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TOTAL QUALITY MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract: The application of Total Quality Management (TQM) principles, which originated in the manufacturing sector, to education has brought about various challenges and raised several important questions that need to be addressed. In higher education, questions such as "Who is the customer?", "Who are the stakeholders?", and "Who defines quality?" emerge, with answers that may vary from one person to another. This article will examine the implementation of TQM in higher education in Uzbekistan and other countries, explain the challenges that may arise, and attempt to provide answers to some of these significant questions.

Keywords: Total Quality Management (TQM), Higher Education, Stakeholders, Quality, Uzbekistan

Quality and total quality management

Quality is a very broad term, and therefore it has many definitions. Quality is determined by the customer. Whatever a customer expects from a product or service, in their eyes, that is "quality." From an "inspection" perspective, the classical definition of quality is "conformance to requirements or specifications." A more appropriate and still relevant definition was given by Juran: "Quality is fitness for use". In education, this definition is more often expressed as "quality is fitness for purpose" [1].

In Total Quality Management (TQM), the term "total" refers to the broadest participation. The quality of a product or service is the responsibility of all employees. "Quality" means meeting customer expectations and exceeding them. However, while exceeding expectations, added value and cost must also be considered. "Management" indicates both the full participation of managers in TQM activities and the fact that total quality is a management philosophy or model. TQM is a management philosophy that aims to exceed internal and external customer expectations, supports participation and teamwork, and targets the continuous improvement of all systems and processes [2].

From quality control to total quality management

Approximately between the 1920s and the 1940s, inspectors were responsible for checking the quality of a product after certain processes. Standards were established, and inspectors (quality control officers) compared the quality of the product against these standards. Nonconforming products were either reprocessed or discarded. In this approach, quality was the responsibility of the inspector or the quality control department.

The period of total quality control began in Japan in the 1960s. A key feature of this period was the gradual involvement of other departments and management in the quality control process. Today, quality assurance systems such as ISO 9000 are widely used in both manufacturing (for example, companies producing household appliances) and service industries (for example, hospitals) [3].

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The contemporary philosophy of Total Quality Management states that quality is the responsibility of everyone who is directly or even indirectly related to the product or service. Quality assurance involves planning and systematic activities to ensure that a product or service meets expectations.

Customers and Stakeholders

Quality and customer expectations are complementary, mutually influencing phenomena that continually change over time. Before attempting to identify customer expectations, it is essential to clearly define who the customer is [4].

In manufacturing, the customer is either another producer who will use the goods produced by the company, or the final consumer who will purchase the product. In the service industry, the customer is the individual or organization that utilizes the services provided, such as tourism, healthcare, banking, or consultancy. Concepts such as quality, customer satisfaction, and product originated in the manufacturing industry. Many of these concepts have been easily adapted to service industries. However, the direct application of certain concepts or assumptions to the service industry is not always appropriate.

One example is the raw material → process → product relationship in manufacturing, which is not an appropriate perspective for the service sector. While producing flawless, standardized products is an important goal in manufacturing, the purpose of higher education is not to graduate students who are unchanging and merely conform to predetermined standards.

In education, the first customer that comes to mind is most likely the student. Viewing students as customers does not mean fulfilling every demand they make. Rather, it means providing the best possible education within the available resources. Since the term "customer" may sometimes evoke the idea of "money," the view may arise that considering the student as a customer is unhealthy. However, the philosophy of TQM is human-centered, and even though the purpose of businesses may be to make a profit, this does not imply the exploitation of customers or a perspective of wild capitalism. TQM emphasizes long-term, lasting, trust-based relationships that aim for continuity [5].

Starting from the definition of quality as "fitness for purpose," education should aim to be fit for its purpose. For example, the education provided should meet the requirements of employers and related professions. When it comes to education, the customers of an institution are not only students, families, and employers but society as a whole.

There are two types of customers: external customers (students, families, employers, society in general, and taxpayers) and internal customers (academic staff and administrative personnel). An internal customer is the next person or department in a process flow. For instance, one of the main processes in a university is education. Each main process has many sub-processes. For example, in order for daily education to take place, the academic staff must arrive at the university using transportation and enter the classroom where the lesson will be given. If transportation services are provided by the university, then the academic staff is an internal customer, and the unit (or company) providing the transport is the supplier. In this example, students are the external or final customers. Any disruption in transportation will also disrupt education on that day, causing complaints from both internal and external customers. Similarly, if classrooms are locked at the scheduled class time for any reason, both internal and external customers will be dissatisfied.

