

THE ROLE OF STAKEHOLDERS IN QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

ROBERT ULEWICZ

Abstract

Shaping and constant improving of education quality constitute one of the most significant tasks of the contemporary higher education. The aim of the following article is to show the role which internal stakeholders, such as students or university employees, and external stakeholders or authorities have in shaping the concept of quality in higher education. As based on literature and own research, the role of each group of stakeholders in quality assurance in the sphere of education was presented. The research was conducted through survey and interview among both, students and employees of the Faculty of Management at Technical University of Czestochowa. As far as external stakeholders are concerned, graduates, potential employers from the area of Czestochowa, city authorities, and the local Employment Office were surveyed. The results show the importance of feedback, especially the one that comes from a job market, in pro-quality undertakings in the area of education service.

Key words: quality assurance, higher education, stakeholders, consultation, collaborative governance.

Classification JEL: M12 – Personnel Management.

1. Introduction

Units which provide educational services face a significant challenge connected with the competitiveness of their offer. In the era of market economy, which enables the development of an educational establishment, the process of attracting students may be analyzed from different grounds; a range of offered services, a place and form of services provided, the quality of delivery, and interpersonal relationships. In the attempt to attract candidates, an academic institution has to create a proper image of a given educational service, but also ensure that its quality is high. Quality is assessed by external environment and the assessment is a two-step operation. Firstly, it is evaluated by a graduate (based on personal experience and skills acquired while studying as confronted with the requirements imposed by a job market or an employer). The second evaluation will be given by an employer himself after confronting the graduate's abilities or skills on a given position. Therefore, questions may arise whether internal and external stakeholders evaluate the quality of educational service in the same way.

The quality of an educational service is defined in an ambiguous way. Education is understood as a sum of activities and processes aiming to pass knowledge, shape particular traits and skills, or a sum of activities the aim of which is to prepare and adjust a person to live in a society, to provide upbringing in terms of intellectual, moral and mental development, as well as to educate (*Sharma & Kamath, 2006; Akiyoshi, 2002; Kendall, 2010; Wiśniewska, Szymańska-Bralkowska & Zieliński, 2014*). The issue of quality of education is linked to the so called overall competitiveness of an institution of higher education in a variety of ranking lists, the status of graduates, the level of its staff, its material basis, quantitative indicators and qualitative achievements of students, the number of scientific projects, etc. (*Mohsin & Kamal, 2012; Wiśniewska, 2007*). The most common definitions of the quality of education refer to one of three components: the degree of fulfilment of assumed standard (measured in a quantitative or qualitative way), the degree of students satisfaction from the service offered by the university (the market approach), the degree of fulfilment of assumed objectives, connected with the process of education (effectiveness in achieving these goals). In addition, quality can be assessed externally, on the basis of objective criteria, it can also be assessed subjectively as interpreted individual or social utility. The effect of education should become an indicator of high quality of teaching and the application of uniform standards does not guarantee education

at high level. The very definition of high level should also be defined. In the publications (*Cave, Hanney, Henkel & Kogan 2000; Akiyoshi, 2002; Grabara, 2000*) appear convertible the use of the concept effectiveness and quality. As quality we define here: a kind of perfection, the consequences of actions and evaluation of the degree of achievement of the target.

Quality of education is considered to be a service because it is a useful product immaterial produced as a result of human labor to satisfy the needs of the market. We can conclude that education is a service. The quality of education in higher education depends on the organizational culture, which is formed by human resources, way of managing but also material side in the form of equipment and the education program, which should meet the requirements of potential beneficiaries (*Ulewicz, 2017*).

2. Quality assurance in higher education

Academic literature abounds in a variety of examples of evaluation of actions undertaken by institutions of higher education which concern the selected groups of stakeholders and a range of criteria for assessment (*Chen, Yang, Shiau & Wang, 2006*). The researchers investigate education quality as a multidimensional model of evaluation of educational activities that helps to build a conceptually correct system of quality evaluation, determine how development prospects may affect it and provide strategic directions of education quality management (*Cheng & Tam, 1997*). Quality of such a service can also be measured by means of certain determinants (*Scordoulis et al., 2015*). The examples of determinants of educational service quality are presented in Figure 1.

