to the implementation of quality management (Rad, 2006, p. 610). Other studies present a dimension of organizational culture - orientation towards performance - with a high impact on quality (Globe Studies).

II. Design and method

The main aim of this research is to identify how the Romanian universities communicate via Internet, **the concern regarding the provided quality of products / services and their related organizational values.**

The main objectives are:

- Analysis of information regarding quality posted by 5 universities on their websites;
- Identify quality related values, which the involved universities communicate through such messages (implicitly or explicitly).

The research, of synchronous type, a qualitative one, subsumed to interpretive paradigm, focuses on the following research methods and techniques: critical analysis of the literature regarding the culture in universities, culture-quality relationship and adequate dissemination of messages on quality orientation, qualitative analysis of information from universities' websites, observation.

The sample included ten universities from Iasi, Bucharest and Cluj-Napoca, including large institutions, traditional ones, positioned among the first ten universities in specialized tops realized by the European University Association, with national and international widespread popularity, due to the number of students, developed researches and partnerships they are members in (according to Order 5262/2011 regarding the finding of universities classification results).

III. Results and discussions

When we talk about quality, we consider that it should be seen as an integrated value, as the sum of attributes of the products / services provided by organizations that meet stakeholder needs. In such an approach, focus on quality of universities requires a strong organizational culture that is based on values that support quality: employee involvement, autonomy, team work, responsibility, participative leadership, customer satisfaction, innovation.

In this article we are interested in the values promoted by the Romanian universities online, and the manner in which the message regarding the orientation of culture towards quality is disseminated and supported by web-based information channels (own websites), because at least of two reasons:

- It indicates the universities' concern for improving the quality (at least at declarative level);
- It contributes to the increase of receiver's confidence (client or potential client of educational services, employee, supplier, etc.), being interpreted by comparison with other messages and leading to the formation of perceptions on quality in different universities.

With regard to the latter aspect, we consider the semiotic perspective of the notion of culture, because the provided "signs", regarding the quality in this case, can be interpreted differently, depending on specific cultural grids that indicate specific expectations. This is why the qualitative analysis of data from university websites comprises two components:

- a) Explicit posts on orientation towards quality (quality statement posted on the website, existence of departments with explicit tasks, duties and responsibilities in this respect);
- b) Messages that refer implicitly to quality, through values consistent with it, expressed in paragraphs / pages regarding the mission and vision, purpose, goals etc.

On the main page of universities involved in this study, explicit information are posted regarding the orientation towards quality, with a separate section allocated to quality management. There is a Commission for quality evaluation and assurance, and a quality department or service, the mission and objective of this structure, audit reports, quality certifications obtained by them; a Procedures Manual is usually included, describing the main procedures and supporting guidelines. These data are posted on the mean websites, but sometimes are very technical and it is difficult to identify the organizational values from its. The most important documents which refer to organizational culture and values supporting quality are, in our opinion, the university Charta, the codes of ethics and the chapters describing the institutions.

Most of universities mentions in different sections the concern for the culture of innovation and knowledge transfer, as well as the quality of the research staff and dedication to achieve excellence, specific to an organizational culture needed to ensure a high quality of work. It is also specified the customers orientation, by increasing employability of graduates, adjustment of the offer to the demand of the labor market. The posted Codes of Ethics and Professional Deontology also lists a number of principles that are reflected in creating and maintaining a quality oriented organizational culture: empathy, pedagogic partnership and mutual aid pedagogy, individual and / or organizational autonomy in developing the scientific research, in the didactic activity and innovation and in fructifying the scientific research outcomes, stimulation of creativity and a proper recognition of performance activities, assuming the responsibility for the staff's decisions taken (UMFB, 2011).

In their mission, universities state their desire to create and support "a culture of action based on systematic innovation and knowledge, a culture of lifelong learning and an innovative one, a culture of competence, a culture of personal and moral development, proactive attitude and participation" (UBB, 1), high quality of education, scientific research results of high quality, suitable climate for personal development of the members of the academic community, transparency of the institutional management, developing relationships with alumni, strengthen the spirit of university community (ASE, 2). It is also specified the tasks of institutions in "the growth and advancement of knowledge, education of students, through a modern educational process, focused on

students, learning outcomes and social commitment” (UB, 1) or the need for openness to everything new in the cultural and scientific environment, to promote an independent and creative intellectual work style. Civic responsibility is another value, which the universities mission is focused on.

Therefore, there are promoted student-centered educational values, independent and creative working style, professionalism and quality (orientation towards internal customers), social engagement, partnerships (orientation towards external stakeholders). It is an organizational culture that favors quality, through the promoted values.

