

EDUCATION SERVICES QUALITY – A MUST FOR A COMPETITIVE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM AT A EUROPEAN LEVEL

Olaru Silvia

Spiru Haret” University, Faculty of Marketing and International Business , Splaiul Independenței, nr. 313, Bucharest, Sector 6 , 0040 21 3169793, olarudelia@yahoo.com

Considering the present economic development, human resources represent the essential element of competition, at both national and international level. In the global competition of the IT economy, quality and human resources ingenuity are the main factors that differentiate countries.

Taking into consideration Alfred Marshall’s statement: “the most valuable of all capital is that invested in human beings”, we consider the quality of human resources in general and that of education in particular to be a key factor for general economic growth.

Key words: human resources, quality, education, quality management

Introduction

Specialists say that there is a very close relation between the technological progress and the investment in education influencing all areas of life: economy, society, politics, and culture. Although the most wide spread idea about quality is that it’s expensive, researches have shown that this idea is false. The quality of education is a desired social objective, and its contribution to general efficiency of economy is determinant.

Seen as a corporate culture model, total quality management has the purpose of orienting all its activities and processes towards the client and of optimizing them, so that they bring him long term benefits. The customers of the education services are both the people who benefit from them and their family but also the society as a whole.

The deficiencies of educational institutions’ management come from the orientation towards solving and diminishing quality problems as they arise rather than increasing the quality of processes and activities that generate these problems, the duality of organizational structures in the educational system and the tendency of self isolation of the personnel and functional subdivisions, the faulty analyses and institutional quality management measurement processes and often solving quality issues after a “late modernization” model.

1. Human Resources – A Key Factor for Economic and Social Development

Considering the present global economic development, the human resources represent the essential element of competition, at both corporate and national level. In the global competition of the IT economy, quality and human resources ingenuity are the main factors that differentiate countries.

People represent the main source of any economy on its way to modernization. The human resources that are educated, healthy, with a high physical and intellectual potential, able to be educated during the whole cycle of life and that adapt themselves to the economic changes, are essential for an economic growth model based on competitiveness, efficiency and quality.

Based on the existence of “living organizations”, managers have reached the conclusion that human resources represent the soul of those organizations (Mathis, R.L., Nica, P.C., Rusu, 1997).

Economic growth depends directly on work productivity. Higher capital investments and technological modernization, although necessary, are not sufficient to obtain these productivity improvements. This is why the improvement of human resources quality is necessary as an inherent condition that in the end implies the structural increase and optimization of public and private investments in key domains of human development, first of all in education and health.

The quality of human resources represents a sum of properties and characteristics of the human resources of an organization. The books written on this subject, refer to quality sometimes as “utility”, “capability to utilize”, or “conformity with the requirements” (S.Ciurea, N. Dragulanescu, 1995). Each of these

expressions represents aspects of quality that require further explanations because here we refer to human resources quality.

Although there have been a lot of discussions about better utilizing the human resources, usually, in reality, the whole potential of personnel from one division is not fully utilized. Thus the necessity of relating the exigency of issued standards with organizational realities regarding: (C. Rusu, M. Voicu, 2001):

Supporting and developing the organization's personnel competences (the efficiency of professional development system of the personnel and of promoting procedures, including the system for choosing all levels managers; the awareness and acceptance degree of the personnel for the criteria employed to evaluate performance.

In order to increase the workforce and corporate adaptability, the following will be supported: assurance, development and maintenance of workforce in order to achieve the companies' high criteria regarding the workforce competences, requirements that are essential in order to be competitive in the transforming process of economic and technological conditions required by the development of knowledge based society.

Adapting the professional competences of own personnel to the company's development needs will support the increase of productivity and the quality of work. All these, together with better work conditions, will lead to a healthy and secure workplace, especially in activity domains and divisions with a high risk and will determine a substantial decrease of accidents as the workplace and of professional diseases, as well as promoting an active aging process (prolonged active life and reduced phenomenon of anticipated retirement).

For continuous improvement of knowledge and managerial competences on all levels, entrepreneurial development will be supported. Implementing programs for entrepreneurial development will lead to ensuring entrepreneurial creativity, improving the manager's and the entrepreneur's capacity to manage their business and to adapt to the exigencies demanded by competitiveness and technological changes.

In order to make the changes in economic and social life faster, it's necessary to have a human resources policy that ensures high quality personnel. In a world characterized by globalization and internationalization of businesses, you can't obtain performance without competent human resources, which means that personnel activities go to a next level concerning promoting total quality management (TQM) and related to that concerning the strategic importance for organizations.

The development of human resources in education has as objective the diversification of initial and continuous education offers and of career opportunities for teaching staff and other human resources from the education and initial learning system. The competences gained during this education and learning programs will ensure, first of all, the acquisition and development of rewritten competences in the European Framework for Teachers' Qualifications.

The actions taken into consideration for this, view the human resources from education, both as participants to lifetime study and as disseminators of knowledge. This domain contributes to the development of human capital stock in education capable to offer quality education focused on individual personal and professional development needs of students, to decreasing the early school abandonment phenomenon and to increasing of education attractiveness.

