

SPECIFIC CHARACTER OF EDUCATION SERVICES AND ITS CONSIDERATION WHEN DESIGNING MECHANISMS OF THEIR QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

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The article depicts the necessity of conceptualization of education service quality into two perspectives: as a consumer category (the characteristic of its interaction with the environment) and as a feature of its production. It formulates the approach to form quality indicators in both perspectives. The article states the specific character of education services that have to be considered in the process of designing the mechanisms of quality improvement.

Various sciences such as philosophy, sociology, theory of education, economics interpret the phenomenon of "education" in various ways: as an institution demonstrating the culture of society, a commonweal, an economic sector, a mechanism of manpower reproduction, a service etc. At the same time, in our viewpoint, each separate interpretation does not allow us to design mechanisms of education quality improvement. An integrative approach is needed, in the context of which it is necessary to define, on the one hand, the essence of education production and consumption, and on the other hand, to reveal the specific character of education in terms of its various interpretations.

It is believed that the essence of education production and consumption represents rendering specific education services. Actually, the concept of education as a mechanism of manpower reproduction, an institution of demonstrating the culture of society, a commonweal, an economic sector (the education objective is somehow stated in all these cases, as well as the economic nature of this phenomenon in the latter) does not contradict the fact that education production and consumption occurs in the form of rendering the service to a person (by a person or an institution). Education is implemented for the sake of a person, a society, or a government. Therefore, education is a commonweal, a mechanism or an institution, implemented in the form of rendering education services that meet the requirements of a person, different communities and the government. As any other service, education service has its result, there are some resources used in the process of its production, and it has a price.

Economically, both the person entering an educational institution (university entrant) and the

graduate are the owners, proprietors of a certain subject of sale - manpower. In relation to the purchaser of this product - the employer - the profit of target manpower is determined by the ability of an employee to adequately fulfill the task they are in charge of within the given time limit.

Services produced by the education sphere, in spite of the intangible character of their results, have a well-defined price. Like in any other sector, expenses - expenditures concerned with the usage of production factors - define the price of education services. At the same time, there is no definite dependence between the amount of financing of education services and their quality. Increase in education financing leads to its quality improvement only in the case of changing educational technologies as well.

Furthermore, the quality of education, just as the quality of any other product realized by any organization, is termed as a degree of correlation of the product characteristics with the needs (requirements) of the subjects of the environment of the organization (producer), foremost customers and consumers. From the specific character of a service we can conclude that each service considered apart is characterized, in terms of quality, by results and features (conditions) of the way services are rendered that are important for customers and consumers. Consequently, in the context of a particular educational program or a definite educational institution - producer of such kind of services - the features of education quality can be classified into two groups:

- ◆ educational results (revealed in one or another feature of clients - students and graduates, formed in the process of education);

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◆ immediate conditions of educational process important for consumers and customers.

Considering the concept of “education quality” in terms of local education systems, it is possible to identify customers of an education system, who are payers and investors at the same time (e.g. government), that find the correlation between the quality and the price of education service very significant, i.e. economically efficient.

Finally, with reference to local education systems and separate education systems on the whole we should notice the specific character of education as a sector servicing the social-economic sphere, which makes secondary facts significant for some customers of education services.

Thus, the characteristics of education services quality as a category describing its features in relation to the environment beyond the education systems of different levels can be divided into four possible groups: results, conditions important for consumers and customers (component of education service quality as a consumer category), organization of educational resources, long-term effects.

In contrast to the majority of other organizations, it is characteristic of education services suppliers that the consumers of the product (education service) are represented by one category of subjects - “learners”. At the same time, there is a significant number of categories of customers that can include learners themselves, as well as their parents, local administration authorities, institutions of up-going education stages, government authorities etc. In other words, there is a considerable number of various customers whose requirements can contradict and should necessarily contradict each other.

Finally, education (in every country) is mainly a budgetary sector (in developed countries public funds finance the majority of educational programs, but the ways of financing the programs of different levels and orientation can vary). The data available indicates that even in highly integrated educational institutions in Western Europe, the USA, Canada with large quantity of adult cohort budget allocations cover no less than 70% of education services cost [2,4]. The investment is even more substantial in secondary education subsystems in the absolute majority of countries.