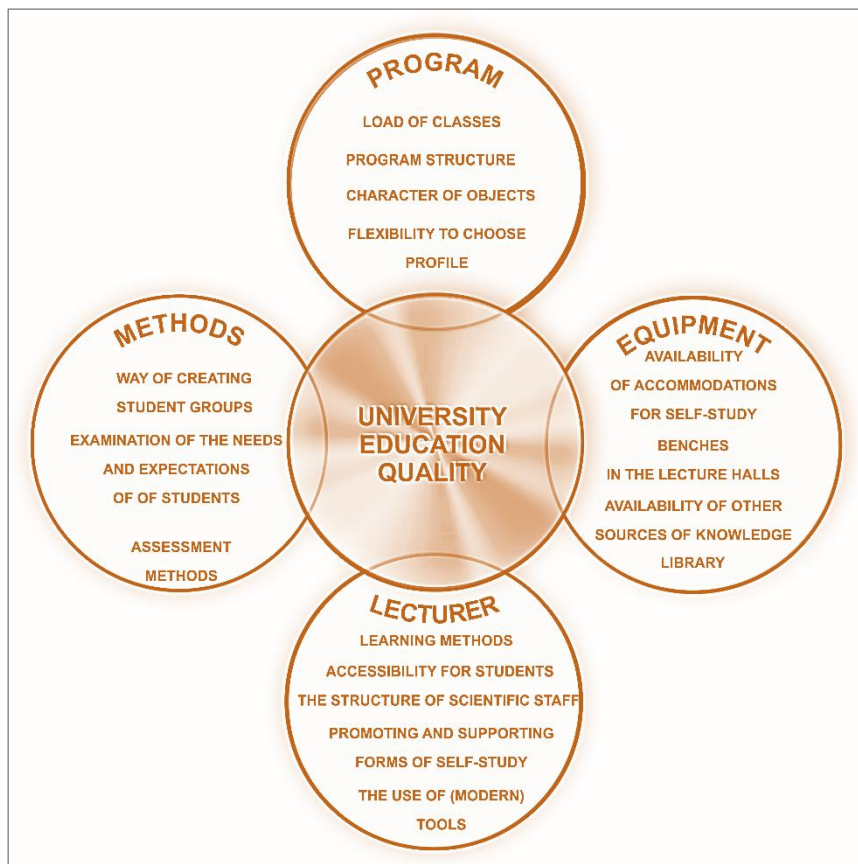


Figure 1. Determinants of quality education (own study)

According to Claudia S. Sarricko and Andre A. Alves, the most important determinant is the level of academic staff which involves qualifications related to a didactic process as well as scientific research, international cooperation and cooperation with industry, for example career guidance (Sarricko & Alves, 2016). Other researchers believe that the quality of education can be measured through the system of institutional management and general management (Cardoso, Rosa & Stensaker, 2016). Quality of education can be evaluated through the lens of a lecturer's success, his or her knowledge, skills and competence, as well as the ability to create facilitating atmosphere between a lecturer and students (Ng, 2015). The approaches presented do not include, or include insufficiently, needs and expectations related to a variety of stakeholders. As both, internal and external stakeholders can be characterized by different needs and expectations connected with an academic institution, R. Kaplan and D. P. Norton underline the significance of multidimensional evaluation perspective in assessing an institution of higher education and the process of its strategic development (Kaplan & Norton, 2010; Liasidou, 2009). As far as the Technological University of Czestochowa is concerned, its management strategy includes actions aiming to fulfil the needs and requirements of students, employees, the management staff, as well as its graduates, and entrepreneurs. A process of monitoring the needs and expectations of students is being constantly performed, which constitutes an important element in creating a proper image of the University and ensuring competitive advantage.

In the area of higher education were formed four classic models currently used in the evaluation process of the function of university. The presented models can be used both to evaluate the quality of education as well as to the activity of the university. Models are shown in Figure 2.

