EXPLORATION OF QUALITY BENCHMARKS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE REALM OF TOURISM: A THEORETICAL ASSESSMENT

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INTRODUCTION

Modern educational programmes have emerged in answer to the developing demands for human resources, which will be able to cope in a globalized environment constantly evolving and changing. (Amoah & Baum, 1997).

The intentions of the present publication concentrate on the following issues:

A.   Conceptual approach of the philosophy of the principles of the holistic quality administration, in the context of human resources management with the main advantage of creating suitable pre-requisites for the rendering of upgraded educational services.

B.   The application of a method of benchmarking as a basic standard of comparative assessment of the best educational achievements of departments of similar cognitive objectives, so as to specialize the mission, vision and aims through the acquisition of an advantage over rivals.

C.   Expressing Conclusions\Suggestions with the view to encouraging initiatives and taking quality measures within the context of higher tourist education activities as a whole.

Key words: benchmarking, tourism, higher education, quality

CONCEPTUAL APPROACH OF THE FORMATION OF THE HOLISTIC QUALITY ADMINISTRATION, IN THE CONTEXT OF HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT

The application of the philosophy of the holistic quality administration to Higher Tourist Education demands self control, autonomy and creativity which develop in an environment of cooperation to the effect of a consistent effort towards a constant improvement of the quality of three key parameters: a) Product b) Process c) Personnel. At the same time, Higher Tourist Education as well as other educational sectors should provide high quality educational services so as to develop "specified competitive quality and to have a clear perception of their mission" (Mathews, William, 1993: 102-108). Furthermore, their governing values should be supported so that all parties involved in the shaping of the educational policy can perceive the aims and commitments through the expression of appropriate standards of performance so as to evaluate the outcome and justly apportion the benefits.

The effective assessment of performance as a monitoring technique requires models, information and corrective movements. The models indicate the acceptable levels of performance for each position. The information is a countable standard of true performance in work in comparison with the models. The corrective movements concern measures

to restore any inconsistency between the true performance and the model. (Terzidis & Tzortzakis, 2004 : 135)

This requires that all the members of the educational system play a multipurpose role through the updating of their intellectual skills and achieve the ultimate in the sense of perfecting culture aided by the experiences in the field of administration (Tsiotras, 2002:141). In practice, this means that, according to Bechard & Harris (1987) and Bush & Bell (2002:56-57), the executives of educational organizations ought to:

- Set goals and be fully aware of the direction in which they are heading.

- Define the organizational structure according to the demands of the goals set and not to the administrative authority or the need to comply.

- Co-ordinate the educational work and contribute to the shaping of a flexible, creative and directly effective workplace.

- Make decisions with a spirit of cooperation, based on the accurate approach of information and common interest.

- Manage human resources with respect and appreciation of their identity, stature and contribution, thus facilitating their work and a more objective assessment (Varvaressos S.,Sotiriadis M., 2003:143-162).

FORMATION OF A HANDBOOK OF QUALITY IN EDUCATION

The necessity for the formation of a handbook for the study of the assessment of the holistic quality of Tertiary Tourist Education, according to the standards of the Quality Assurance Agency For Higher Education (**QAA**) is concerned with the establishment of suitable standards, the updating as well as the encouragement for constant improvement of quality, the recognition of strengths and weaknesses, the independent and valid information concerning higher education services. (Prinianaki E. & Loupa P. 2007).

Taking into consideration contemporary tendencies concerning the degree of effectiveness of the Education in relation to modern work market demands we deem the need for an in-depth assessment urgent, the need for

a procedure which will emphasize self- evaluation, a method to collect data from inspections conducted, an approach which will comprehend the special needs of the educational organizations and their operating environment (Kaplanis, 2007).

This approach could be based on the continuous utilization of dialogue and feedback with the Department under evaluation, on the exploitation of the experience acquired by the students, on the conduct of thorough research with clear target, on coordinated action of the groups conducting and composing the assessment, judgment or recommendation for the standard of the services provided by the departments, on the recognition of the best practices for the assurance of quality (Stavrakis & Karageorgou, 2007).

According to James (2003), the primary target of those involved in the shaping of the Model Of Holistic Quality is their commitment to the comprehension of the organizing processes of estimating and back feeding of the results quality and quantity wise. The awareness of quality must be part of an established programme whereas the improvement is accompanied by the concept of corrective action and its application (James, 2003: 81).

