

HUMANE

Heads of University Management & Administration Network in Europe

SEMINAR

Friday 15 to Saturday 16 March 2002

University of Bologna

“Student Issues”

Summary

The seminar took place in the Senate room of the University, which in addition to a rich collection of portraits from its long history was endowed with highly sophisticated IT equipment such as individual screens for viewing presentations and speakers. Such technological innovation gave a particular edge to the first session, on the role of new technologies in support services.

Following a kind welcome by the Rector of the University, Professor Fabio Roversi Monaco, the head of administration (and President of the Italian Association of *Direttori Amministrativi*), Dr Ines Fabbro, introduced the seminar by giving a summary of the University of Bologna, the oldest university in the world. She underlined the fact that students had always played a key role in Bologna, and participants had indeed been struck by the level of student activity in the surrounding streets.

Since 1989 there had been four decentralised campuses in other cities of Romagna, and student numbers now stood at just over 100,000. Of these, some 80,000 were enrolled in Bologna, which had a resident population of just 320,000. The University area had expanded by over 50% in the last fifteen years, and was now larger than that of the Vatican City!

After giving more details of the provision made for students, Ines underlined the University's commitment to improving the support services further still, both in technological and human terms. The inter-action between these different aspects was to be the subject of the first session.

Session 1

The Quality of Support Services in Relation to New Technologies

Professors Diego Macrì, and Maria Rita Tagliaventi, Università degli Studi di Bologna (IT)

In two separate but linked presentations the speakers argued that although new technologies had given rise to formidable new opportunities for the delivery of services on the web, such approaches were not always the most suitable. Certain services require forms of interaction that cannot be entirely automated, since they require human contact, and would be less effective and more impersonal if reduced solely to web-based exchanges. It was therefore important too identify and deal with those operations consisting of pre-defined exchanges of data and information in which human contact is not necessary.

In order to do this, Bologna University was constructing a new portal, intended to be the primary access point for the delivery of all services that can be standardised. These services would be organised around the needs of the users rather than around the functions of the departments delivering them. Each service encounter may therefore require input from a number of departments and offices, often belonging to diverse organisations and institutions (for example, the University, City Council, Regional Government, Ministry, etc.). The complexity of this service delivery process would not be apparent to the user: a complex and coordinated back-office equipped with information and communication technology would act as an organisational engine working behind the scenes to provide access to the portal.

The structure of the portal was described, with a brief outline of a number of successful projects implemented by Bologna University and based on the delivery of services using new technology. These included the use of e-signatures for the registration of examination results, and the use of the web for enrolments and the payment of tuition fees.

Discussion

Not least because of the excellence of the audio-visual equipment in the meeting room, participants were interested to know what sort of resources had been made available for the review. A team from Bologna plus several consultants had worked for about four months on the project – the numbers of staff had been limited, but the view was that the return on investment had been very significant.

Two British speakers put forward the view that while business process re-engineering (BPR) was a valid undertaking, the full benefit of any new systems comes from the accompanying examination of the managerial process. Christine Challis agreed with this, noting that the LSE for You project which she had described in Utrecht (October 2001) had been largely inspired by what had been done in Bologna. In response to her question as to how one dealt with colleagues who actually seemed to enjoy doing unproductive tasks, and who resent change, Professor Tagliaventi thought that most colleagues would like to achieve a competitive advantage, and that this aspect should be stressed.

Other observations concerned the paradox and occasional tensions involved in the fact that there was decentralised use of centralised data, and the extra training costs which were associated with this. Several colleagues developed this clash between the intranet and the internet, and remarked on the wish of academic colleagues to “do their own thing” rather than submit to a single, central set of data. The need for a common system across the institution was felt to be vital – and the session ended with the remark that if that central system was good, and produced by a committed team, other staff would want to use it, and there would be no need to insist on it.

Session 2

Appeals and Student Complaints on Academic and Related Matters

Steve Cannon, University of Aberdeen (UK)

Steve Cannon noted that most, if not all, institutions of higher education (HEIs) have internal procedures for dealing with student complaints. In recent years, however, UK institutions had come under considerable pressure from Government to introduce an independent stage into their procedures in those cases where complainants are dissatisfied after internal procedures have been exhausted.

One major point which he made at the outset was the multiple rights of students to complain in terms of standards, ranging from internal protocols to government legislation, and including various codes of conduct which allowed complaints against other students or staff. He also stressed that

academic complaints are always and only at the procedural level – matters of academic judgment could not be challenged. Steve wondered whether this was still reasonable. Indeed, the University of Aberdeen was introducing a code of practice/procedure which would allow such academic matters to be questioned.