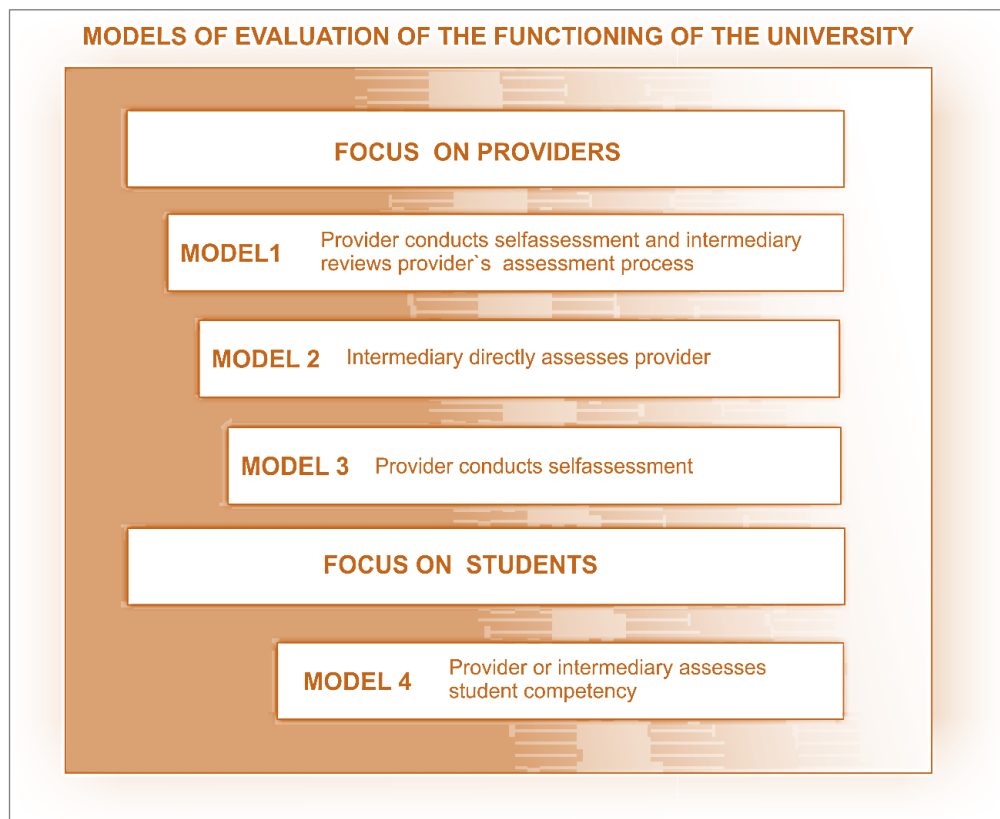


Figure 2. Models of evaluation of the functioning of the university (Cave, M., Hanney, S., Henkel, M. & Kogan, M. 2000. *The Use of Performance Indicators in Higher Education – The Challenge of the Quality Movement. Higher Education Policy, Series 50*)

The models presented above (Figure 2) can be divided into two groups according to an entity involved in the process of evaluating a university. Models 1 – 3 constitute group number one: they are focused on an institution of higher education itself and evaluate different aspects of its dealings. The second group, model 4, prioritizes the idea of fulfilling the needs and requirements of a student. The evaluation of the level of student's satisfaction (the level of fulfilment of needs and requirements) is, in an indirect way, the evaluation of the quality of a given university.

The first model is called self-esteem controlled by an external body and was established on the basis of business solutions. It consists of internal establishing evaluation criteria by the institution which is the subject of an evaluation, and then verifying the fulfilment of these criteria by an external entity (an adjunct can be an example).

External entities which evaluate academic institutions tend to focus on system objectives, and, at the same time, do not individualize an evaluation process according to specific academic institutions. Entities which provide evaluation usually include state institutions (in Poland – The State Accreditation Committee or Accreditation Commission of Universities of Technology) and public institutions independent of universities (Chamber of Industry). Model 4 is not entirely focused on an academic institution. It does not analyze the process of providing education itself. It can be observed that it is characterized by a process approach which involves the entrance and exit without focusing on the process itself. This model is focused on outcome data, a product in the form of human resources endowed with competence, skills and knowledge that will be further verified by a job market (employers).