The analysis developed on the information provided by the institutions on their websites indicates a major concern for quality assurance of activities / processes from within. Values promoted by universities and which are the base of such approaches can be systematized in a synthetic manner (Fig. 1).

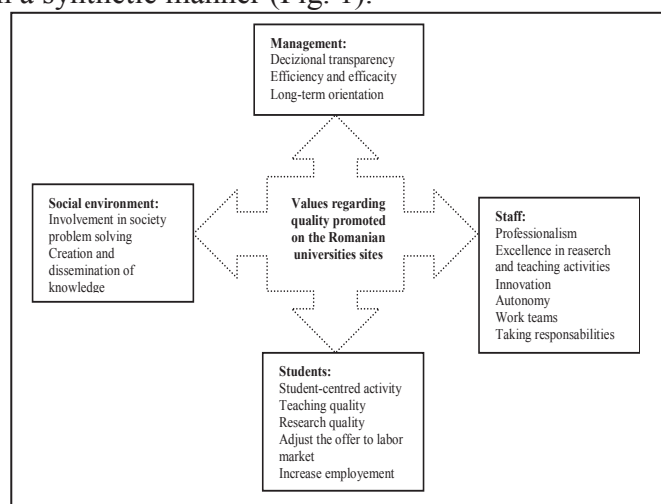


Figure 1: Values regarding quality promoted on the Romanian universities sites

These values were grouped on the stakeholders to whom universities address when they disseminate messages regarding quality, explicitly or implicitly. The first concern is on present and future students, all universities involved in the study declaring their intention to focus teaching and learning on students’ needs, adapting the educational offer to the requirements of the labor market, creating and maintaining the didactic material required for a quality oriented education. It is the most common message on the analyzed websites, as it targets major-considered customers by universities, in a market in decline and with a significant competition.

Another component of the messages envisages also the internal stakeholders: university staff, emphasizing values such as autonomy, professionalism and excellence in their activities, taking responsibility for teaching and research (coordination of bachelor degrees, doctoral, master works and development of works that respect property rights in particular), developing work teams in research projects with national and international visibility.

General social environment is another category of stakeholders that universities have in view in the creation or rather the preservation and development of values regarding the traditional role that society places to them: involvement in solving general issues, partnership with social environment, creation and dissemination of knowledge for the benefit of society as a whole.

Values of academic leadership focus primarily on decisional transparency, efficiency and efficacy of activities and long-term orientation (making plans and strategies for 3-5 years).

Conclusions and key contributions

All ten universities involved in the study communicate, at least at declarative level, on their websites, a major concern for the quality of products / services they provide to their customers. Organizational culture and the promoted values that support quality refer mainly to the orientation towards the needs of current and potential students, through student-centered curriculum, adapting the offer to the labor market, providing necessary material and technical base for teaching and learning. As well, processes' quality can be reached only with a highly qualified staffs, requiring professionalism, total commitment, taking responsibility, continuous innovation and development of interdisciplinary work teams that can run complex projects and create a sense of belonging to the university community. Social environment is a direct beneficiary of the research outcomes and teaching activities of universities, and it is included in the messages regarding quality. Decisional transparency, efficiency and efficacy of managers and long-term orientation are values emphasized by the studied universities, absolutely necessary aspects for the high quality products / services they offer.

Such messages regarding the values are disseminated explicitly (through information about quality - quality assurance departments, manual procedures) and implicitly through the mission, vision and strategies of universities.

We consider that explicit messages regarding quality have greater impact on the receivers, while implicit messages depend on their interpretation. Considering that this mode of interpretation has a higher dose of subjectivity, we anticipate the recommendation of providing data through explicit communication, to convey concern for coherent strategies to increase quality, with positive impact on the organizational image. Values that support quality should be disseminated explicitly, so that there is real consistency between the plans and the strategies regarding quality and the promoted organizational culture. Receivers' reaction at communication stimuli with connotative or symbolic feature, users of significations depending on their personal goals, may be different or even contrary to the intentions of communication, which leads us to the idea that concern for quality should also cover the quality of messages' communication on quality. In fact, one of the components of quality management is even information management (in addition to employee management, customer management, suppliers management and materials management - Rad, 2006, p. 610).

The value of the study consists in the manner of the paper's approach: information on university websites is analyzed to detect the values they promote in conjunction with concern for quality. With such an approach, at a time when messages communicated via Internet have a significant impact on public's perception, we recommend to promote explicitly the values that support the quality on this channel.

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