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Universities can produce three different types of services depending on their activities: education, research, and community service. The customers of these services also differ. For instance, if a university provides research and community services, the customers of these outputs are generally different from students or their families. Particularly in such services and projects, university staff involved must carefully consider which customers the service outputs are intended to satisfy.

Fundamental principles of total quality management

Some fundamental principles commonly sought in Total Quality Management (TQM) can be summarized as follows:

1. Customer Orientation
2. Leadership
3. Strategic Planning
4. Employee Involvement / Teamwork
5. Process Approach
6. Continuous Improvement
7. Data-Based / Scientific Approach
8. Mutual Benefit in Relationships with Suppliers

These principles took their present form in Japanese manufacturing enterprises such as Toyota, yet they are also highly applicable to service sectors such as higher education [6].

Leadership

In TQM practices, the leadership, vision, and direct involvement of management in quality initiatives are prerequisites for success. In a total quality culture, managers take on a role that facilitates the work of employees, supports them, helps them develop, and enables them to work more independently by delegating authority and responsibilities. In order to improve quality within an organization, fear, prohibitions, and barriers must be removed by management. Management should demonstrate its support for TQM in an explicit manner. In higher education, this support must be consistently shown at the university level by the rectorate, and at the faculty and school level by deans and directors.

Strategic Management

Strategic management is a form of management based on the factors that will guarantee success in a given field (within an ethical framework) through all actions, operations, and decisions. From the perspective of a strategic manager, resources used without contributing to the achievement of identified goals are wasted. The more direct the contribution, the better. Strategic planning is the process by which an institution answers the following questions: Who are we? Where are we going? How will we get there? What opportunities and threats exist in our environment?

Strategic planning is a written plan aimed at developing the activities illustrated in Figure 1. The institution's plan must ensure a strong alignment between internal realities and external conditions. Internal conditions consist of the strengths and weaknesses of the institution (or the relevant department). External conditions consist of opportunities and threats present in the work environment. The strategic plan should take advantage of strengths and opportunities while seeking ways to overcome weaknesses and threats [7].

Employee Involvement / Teamwork

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In any field, the success of a company is only as great as the success of its employees. Employees at all levels are the core assets of an organization, and ensuring their full participation supports the use of their talents for the benefit of the institution. The advancement of a company is only possible through employee involvement. Therefore, it is necessary to develop employees' problem-solving skills and encourage them to generate improvement suggestions.

In universities, a TQM culture requires new approaches and teamwork. Permanent and significant changes can only be achieved through the active participation of university staff in planning and implementing change. The review of processes, identification of problems, and discovery and elimination of root causes are better carried out by teams. Since teams and employees are closer to the problems, they are usually also closer to the solutions.

Process Approach

In order to understand the main processes that add value, the related processes, and the unnecessary activities during reviews, improvements, and restructuring efforts aimed at achieving set goals, processes must be concretely understood and documented. Once these processes are clearly identified, it becomes evident that many improvements can be made. These improvements are generally directed at increasing efficiency, reducing waste, and producing high-quality services (or products).

An example of the process approach in higher education can be seen in how faculty members view a course taught over a semester as a process. If they can identify the issues within this process, more effective solutions can be developed. Steps such as preparing lecture notes, delivering lectures, student participation, evaluation of knowledge and achievement, and grading are all part of the process.

Continuous Improvement

Japan, a pioneer in TQM, has contributed the concept of kaizen to the literature. Kaizen is a Japanese term meaning "continuous improvement." Today's competitive conditions do not allow an institution to remain static or stagnant, regardless of how high the quality of the service provided or the product manufactured may be. Organizations that recognize the importance of quality and innovation are constantly evolving. Many organizations have found that step-by-step improvement of value-adding processes is a highly effective method and have embraced change as part of their corporate culture [8].

Some approaches and methods used in continuous improvement include:

- Teamwork
- Quality Circles
- Total Productive Maintenance
- Brainstorming
- Pareto Analysis
- Benchmarking (Best Practices)

Some continuous improvement methods developed for the manufacturing sector can also be applied in service sectors. The methods listed above represent only a small portion of these. Generally, all of these methods are designed around teamwork. Many of these approaches support creativity and are suitable for effectively utilizing the skills and experiences of employees.

Conclusion

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As can be seen, in today's highly competitive higher education sector, TQM holds great importance for the success and sustainability of an institution, just as it does in other service fields. However, it is essential that the concept of TQM be well understood and that the necessary adaptations, particularly for educational services, be made. Beginning at the rectorate level, raising awareness among all academic and administrative human resources regarding TQM, as well as fostering ownership of TQM initiatives, is a prerequisite for achieving success.

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