Methods based on gained assessment in the course of teaching students competences perform well in typical decentralized higher education systems. However, these are usually models of 'cost-intensive' – associated with the estimation of added value of the teaching process. A specific model out of those described by Getes (*Gates et al., 2002*) can be used as long as the system within which a given academic institution operates is:

- Measurability oriented;
- Oriented on improvement;
- Oriented on resources;
- Oriented on system decentralization;
- Complexity or simplicity oriented;
- Homogeneity- and heterogeneity-oriented.

Orienting the actions of an individual towards measurability is connected with a necessity to improve the ability to account academic institutions merely on the basis on the outcomes of their work. Improvement-oriented actions indicate that individuals are motivated externally to constantly reform their own undertakings. Decentralization is connected with transferring eligibility from central management centers to academic institutions directly. Heterogeneity evinces variety and complexity of a given system. The most flexible model that can be implemented in order to evaluate the functioning of an academic institution is the one which is based upon self-assessment. A weak point that is related to a degree of subjectivity in indicating criteria for assessment is insignificant utility connected with a demand of measurability of an institution's actions. Such a model, therefore, is more beneficial in case of single units which are subjected to evaluation rather than units managing a sector, or institutions allocating funds (*Gates et al., 2002; Kontio, 2012*). The analysis of specific models through the lens of their role in the process of evaluation of education quality shows that their role in different models is not the same. Moreover, in some models the role of stakeholders is infinitesimal or completely absent from them. Table 1 shows a comparison of the usefulness of evaluation models for higher

education institutions depending on features characterizing a system which provides educational services.

Table 1. A comparison of the usefulness of evaluation models for higher education institutions depending on features characterizing a system which provides educational services (Gates, Augustine, Benjamin, Bikson, Kaganoff, Levy, Moini & Zimmer. 2002. Ensuring Quality and Productivity in Higher Education. An Analysis of Assessment Practices. ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report, 29(1): 192)

Characteristic features	Model 1 Controlled self-assessment	Model 2 Evaluation by external institution	Model 3 Self-assessment	Model 4 Student competence assessment
Measurability-oriented	Average probability of effectiveness	High probability of effectiveness	Low probability of effectiveness	Average probability of effectiveness
Improvement-oriented	High probability of effectiveness	Low probability of effectiveness	High probability of effectiveness	Average probability of effectiveness
Resources-oriented (limited resources)	Average probability of effectiveness	Low probability of effectiveness	High probability of effectiveness	Low probability of effectiveness
Decentralization-oriented	High probability of effectiveness	Low probability of effectiveness	High probability of effectiveness	High probability of effectiveness
Complexity-oriented	High probability of effectiveness	Average probability of effectiveness	High probability of effectiveness	Average probability of effectiveness
Heterogeneity-oriented	High probability of effectiveness	Average probability of effectiveness	High probability of effectiveness	Average probability of effectiveness

In literature (Gates *et al.*, 2002; Stasiak-Betlejewska, 2012, Ślusarczyk & Kot, 2010) the following concepts such as licensing, evaluation of the quality, accreditation and overview can be found. Licensing – involves granting university the rights to its functioning. The Licensing unit checks whether the school meets formal requirements.

- Evaluation of the quality – is based on the judgment/certificate about the level of quality of education. The level of quality of education is assessed based on a comparison of achievements of university with specific requirements/standards. When assessing quality of universities the same criteria are determined, taking into account the diversity of the program and forms of education. The evaluation is made by external unit.
- Accreditation – consists in ensuring that the university meets the standards, which guarantee the quality of education. Purpose of this method is to increase confidence in the university and to reduce external oversight.
- Overview – this method involves the review of internal mechanisms to ensure the quality of education at the university and its improvement. This review consists of checking the correctness and effectiveness of the functioning of these mechanisms by external unit.

The presented methods allow for the delivery of solutions to ensure the quality of education at universities, however, they differ among themselves with the boundaries impact on quality. The role of stakeholders in quality assessment should be highlighted. In the case of licensing and evaluation of quality, the role of stakeholders is insignificant or non-existent. On the other hand, in the process of accreditation and overview it is crucial. Table 2 presents a comparison of the features of evaluation systems and, also, the range and direct influence on quality, engagement of stakeholders, and on the direct aim (Cheng & Tam, 1997).