He went on to examine the controversy surrounding this issue and the background to the debate. As well as looking at existing practice and procedures within UK institutions he gave more detail about two proposed schemes of independent review, the first of them being a UK-wide scheme, while the second is available only in Scotland. The latter complaints process had various stages, starting with informal procedures before (possibly) moving on to a written stage and culminating in the involvement of the University Secretary, who could either act alone on the basis of known facts or convene a panel (with staff and student members) to deal with the issue. Beyond this there was no appeal. The government had indicated that this was not satisfactory. Steve stressed that the real issue was whether the sector as a whole could devise a means of allowing genuinely independent review without compromising its own independence.

Discussion

In the lively debate which followed the short presentation there was much concern about the ways in which the complaints process had to balance the rights of the student and the person who was the subject of a complaint. For example in matters of sexual harassment the situation in the UK seemed to give all the rights to the accuser, as opposed to the accused. In academic areas, the subjective nature of University teaching quality was a major issue – an individual student might complain that better teaching would have avoided failure. While it was true that if the teaching were genuinely bad there would be more than one complaint Steve Cannon observed that many of the problems occurred with postgraduate work and the inevitable one-to-one supervision. It was noted that at Bologna and in other places there were staff-student committees to deal with complaints at an early stage.

Dutch students had the opportunity of going to (civil) courts to press their case. Steve noted that although this was theoretically possible in the UK also, the cost and complexity of the legal process meant that it was very unlikely. Another Dutch institution, the university Ombudsman, had been suggested in the UK, but the idea raised difficulties in respect of institutional autonomy.

3. Academic Education as a Professional Service

Bert Verveld, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen (NL)

Bert opened his presentation by asking various questions, all springing from the idea that “... *every professional firm must satisfy three goals of 'service, satisfaction and success'...*” He used this idea to show that when we look at a university as a professional firm, we can see academic education as a professional service. In this light, what service do we offer our students? How professional are our service providers, the teachers? What is their professional academic make-up? He argued that many aspects were of importance: academic standing, teaching skills, teaching methods, social behavior, open-mindedness, contact with colleagues, etc.

He drew attention to three aspects in particular which would determine the teacher's success: the study programme, the physical context and the student.

The design of the **study programme** provides the framework or broader perspective within which the teacher works. It determines to a large extent what is expected from teachers. **Physical facilities** are very often underestimated in relation to teacher success and student satisfaction. Poor facilities don't always produce poor education, but they make things a lot more difficult. Good facilities, on the other hand, increase teacher and student performance considerably. The **student** determines the success of the teacher just as the teacher determines the success of the student. You can't spoil a good student - the best students will survive any education system and any teacher! But most of our students don't reach the summit and come to university for a good solid education as a start for their career in society.

Again to quote Maister: “in any professional service there are three key benefits that clients seek: expertise, experience and efficiency”. For most of our students efficiency is not the least of their objectives.

The presentation concentrated on the case of the University of Groningen in order to illustrate the opportunities and pitfalls of creating a stimulating teaching environment at a traditional and research-oriented university. Bert felt that the major problem in many universities is that teaching offers little perspective in terms of academic career - the dominant denominator in HRM for academics is still research.

By contrast, key elements of the policy approach in Groningen relied upon making a teaching career attractive, offering a stimulating teaching environment, offering facilities for teachers and taking education serious in terms of professional competences and qualifications.

Bert acknowledged that university teachers are traditionally researchers. So it should be and so it should stay. Academic teaching and research are two of a kind, but it should be recognised that university teaching is a profession in itself. University teachers should be assessed on two aspects of their activity:

1. Knowledge. This is so obvious that it hardly needs mentioning. It involves academic status, keeping up with international literature, research activities, membership of editorial and academic boards, etc. More and more other types and fields of knowledge are now becoming important for university lecturers, such as: teaching methods, ICT and education, labour market, etc.
2. Skills. These have become more and more important over the years. As students tend to evaluate skills rather than knowledge in teacher evaluations, staff have become more aware of the significance of teaching skills. Here we shall consider things such as pedagogical qualities, organising skills, communication with students and colleagues, attitudes towards reform, openness to intellectual debate and criticism, command of foreign languages, etc.

Bert offered two or three case studies from faculties to illustrate the policy in more detail. His general premiss here was that although we cannot ensure that all staff are great teachers, we can at least expect that they all do a good, solid teaching job.

Discussion

Several participants recognised in their own national systems the contradiction (referred to by one person as schizophrenia) whereby universities allegedly respect and reward good teaching whereas in fact research is king. There was still, for example, no national scheme in the UK for rewarding excellence in teaching, although in that country national schemes seemed to abound!

Other members were interested in the way in which Groningen had managed to persuade young teachers to accept training. The answer, very simply, was that it was a requirement! Elsewhere the point was made that while older members of staff might be more defensive and critical of such training, younger staff were rather inclined to be critical of the training given.

