In Search of Quality Education: The Implementation of ISO 9000 Quality Management Standards

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Introduction

The quality of higher education institutions (HEIs) has often been a subject of concern by relevant authorities around the world. For example, there have been reports about the closures as well as non compliance of HEIs (Aldrige and Rowley, 1998). These situations have made the authorities and general public wondering if the quality of higher education meets people's expectations. This is because, like many other industries, higher education also needs quality. Thus, apart from the authorities' concerns, the increase in competition as well as greater expectations from customers have caused HEIs in many countries to focus on quality. With so many HEIs competing with each other to gain larger market share, customers are largely spoilt for choices (Ho and Wearn, 1996). Therefore, creating quality services might separate one institution from the other. In addition, there are also many examples of organisations that managed to integrate quality into a successful competitive strategy (Kanji and Thambi, 1999). It also appeared that many HEIs have decided to emulate these organisations in addressing the competition (Yeo, 2008). This is because in a world where branding is the main basis for competition, assurance of the highest standards of quality in education has been perceived as the strategic aim to internationalisation of higher education industry (Grant et al. 2004).

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In order to turn Malaysia into a regional educational hub, the Malaysian government has encouraged HEIs to take ownership of their courses and be more accountable towards the delivery systems for such courses. In fact, several initiatives have been taken by the government to strengthen the image of HEIs such as the establishment of a specific Ministry responsible for higher education in 2004 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2009). The setting up of this ministry reflects the country's commitment towards creating an environment that is conducive for institutional excellence. It is also the intention of the ministry to ensure quality delivery in higher education (Ministry of Higher Education, 2009). In relation to this, the Malaysian government set up the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) in November 2007 with the coming in force of the Malaysian Qualifications Agency Act 2007. The main role of this agency is to implement the Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF) as a basis for quality assurance of higher education and as the reference point for the criteria and standards for all national qualifications. The MQA is responsible for monitoring and overseeing the quality assurance practices of the HEIs.

The ISO 9000 Standards and the Education Industry

While HEIs are qualified to establish their own quality systems, the efforts are self accredited and might not gain recognition from others. The increasing pressures to improve the quality of education have pushed a number of these institutions to take a step further in their quest for quality assurance by certifying themselves with the ISO 9000 standards (Baharun, 2003; Othman and Ng, 2007; Zailani et al. 2006). The adoption of such a system by the HEIs is intuitively customer oriented and market driven (Peters, 1999). With the implementation of a visible quality management system, these organisations hope to attract not only local but also international students.

As the quality assurance effort pushed its agenda into the education industry, those involved in the industry believed that adopting the ISO 9000 quality standards was paramount for the industry's survival (Thonhauser and Passmore, 2006). These standards are a set of guidelines that can be used to formulate quality management systems that are applicable to manufacturing or service organisations (Kantner, 2000). However, the transition of ISO 9000 as quality management standards for manufacturing industry to education has been controversial and far from smooth even though ISO standards are widely used in the industry.

In relation to HEIs, the requirements of ISO 9000 standards comprise several components. These components include the syllabus and school leavers as input, teaching and learning processes as products realisation, assessment as quality control and graduates as output. All these components are considered as part of the ISO 9000 standards and functioning parallel to their counterparts in the manufacturing environment (Moreland and Clark, 1998;

"MS ISO 9001:2000 Quality Management System", 2009). Each of the components might contribute potential issues and problems to the implementation of the ISO 9000 standards by HEIs (Subramaniam, 1998). As an example, graduates might be not able to secure employment because they failed to meet the industrial demands. In other words, the companies are manufacturing the wrong products that are not meeting customers' requirements.

Issues in Implementing ISO 9000 Standards

There are a number of issues related to the implementation of ISO 9000 standards in the manufacturing environment and in higher education. Among the issues that require further understanding are the interpretation of students as customers or products, the treatment of continuous improvement in the context of higher education as well as the adoption of effective design and delivery of course contents.

BSI Quality Assurance (1995) defines the products of HEIs as the knowledge, understanding and the enhancement of competence of the students as a result from learning experiences. The customers are defined as any students, organisations or any individuals who purchase the education service from the institutions. However, Yeo (2008) believed that interpreting students as customers might not be that simple. From the marketing perspective, students can be perceived as customers since having satisfied students would enhance an institution's popularity and marketing profile. Operationally, Yeo (2008) stressed that students could also be treated as products, which are the outcomes of the educational system. Thus, how they are perceived determines the direction of the quality management systems.

In relation to the continuous improvement, the education environment is compelled to be more transparent about the learning activities as the quality systems require HEIs to document procedures, collect records and conduct internal quality audits (Shutler and Lachlan, 1998). Nevertheless, the requirement for implementing corrective measures is having a different situation. This is because, even if the institutions become more transparent, improving the quality of learning outcomes is still difficult. There is no assurance that the HEIs will be able to immediately act on any quality issues after all the shortcomings have been identified and highlighted.

Apart from that, developing effective design and delivery of course contents may also cause great challenges to the HEIs. The ISO standards place strong emphasis on identifying customers' needs and expectations. The customers' requirements should be incorporated into the implementation of the ISO 9000 standards to ensure satisfaction. However, it will be very difficult for HEIs to comply with the ISO 9000 requirements because the course structures may emphasise on theoretical aspects whereas the students might want to acquire practical skills. Furthermore, there are no explicitly effective teaching and delivery methods (Yeo, 2008). In fact, Osborne (1997) has highlighted that there was a case of a German student suing an education institution for failing to provide a relevant science education. Shutler and Lachlan (1998) concluded that failure to comply with the requirement showed that a different approach might be needed for the education environment.

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Studies on issues related to the implementation of ISO 9000 standards in education are becoming more prevalent in recent years (Moreland and Clark, 1998; Shutler and Lachlan, 1998; Yeo, 2008). No doubt a plethora of studies have demonstrated that ISO 9000 standards generate better market image, superior product quality, increased customer satisfaction as well as continuous profitability (Brecka, 1994; Casadesu´s and Jime´nez, 2000; Gotzamani and Tsiotras, 2001). However, the challenges of implementing ISO 9000 by the HEIs are not being widely researched yet (Othman and Ng, 2007; Yeo, 2008) and might affect the successful implementation of the standards by HEIs.

Conclusion

The lack of proper interpretation on the implementation of ISO 9000 quality standards by HEIs has created a loophole that might jeopardise the fundamental intentions behind such an adoption (Ho and Wearn, 1996; Osborne, 1997). With Malaysia's aspiration of becoming the regional education hub at stake, initiatives need to be taken to ensure the continuous improvement of service delivery is taking place by understanding the challenges posed in implementing the ISO 9000 quality management standards.

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