Table 2. Methods of evaluating quality with their common traits (own study on literature)

	Range	Influence on quality	External Stakeholder engagement	Internal Stakeholder engagement	Objective
Licensing	generally compulsory	little	little	little	license to operate
Quality assessment	often compulsory	perceptible	little	little	a comparison of quality, funding
Accreditation	compulsory PKA other voluntary	significant	very big	big	threshold quality assurance
Overview	voluntary	very big	very big	very big	continuous quality improvement

In Polish conditions, to create an efficient process of improving the quality of education in Polish higher education is very difficult due to the relatively low level of funding for education per student. Another factor determining the quality of education is increased competition on the education market and demographic decline. This determines the choice of qualitative orientation of management strategy. Analyzing the development strategies of university indicates that improving the quality of education involving the temporal assessment of the effects of education may not produce the desired effects. Incorrect assumptions from the past not consulted with external stakeholders may appear in the future.

Institutions of higher education by creating pro-qualitative strategy should (Ulewicz, 2017):

- Analyze abreast the changes of surrounding of the university, market requirements, legislation, etc.
- Take actions on the basis of anticipated changes and not on the basis of the present state.
- Manage the process of learning by objectives.
- Introduce solutions that facilitate the education process – to undergoing changes in its environment.
- Instigate actions aiming at receiving feedback from stakeholders, especially the external ones (employers, representatives of government institutions such as the employment office) in order to determine the usefulness of knowledge, skills, competence provided by a university as well as the quality of the didactic process).

3. The role of stakeholders in quality assurance

There are a few theories concerning who might be considered a stakeholder in an academic institution. According to Freeman (Freeman, 1984; Mitchell, Agle & Wood, 1997), it can be any person or a group of people that can influence the process of achieving the aims of a given organization – an academic institution in this case. The division into internal and external stakeholders was introduced by Burrows (Burrows, 1999). In his work, Watson (Watson, 2012) states that not all groups seen as stakeholders are, indeed, stakeholders, as the role they play and their influence on an organization is very low or non-existent. However, institutions such as public higher education institutions do not need to use sustainable approach to the so called public opinion. In the last two decades (one decade in Poland) two stakeholders groups have

acquired a specific role in case of higher education institutions, i.e. students (internal stakeholders) and employers (external stakeholders), (*Smeby & Stensaker, 1999; Beerkens & Udam, 2017; Zeller, 2004*). It can be observed that more and more often students are treated as consumers that use educational services (*Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; Corodos, 2012; Zieliński & Lewandowski, 2012*). Therefore, it is possible to approach the analysis of a student's satisfaction from the standpoint of a feedback given by a student, and a feedback provided by an employer who consumes an educational service in the form of a student with a certain amount of knowledge, competence and skills. Furthermore, academic institutions can be treated as enterprises which operate in a dualistic environment. In order to achieve success, the aims of internal stakeholders, the first degree environment, ought to be compatible with the aims of external stakeholders (the second degree environment). As *Ryńca* states, three types of customers in academic institutions can be distinguished (*Ryńca & Kuchta, 2010*). *M. Alvarez* and *S. Rodriguez* proposed a concept of managing an academic institution which focuses not only on the needs of internal customers but also on that of the external ones which may be understood as the general public, in particular, prospective employers and graduates (*Alvarez & Rodriguez, 1997*). The Faculty of Management of Czestochowa University of Technology uses the management model focusing on a student (model 4, Figure 2) which, at the same time, provides for the needs and expectations of external stakeholders to a substantial degree (the second degree environment). Figure 3 shows a model of quality assurance system for education in the Faculty of Management.

Internal and external stakeholders have a substantial impact on the effectiveness of the university's functioning. Among the most essential factors connected with the first degree environment, also called the functional environment, are the employed staff (qualifications), management style, the culture of an organization, scientific work, works that facilitate development, technological level, availability of laboratories, methods and means to manage human resources and infrastructure, quality assurance methods, marketing means and techniques as well as the functioning of the financial accountant staff (*Ulewicz, 2014*).