According to the actions of the Quality Assurance Agency For Higher Education in Great Britain (**QAA**), the report is written in such a way as to ensure its objectivity, its accuracy and its usefulness for the educational organization. It contains the assessors' conclusions and recommendations, but no judgments, it is concerned with the presentation of the optimum practices for dissemination and is conducted on three levels www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/IQER/handbook/IQERPilotHandbook.pdf: a) The desirable recommendations which refer to issues able to enhance the quality and the institution's capability to maintain the standards. b) The advisory recommendations which refer to issues able to jeopardize the quality in the future and require particular attention. c) The essential recommendations which refer to issues already jeopardizing the quality and require immediate attention. The aim of the above is optimum publicity of the assessments which promotes a form of benchmarking in which all the educational institutions will be involved in a process of emulation.

COMPARATIVE ASSESSMENT OF PERFORMANCE IN TERTIARY TOURIST EDUCATION

The comparative benchmarking is a method of enhancing the functioning of the enterprise\institution through the definition and adoption of the best tried "optimum" practices (Bourantas & Papalexandri, 2003). The term "comparative assessment" is used in order to define the level of performance of each educational organization, with concrete targets, so as to allow the evaluation of the progress. Comparison with rivals enables the organization to mark its boundaries in relation to other institutions which offer similar educational services.

Therefore, benchmarking is a process through which educational organizations (Dervitsiotis, 2001: 429) select sectors to enhance their educational work and answer the question: how is our performance judged in relation to that of the leaders' of the educational field who have achieved the best performances? The best practices of other educational organizations are studied and also answer the question: where must we focus our efforts in order to bridge the gap and become more effective as against our rivals? By applying new methods and systems to enhance productivity and quality, they answer the question: where are our weaknesses, which are the targets set, and which are the performances of our rivals especially those who have utilized effective practices? (Karagiannis, 1992: 48).
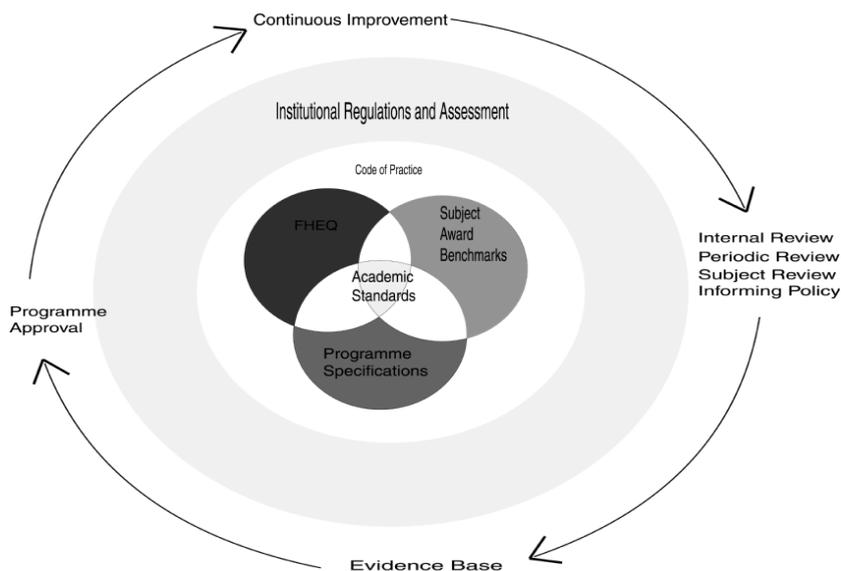
BENCHMARKING IN TERTIARY TOURIST EDUCATION

Benchmarking is one of the most widely applied methods of drawing conclusions and comparing data of organizations of the same kind (Athanasopoulos, 2007). The importance of benchmarking in the management of the international tourist phenomenon, is evident from the creation of the benchmarking committee under the auspices of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which supports the shaping of a strategic for tourism, awakens the cooperating parties for the discovery of viable solutions, helps to pinpoint deficiencies and shortcomings, estimates potential achievements of optimum practices,

aiming at the solution of the problems which arise in OECD countries. (2007 www.oecd.org)

Nonetheless, which are the methodological process and the main points of comparison that form the basis upon which the success of an educational programme will be evaluated holistically so as to develop future quality initiatives targeting at reinforcing and enriching the competitive position of the educational organization in general?

The diagram depicts the commitments of the educational organization which it ought to abide by with the basic data from the Optimum Practice Code (Self-evaluation – Assessment of Programmes), the academic standards, assisted by the systems and the quality assurance and management mechanisms, after having related the academic infrastructure to the students experience as well as to the evaluation of performance between the organization under observation and the optimum performance model (Bank,2000: 42-43).