Also, taken into consideration the fact that orientation and counseling services of human resources in education are not developed enough, nor have operational specific instruments to define professional and career plans for this category of human resources, actions from this domain will be linked with specific measures of career development growth opportunities for human resources in education.

The main actions taken into consideration are:

- Developing continuous education offers for teaching staff and human resources in education (including "on the job training");
- Developing initial education offers for teaching staff and human resources in education (for example, master's programs for teaching staff);
- Developing continuous and initial education offers for new professions in education; research;
- Developing the supplier services and instruments network;
- Ensuring the access to quality services;

- Career opportunities and career development services for human resources in education.

Developing and modernizing initial and continuous education offers have as objective the increase of the educational offers' appeal, the increase of quality and education value for the workforce market. The investment in human capital must be understood as an investment that sums up the investments in education. The investment in human resources includes the total expenses for increasing physical and intellectual aptitudes of people. The investment in human resources approach, like investments in physical capital, can be made through the cost-benefit, cost-efficiency and actualization analysis.

Among the factors that influence the investment in human capital are: *the economic general situation, the length and stability of the income flow, income differences, direct and indirect costs, ability revenue, human capital investment rate of return, the marginal income of it*, etc. Investments in human potential, seen as key investments in an economy, should be focused so that they coincide also with workforce occupation politics at national level. It should also be taken into consideration that an efficient regional and activity sector management of investments in human capital can lead to a better national economic development.

The perception of changes that took place in the structure of human resources and the effects caused by them on investments in human capital evolved along with the restriction of activities in some domains. Thus, the appearance of unemployment and the effects of it on some socio-professional categories led to rapid changes mainly in the structure of work demand and generated significant mutations in the human capital investments' structure.

The most important part of human capital is, as we have already shown, education and implicitly, the level of knowledge. In order to highlight the efficiency of investments in education we have to analyze both the costs and the benefits of the investing process.

The costs refer to the funds allocated for acquiring land but also buildings meant for education purposes. The private benefits resulting from the investment in education are clear: increased incomes, decreased risk of unemployment, therefore the increase of the degree of insertion on the workforce market. Social benefits strengthen the social cohesion, the increase of productivity and the certainty of economic growth, the decrease of social costs by preventing social exclusion, etc.

Taking into consideration the fact that individual investment into a person is made on a long term basis, not only in school but also at the workplace, the investment responsibility is not only of the employee but also of the employer, because the production process is the subject of permanent adaptation to the new techniques and technologies that appear on the market.

An OECD study shows that "participating at an additional year of secondary education amplifies the economic growth by as much as 5% and further, with 2.5% on a long term". Also, an additional school year raises the level of individual salary by approximately 6.5%. Evidence has also shown that, unemployment rate decreases along with the superior education levels, thus reducing the social costs that are involved. In conclusion we can say that the employment rate increases together with the education level reached by a person.

Education must help solve some of the problems that the contemporary society deals with. For this, internal coherence of education systems and society must be improved, but also ensuring a certain stability and continuity of these that will ensure long term efficiency.

If investments in tangible resources have as output the creation and development of physical (technical) capital, investments in the growth, education and training of human resources generate that which we call human capital.

We can say that a better quality of work contributes to the growth of employment, productivity and social cohesion. Benefiting of a higher and higher reward for qualification, the polarization between those with high volume and those with low volume of knowledge *affect the economic and social cohesion*. The access to education paid by the employer is often limited for those who already have a high qualification and so some groups are blocked in the inferior part of the workforce market.

An important desideratum is the development of education and training throughout the entire life, so that the changes and reorganizations in the economy don't produce negative effects for the social cohesion. One of the most important conclusions of recent research in education is that investment in educating and training people is both a *growth factor*, especially in the present times characterized by fast technological changes, and a fundamental instrument in *supporting social integration*. This fact was also confirmed by

the analysis of the PISA study results, which show that some countries with the highest medium achievements have, also, the lowest levels of differences between individuals and schools; in other words, the improvement of quality does not imply restricting the opportunities, on the contrary.

Education and high qualification education are considered an instrument of reducing differences between highly and lowly developed regions, by providing human resources necessary to the economic and social development. Choosing *the regional or local level of the training degree* as one of the six fundamental pillars of permanent education strategies in Europe and the movement for Learning Cities and Regions show how important these have become for hiring workforce and for local and regional development.

The question here is: should education be seen as a public asset exclusively? It is said that a stable, democratic society can't exist if the majority of its citizens don't dispose of a minimum level of civic culture. The idea is that the education a child benefits from brings benefits not only to his parents or to himself, but also to the other members of the society. "The education of my child contributes to other people's welfare by promoting a stable and democratic society" (M. Friedman).

Other people from the society benefit also from the fact that a parent pays for the education of his children. But it's difficult to identify all the beneficiaries and to demand payment from them. As a conclusion, we are dealing with a vicinity effect. Governmental intervention would be necessary on one hand in order to impose that every child receives a minimum level of education, and on the other hand to pay for this education in the case they don't afford.