An academic institution does not affect the second degree environment to such a degree as it influences the first degree environment and its factors. An academic institution operates within a particular region or a country so it must submit to regulations and schemes imposed by authorities (*Borkowski & Ulewicz, 2008*). The competitive strength of an academic institution is influenced by the financial policy of the country (subsidy level), economic environment; the more enterprises and companies on the local market, the better demand for specialists in particular fields; acquiring partners for research projects or partners that could provide internship for students. Sociological and political issues are also of great significance (*Borkowski & Ulewicz, 2009*). A necessary condition for an academic institution is to function is fulfilling the needs of the environment by a university and university's needs by its environment. The lack of fulfilment, in time, may result in liquidation of a higher education institution. Similarly to enterprises, the objectives which are set by the first degree environment, that is universities, and those set by the second degree environment, generally speaking, the economy of a country, must be compatible in the basic parameters of their functioning in order to achieve the desired educational outcome within the analyzed area related to an educational service in a specific academic institution.

In order to obtain synergy in the quality assurance system in the area of education, the role of feedback from the environment is highlighted in the Faculty of Management. To achieve this, a variety of tools and methods are used, such as:

- Instituting a social council for business which is an advisory and evaluating entity that is supposed to report demands for new degree courses, give opinions on degree courses appointed by faculties, specifying and selecting areas that need to be improved.

- Monitoring job offers by a career support office which at the same time works as a recruitment agency.
- Cooperation with the District Employment Office in order to follow changes in the job market.
- Cooperation with trade organizations and organizations which associate specialists from various fields.
- Conducting survey among local entrepreneurs.
- Organizing annual job fairs.
- Cooperation with the association „Alumni of Częstochowa University of Technology”.