Workshop Session (a)

Quality of Teaching

Christophe Ehrenberg, Universität Osnabrück (DE)

Problems concerning the quality of teaching at German universities were acknowledged in the 1990s. The causes: on the one hand, the relatively poor teacher/student ratio, thus the unfortunate conditions for being in charge of an “overload” of students. Like Bert Verveld (previous session), Christoph noted that another important reason was that becoming a university professor is based mainly on research and not on teaching skills, so that good teaching performances are not recognised.

The recognition of inadequate academic teaching had led the federal government and several different states to introduce new regulations concerning the evaluation of teaching skills into their higher education legislation since 1998 in order to improve the quality of teaching. Accordingly, when appointing professors, “pedagogic suitability” was now also taken into consideration.

In the State of Lower Saxony the first state evaluation agency, called ZEvA, was founded in 1995. ZEvA is an institution belonging to the higher education institutions of Lower Saxony and is financed by the state government. Its task is to evaluate teaching, covering all faculties systematically, combining internal evaluation (self-report of the faculties) and external evaluation (peer reviews). In the meantime, most academic subjects have been evaluated, including recently Psychology and Philosophy.

While the ZEvA evaluations examine basic and structural questions (e.g. evaluating the priorities of the offered courses, the structure of study-plans, equipment, etc.), it does not go into the details of individual seminars or lectures.

First comes a period of self-evaluation and preparation of the external evaluation. Here a working programme is drafted for specific disciplines, and the university is advised about the main themes, and the possibility of using workshops to agree on objectives. The department draws up a self-evaluation, and discusses the nomination of experts with the agency. Departmental groups then have to collect the required material, and provide written analyses of various issues, which the agency passes on to expert panels. These panels prepare and carry out external evaluations.

The agency agrees the precise timescale, and takes part in discussions within departments before agreeing on any further action in consultation with the expert panel. These peer groups decide on the work plan for each evaluation, and then send a copy of their report to departments for comment. Departments then have a chance to respond to the report and its conclusions, and may submit suggestions on the implementation of any recommendations. The expert panel then finalises its report in conjunction with the agency, which determines the final version and arranges publication.

Student feedback has also been introduced at most German universities, but it is still on new ground. At the University of Osnabrück more than 50% of the seminars and lectures are evaluated by students. For this procedure the different faculties have developed their own questionnaires; in some cases some have also been created by the departmental student organisations. Moreover, since 2001 excellent academic teachers at the University had been awarded prizes.

The most systematic and scientific-based evaluation is at present the “Teaching evaluation procedure KIEL”, which has been in use since 1998. This procedure is based on communication between academic teachers and students about the given seminar or lecture. Students fill out questionnaires which are analysed and discussed in class at the end of the semester. The aim is not to rank the teachers but to motivate a productive dialogue between students and teachers in order to improve the quality of teaching.

Christoph’s conclusion was that neither the evaluations of ZEvA nor the feedback from students had resulted in harsh consequences so far at the University of Osnabrück. The results of the feedback discussed in class are not published, apart from in those cases where teachers are awarded prizes for their high-quality teaching. This practice corresponds to that of most German universities. However, he had to recognise that the results of the teaching evaluation had not yet influenced the financing of universities by the state or the financing of Faculties by the university. The didactic skills of junior scientists and professors are hardly promoted systematically. In other words, there was still a lot of work to be done.

Workshop Session (b)

The Provision of Student Services within the Context of a TQM System

Antonio Alonso Sanchez, University of Salamanca (ES)

This presentation addressed the experience of the University of Salamanca in delivering quality management in student affairs. First, Antonio described the system used to evaluate students’ satisfaction and expectations. This is based on questionnaires designed to assess students’ perceptions of their teachers and the subjects taught, and another questionnaire system looking at students’ satisfaction with academic services (including registration, reading rooms, the grant system, etc.) and on the Institutional Quality Program. The latter aims at fostering student participation in Quality Assessment Committees as regards academic awards and Departments. Finally, there were the External Audits of the TQM System, which are carried out by the Bureau Veritas Quality International, and the European Foundation for Quality Management. Antonio looked at the results and trends over the last five years and discussed the weight of the students’ perception of quality as regards the certification from the EFQM recently awarded to the University (December 2001).

In a second section he went on to summarise his experience in innovations in the academic services provided to students through the “single window” principle underlying the Student Assistance Service. This aims at simplifying students’ paperwork, partly through new on-line academic services through the Internet. Thus there was now a system of on-line suggestions/complaints/consultation boxes and on-Campus Student Orientation Points, with Student Information Terminals through which students can gain access to their own academic information, “smart cards”, etc.

This structure, designed to improve quality in student affairs, completes the cycle of the TQM experience undertaken by the management of the University of Salamanca, and described earlier (Reykjavik, 2000) by the same speaker.

David H. Maister; *Managing the professional service firm*; The free press; 1993.