Diagram 1

Continuous Improvement

Institutional Regulations and Assessment

Code of Practice

FHEQ

Subject Award Benchmarks

Academic Standards

Programme Specifications

Internal Review
Periodic Review
Subject Review
Informing Policy

Programme Approval

Evidence Base

Quality Assurance Agency For Higher Education 2006

At this stage we can define the Critical Success Factors (CSFs) (Evans, Campbell, Stonehouse, 2003) such as devotion to the educational work, expansion of higher tourist education into the international market by seeking executives even in multinational educational organizations with high performance criteria (Gratton, 2003). Furthermore, the constant research on models of procedures and standards will result in the relocation and redefinition of the services provided, fund seeking, development of excellent skills (best in class) and reinforcement of competitiveness, conditions which are essential to every 21ˢᵗ century educational organization (Johnson, Scholes, Whittington, 2006).

Access to information is undertaken by a group of experts who communicate with key-contacts in specific reference organizations (Xiggi, 2000) fact which assists all the educational organizations involved (David, 2007). Consequently, the effectiveness of the programmes of studies, the professional development of the graduates, the structure of the syllabus, the steps towards professional cooperations on a national and international level, the assessment of teaching staff, the contribution and the results of the examination procedure, the standards of performance of the research work of academic staff and the standards of excellence and quality of the administrative organization of services are the main factors of educational strategy. It ought to be noted that devotion, motivation and performance of the staff cannot be assessed by means of a checklist alone (Wheelen, Hunger, 2006).

However, to fully understand the model, the measurement and comparative analysis of performance are materialized in four consecutive stages: "Plan-Do-Check-Act" (Evans, Lindsay, 2002: 587-588):

- Stage 1 includes the design and the choice of the key factors, adapted to performance. In this case members of the educational organization are committed to "supporting the assessment as operational philosophy which contributes to the perfection of quality and innovative adjustment" (Airey & Tribe, 2005: 501-506). Assessment , on the other hand, is not limited to administrative procedures only, but takes into account the human factor as well as the use of technology (Bogan, English, 2007).

- Stage 2 refers to the collection of information during which the parties involved are informed of the results of the study\research in progress, (Ladkin, 2005: 437-447) in relation to the measurements of the performance

of rivals. The fact that enhancements are constant and the comparative measurements are soon rendered obsolete is a parameter that ought to be taken into consideration. It is possible that the performance of rivals will continue to improve at a faster pace. The following sectors of skills, knowledge and experience are considered: the development of institutional infrastructure, clear comprehension of the basic issues related to learning and the possibility of its development within the broader statutory goals or missions. (Lewis, Smith, 1994: 85-104).

- In Stage 3 the educational procedures must be reviewed and enhanced. Evaluation is useful only when it is applied and part of a structured programme which leads to detailed analysis. "It covers procedures administratively as well as academically and the methodology ought to go beyond superficial issues and allow flexibility as to the way of its guidance, through study\research of the most significant operational procedures for the achievement of the holistic quality" (2007, www.apqc.org). No communicational tool is stronger than the actions of the leadership when it comes to the enhancement of performance. Consequently, many organizations call upon their senior members of staff to form behaviours, adopt views, and acquire skills and take actions which support the organization. Assessment must be a common practice amongst the group of the leadership of every organization (Liston, 1999). Borrowing the best practices from the pioneers in the market and the international quality is an effective means of regulating change and exercising pressure for constant enhancement.

- In Stage 4 , according to Liston 1999: 98-120 & Bogan C.E., English M.J. (2007) "The schemes of action determine the ranked interventions of the administration for the achievement of goals with time escalation of the appropriate actions and noting of the necessary means and corresponding expenses. While applying measures aiming at the achievement of the goals of enhancement of the quality, the team in charge detects opportunities or obstacles which make reviewing imperative at regular intervals" (Vellas, Becherel, 1999: 56-57) of the goals of enhancement which emerged from interuniversity comparisons of competitive performances.

When the educational institution pinpoints the best practices it must successfully share and expand the knowledge. (Bogan, English, 2007). At the same time reliable answers are offered to questions like: In what ways can the organization invest in the training of its human resources who are willing

to adopt innovative ideas and practices from external sources so as to encourage the exchange of ideas and better distribution of practice through the use of the existing systems? Although answers are not easy, we believe that areas of work must be designed, the practices of rivals must be evaluated, libraries and notice boards must be created, innovations and practices which show true results must be announced. "Even when the ideas of another educational organization are not truly adopted, the stereotype examination of innovative practices is a challenge in the frame of the forming strategic schemes of the organization" (Middaugh, 2001: 157-158). The reports almost always suggest that comparative assessment:

- ➢ Broadens the functional prospect of the organization, creating a cultural environment open to new ideas. It increases the sense of job satisfaction in first rate employees through their participation and the strengthening of the sense of proprietorial professional prospect (Varvaressos S., Sotiriadis M., 2005:35-54).
- ➢ It contributes to the creation of a workforce of pioneering achievement, encouraging initiative and creative thought while performing their duties (Thompson, Strickland, Gamble, 2007).