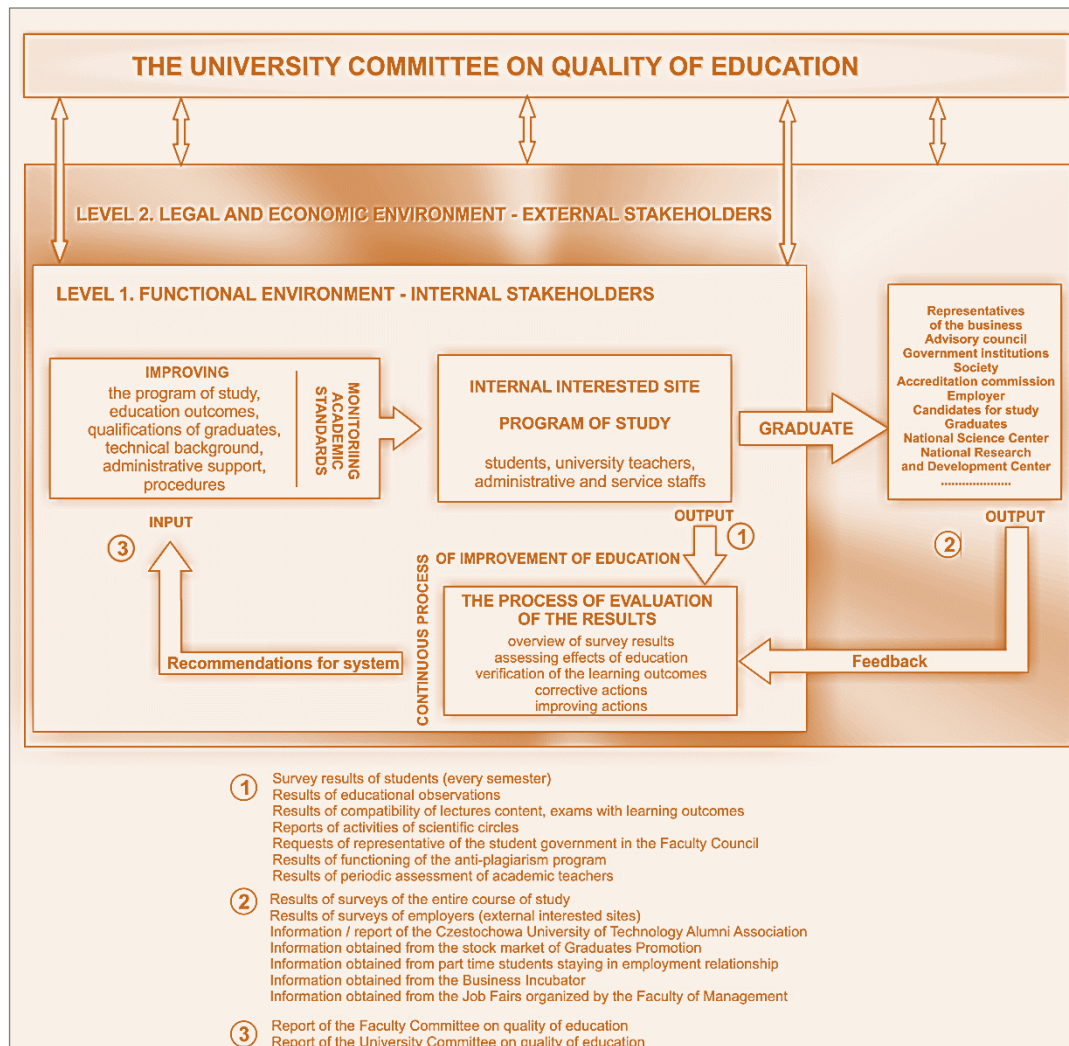


Figure 3. Model of functioning of internal system of quality assurance at the Faculty of Management – Częstochowa University of Technology

4. The analysis of stakeholders' satisfaction factors

As based on literature research (Ryńcza, 2013; Alves, Mainardes & Raposo, 2010; Aldridge & Rowley, 1998) and own research conducted in the Faculty of Management at Częstochowa University of Technology in the years 2014 – 2016, satisfaction factors for particular stakeholders groups were specified. The following types of survey were used: a random internal stakeholders survey (students and academic staff), paper and pencil personal interview

(employers, entrepreneurs, graduates, selected government institutions, chambers of commerce and associations), and computer assisted web interview, CAWI, directed at graduates and prospective students. Direct survey was also used in the process and it was aimed at local entrepreneurs, and the representatives of government administration authorities (the City Council, the District Employment Office) and trade institution or independent university workers. 265 student questionnaires, 55 academic staff questionnaires, 24 business representatives' questionnaires, 7 government institutions questionnaires, and 195 graduates questionnaires were qualified for the research. The results of the survey allowed to develop an overview of the selected satisfaction factors for various stakeholders groups. The following table shows partial results of the survey. They concern identification of satisfaction factors in particular groups.

Table 3. Selected factors concerning stakeholders' satisfaction with the quality of educational service

Internal Stakeholder engagement		External Stakeholder engagement		
Students	Employees	Employers	Graduates	Government bodies
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Approachable way of presenting information. 2. Devoted lecturers. 3. Well-prepared educational materials. 4. The ability to create positive and facilitating atmosphere for students to acquire knowledge. 5. The possibility of taking part in research and projects. 6. The possibility to obtain additional knowledge in student research clubs, etc. 7. Easy access to academic staff. 8. Infrastructure of a university. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Regular income. 2. Safe working environment. 3. The number of hours in the workload. 4. The subjects in a teaching contract. 5. Flexible working hours. 6. The number of days in a paid leave. 7. The possibility to take part in conferences. 8. The possibility of improvement. 9. Clear promotion rules. 10. The possibility of promotion 11. Access to laboratories, library, legal and technical advice. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Large professional knowledge and skills of students. 2. Good preparation for a given job – internship. 3. The prestige of a university. 4. Participation in creating new degree courses (defining the expected educational results). 5. Innovative teaching. 6. The amount of practical training, projects, and workshops. 7. Good cooperation with the Careers Office. 8. Cooperation with the university in terms of research and development. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The prospect of further career (qualified employment). 2. Remuneration 3. The demand of graduates in a job market. 4. Short spell of searching for a job after graduation. 5. Overall positive evaluation of the curriculum and internship. 6. Evaluation of the cooperation between a university and entrepreneurs. 7. The participation of an academic institution in research and projects for companies. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Good teaching facilities, a library, etc. 2. Conducting research connected with a given degree course. 3. Equipment. 4. Subsidies and scholarships. 5. Publications with a high number of points. 6. The number of patents. 7. The number of foreign students (internationalization level). 8. Eligibility to give academic degrees. 9. Rules and regulations compatible with the law.