Regarding the Romanian education system, we can see that it faces structural issues and especially the rural education system which deals with major difficulties regarding investments in physical infrastructure, qualified teaching staff, limited access to professional education and to continuous education programs for the rural population.

The special interest for investing in human capital in general and educational in particular is reflected also by the constant concern of OECD to support economic growth through programs of educational capital growth. International comparative studies for OECD countries show that at individual level, investment rate of profit in education is higher for higher education graduates than for secondary education graduates.

2. Quality of Education Services – a Must of the Present Times

In Romania, as well as in other European countries, the quality of education has become a very interesting domain considering in the first place the national differences as compared to developed countries and the necessity of obtaining results integrated in the European context. For this, compatible politics and procedures for ensuring the quality of teaching and higher education have began to be promoted, in order to increase the global competitiveness of higher European education and to facilitate mutual acknowledgement of each other's diplomas and university degrees.

Taking into consideration the desired outcome, any higher education institution is responsible to develop a quality culture, meaning to develop politics, techniques and practices that are applied consistently and thoroughly documented in order to obtain those results / performances that obey the desired objectives.

Among the institutional standards of ensuring the quality in a university are: the existence of specific mechanisms of approval, surveillance and evaluation of study programs and diplomas, the evaluation of students according to public criteria and procedures consistently applied, the compulsory fact of ensuring sufficient, competent and qualified teaching staff to manage teaching and study, the learning resources offered to the students to be appropriate and specific for each learning program, institutions to have data systems and information that measure the quality.

The quality of education services is a desired social objective, and its contribution to the general growth of efficiency of economy is critical. Although the most widespread idea about quality is that it's expensive, research have shown that this idea is false.

Ensuring the quality in education refers to elaborating reference standards, norms and performance indicators in the national education system taking into consideration the following aspects:

- The quality of the national education system;
- The quality of suppliers, education unit and institution representative.
- The quality of teaching and education process of the students is proven by the learning results, by applying development methodologies of the curriculum, teaching and learning methods, evaluating the examinations and certifications.

Concerns regarding ensuring the academic quality exist also in the extra-European and global space. For example, UNESCO and OECD, taking into consideration the transnational, cross-border education, are involved by elaborating and adopting “guidelines” regarding the quality of the services offered by transnational institutions. The issue is that of applying the same quality rigorous demands not only to national institutions, but also the transnational ones.

Among the motivational factors that determine higher education institutions to be concerned with the quality issue are:

- Orientation towards performance and increasing competitiveness of universities on the education services market and of graduates on the workforce market;
- The increase of expenses for education processes and for research and development;
- The acknowledgement on the European market of the qualifications (titles and diplomas) offered by the institutions in the country;
- Developing a corporate culture of quality, total involvement of the personnel for obtaining performances;
- Increasing the responsibility for the quality of university services.

In order to offer a common set of references to all universities and to facilitate the inter-university comparison regarding the institutional management and to evaluate the quality externally, the following was proposed by Law:

- Reference standards;
- Clues concerning domains where this applies;
- The necessity of working with performance indicators.

Conclusions

Ensuring the quality and quality management in education and initial education is an area that mainly needs developing and implementing systems and procedures of internal evaluation, management and the guarantee of quality for the education activities and initial and continuous education, as well as professional managerial activities for the suppliers of education and for the initial and continuous education.

The focus is mainly on the institution’s activity and on the suppliers of education and knowledge from the formal education system. The main activities focused on are: creating and developing guarantee systems and quality management in education and training; developing professional training programs for educational management and for quality management; developing mechanisms to monitor the graduates’ entrance on the workforce market in order to adjust the education offer according to the evolutions from the workforce market; creating and developing guarantee mechanisms and quality management in education in the non-formal and informal education contexts.

The quality of education in the Romanian education system focuses on outputs as per the European context revealing opportunities offered by the European society of knowledge. Pupils, students and teachers must be aware of the necessity of proper studies that can be efficiently used in the entire Europe.

Considering that quality education means continuous improvement of performances and considering the rhythm of social changes, education institutions must have as objective the continuous development of human resources.

References

1. * *(2005) Geraint Jones, Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd- Cheltenham, UK- Northampton, MA, USA – International Handbook on the Economics of Education
2. * *(2002) Enders, J. and Fulton, O. Higher Education in the Globalising World. International Trends and Mutual Observation. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publ.
3. * *(2004) Jones, G. and Jones J. International handbook on the Economics of Education. Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, Ma: Edward elgard Publ. Ltd.

4. * *(2005) Dennis Farrington, Legislative initiatives in the context of the Bologna Process: a comparative perspective, UNESCO – CEPES, Bucharest, 2005
5. * *(2004): "Education & training 2010" the success of the Lisbon strategy hinges on urgent reforms", Joint interim report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the detailed work programme on the follow-up of the objectives of education and training systems in Europe
6. * *Vlăsceanu Lazăr - Asigurarea calității în educație, UNESCO-CEPES, București, 2005