- ➢ It overcomes the natural doubtfulness of the employees using techniques of motivation and reward so that the result is oriented towards a broader working atmosphere, in order to achieve the standards of higher performance (Thompson, Strickland, Gamble, 2007).

The process of benchmarking is considered especially suitable for higher educational institutions because it does not focus only on detailed mechanisms of comparison, but mainly on the effect of these comparisons/evaluations on the behaviour of the workforce (Johnson, Scholes, Whittington, 2006). They discover that it helps to overcome resistance to change, it offers a structure for external evaluation and it creates new networks of communication between departments of the same cognitive objectives where the valuable information and experiences can be shared.

CONCLUSIONS/SUGGESTIONS

The department of education in the tourist industry, includes accommodation, recreation, sport and tourism enterprises, it demands the analysis of the particularities of each programme for every cognitive unit, showing a great degree of flexibility in order to facilitate designing, delving into syllabuses of the cognitive units and seeking the desirable results (Dale, Robinson, 2001). Contemporary educational tendencies reflect the existence of tourist programmes which incorporate notions and ideas from other scientific domains, such as: sociology, anthropology, civilization (Athanasiou, 2004).

Qualifications in the particular cognitive fields refer to:

- Consideration of the ideology and the characteristics of Tourism as an academic as well as applied scientific subject.
- Examination of the nature and the characteristics of the domain studied.
- Research on the products, the structures, the functions, the transactions of the tourist industry.
- Analysis of the social dimensions of the tourist phenomenon.

Although the majority of the programmes constitute an overview of the fore mentioned points, each programme focuses on a different area. They are multi-disciplinary and the majority presents an applied and inter-disciplinary goal.

Furthermore, a vital role is undertaken by the realization of research projects as well as the acquisition of specific skills, among which are:

Knowledge, that is to say comprehension of the subject, multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary approach of the studies drawing data from the field of services, research projects, acquisition of problem-solving abilities.

Mental Powers such as approach, evaluation and the ability to think critically upon theories, principles, notions. Synthesis – analysis – interpretation. Application of knowledge through elaboration of logical arguments so as to resolve pressing issues.

<u>Key skills</u> such as communication – presentation of written and spoken language, participation in teams and solidary cooperation, problem solving, crisis management, ability for self-assessment and its application to practice, programming of learning procedures.

<u>General Skills</u> such as designing, programming, execution of practices using appropriate techniques, ability to convey part of one's intellectual product, recognition, response to moral and security issues, legal matters in direct relation to the cognitive subject.

The designers of the programme of studies, according to the proposed actions of Quality Assurance Agency For Higher Education in Great Britain (2007) www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/honours/hospitality.pdf , should ensure that " general" knowledge form the basis of all programmes. However, skills may vary and will always be put in specific and specialized frames in conjunction with the rudiments defined by the guidelines of each cognitive subject.

According to the above when the qualification contains the term "administration", the students should show professional administrative abilities and knowledge through professional practice, they should evaluate and apply notions relevant to the functional and strategic administration of funds, human and natural resources, they should comprehend the necessity of conserving resources in society.

When the programme contains the term "science", the students should comprehend the philosophical basis of the scientific examples, they should show ability to conduct research, to interpret and analyse relevant data and technologies.

When the programme contains the term "studies", the students should be able to critically approach the contribution of the various academic fields to the development of a specific scientific subject, they should show a satisfactory degree of development in their domain, they should possess a substantial knowledge of their discipline.

To sum up, a graduate of a programme of tourist education ought to comprehend and appreciate the contribution of various disciplines to the interpretation of the nature and development of tourism, to interpret but

also question theories and notions, to comprehend the local as well as the international nature of the dimensions of the tourist phenomenon, to exploit, investigate, realize the dynamic nature of tourism in contemporary societies, to comprehend the structure, function, organization of the public and private factors as well as their activities, to analyse the relationship between consumers of tourism and those who offer tourist services, to evaluate the effect and consequences of tourism on a social, political, cultural, environmental level, to interpret the characteristics of the demands of tourism as well as the factors which formulate them, to perceive the cultural value of tourism and to understand the behaviour of tourists in their various destinations.

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