At the same time, government (and associations), being only one of the customers, but acting as the main investors in the case of most types of education services, quite often dominate when stating the request in relation to other customers, turning their order mainly into a declarative one. More-

over, budgetary character of financing most education services along with the concept of education as a “commonweal” often lead to obviously unrealizable or only partially realizable challenges set for educational organizations. It increases the vagueness of the external request and gives rise to difficulties in education services quality improvement.

Education services have a series of essential peculiarities concerned with the production process. Particularly, in case of education service a highly specific feature is the role of the client, the consumer of service. In contrast to the majority of other services’ consumers, a learner cannot get it without being engaged in the process of its production. In other words, there is direct dependence of educational results acquisition on the client’s diligence.

The above mentioned predetermines considering the consumer of education service not only a subject of an educational organization outer environment, but also as a subject of its inner environment (in a sense - organization personnel). However, in this case the learner is the subject of his/her personal (educational) occupation, which results in both production and consumption of education service. Thus, the learner is not only a client, a member of personnel, but the subject of administrating education service production as well.

We can notice another peculiarity in the education services production process from the point of an informational approach to administration analysis. It is concerned with the resemblance in occupation of all the subjects: the heads of an educational organization, teachers, and learners. The aim of all the subjects is (or should be) an education service, its production. All of them are the subjects of this production administration.

Considering these specific factors, we can single out a consistency of aims-means, which should be considered education service quality parameters or characteristics in the process of its production: educational process output qualities, characteristics of the resources for educational process realization (first of all - teachers’ performance as the most important personnel resource of the production process), administration process features, education system heads’ qualities (as the chief resource of administration process). It is also clear that these characteristics of education service production quality should be also regarded as the external parameters of the quality in the situation when education administration authorities, being customers, assess the functioning and the results of functioning of the subordinate education systems.

The analysis makes it possible to come to the following conclusions about the specific character of education services and designing the mechanisms of their quality improvement.

1. In an education service as the category describing its features in relation to the environment of education systems of different level it is reasonable to highlight the education service quality as a consumer's category (characterized by the results and its rendering conditions (process) important for customers and consumers), as well as educational resources organization and long-term effects of education systems activity.

2. It is essential to differentiate between the education service quality as a category, describing its features in relation to the environment, and its production quality in a particular educational organization or education system, described by the system of inner parameters of the organization or system. Among these parameters we can specify educational results characteristics and their rendering conditions (process) important for customers and consumers, educational process production peculiarities, features of the resources needed for educational process realization, administration process characteristics, education system heads qualities (as the chief resource of the administration process). At the same time, in case when education administration authorities, being customers, assess the functioning and the results of functioning of the subordinate education systems it is reasonable to describe these education service qualities as the external parameters of education service.

3. Due to the fact that education is considered to be a commonweal, an institution demonstrating the culture of a society, education is chiefly a budgetary sector in most countries, and in the majority of cases we observe overestimation of the possibilities of organized education, which is revealed in only partially realizable (in organized education systems) goal-setting in the sphere of education services quality.

4. Education has an essential specificity concerned with the fact that in the most of cases of rendering education services we observe plurality of customers (learners, communities: parents, employers, institutions of up-going education stages, local administration authorities, the government, etc.) with the only group of consumers - learners - and lack of consensus (not complete consensus) in the views of customers and consumers; the requests of various subjects gener-

ally contradict each other, which also leads to the difficulties in definite goal-setting in the sphere of education services quality.

5. The essential specific character of education services production is the fact that, in contrast to the majority of other service types, education service requires clients' active participation in the process of its production; thereby, the educational service consumer is not only a subject of outer environment but also that of the inner environment - as a member of organization personnel. This specific character does not allow considering the main production (educational) process in educational organizations as a process of quality administration, since the process approach implies a single owner. As a result, what is processed firstly in quality administration in educational organizations is administrative and service processes, which makes it possible for the client to become a subject administrating his/her own activity in achieving educational results.

6. Finally, from the informational viewpoint, the specific character of education service production is plurality of its administrative subjects. This is revealed in the similarity of informational nature to the administrative, main production (pedagogical) and educational activity, which makes it possible to design common models of quality administration of education services production on all hierarchic levels: head of educational organization - teacher - learner.

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