Figures 4 – 8 show percentage visualization of the results of evaluation in different groups of stakeholders (1 – little significance; 5 – great significance) for particular satisfaction factors from Table 3. As far as students are concerned, factors which are crucial to achieving satisfaction (in percentage) are preparation of teaching materials (factor 3), easy access to academic staff (factor 7). When weighted average is taken into consideration, the most significant factors are factor number seven and the infrastructure of an academic institution

(factor 8). Academic staff considers as the most important clear promotion rules (factor 9) and regular income (factor 1). As for weighted average, the most important are safe working conditions (factor 2) and the number of working hours in their workload (factor 3).

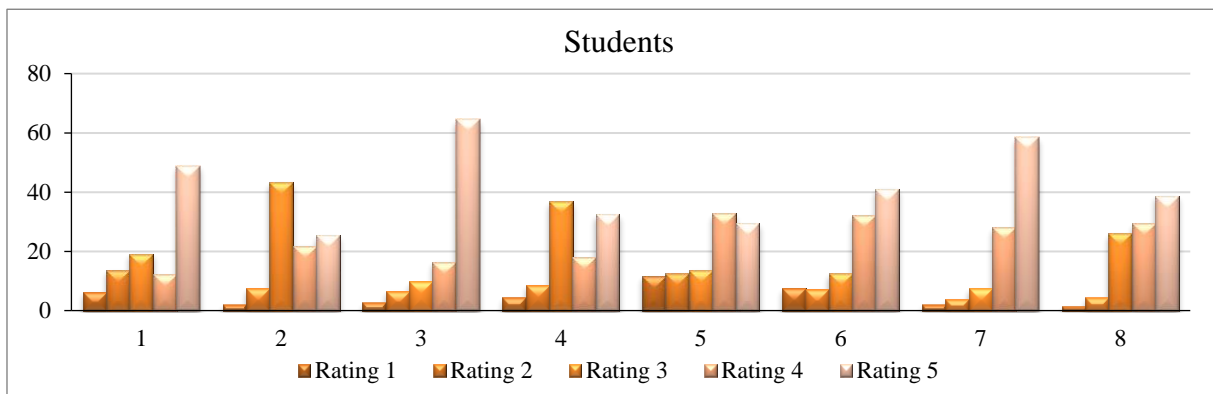


Figure 4. Significance of satisfaction among students – results of evaluation factors (own study)

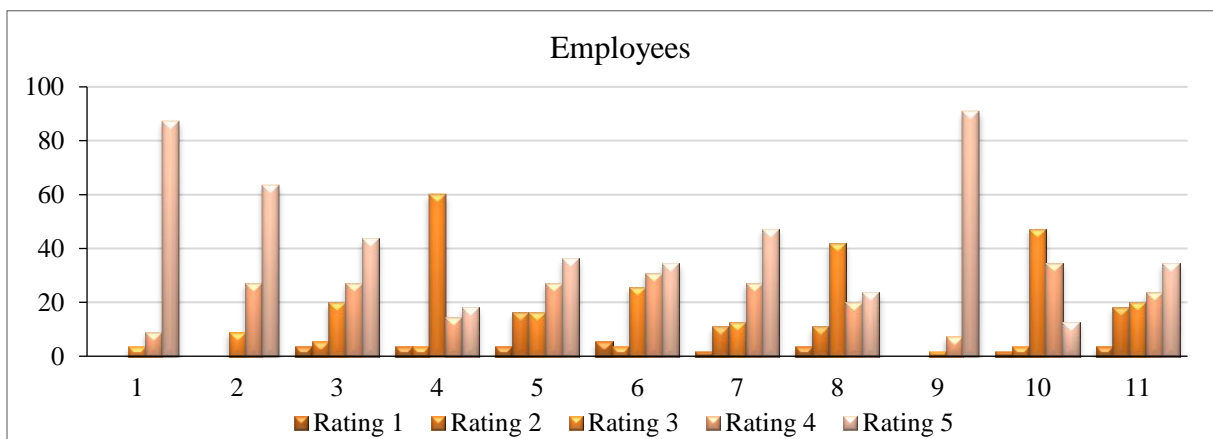


Figure 5. Significance of satisfaction among employees – results of evaluation factors (internal stakeholders), (own study)

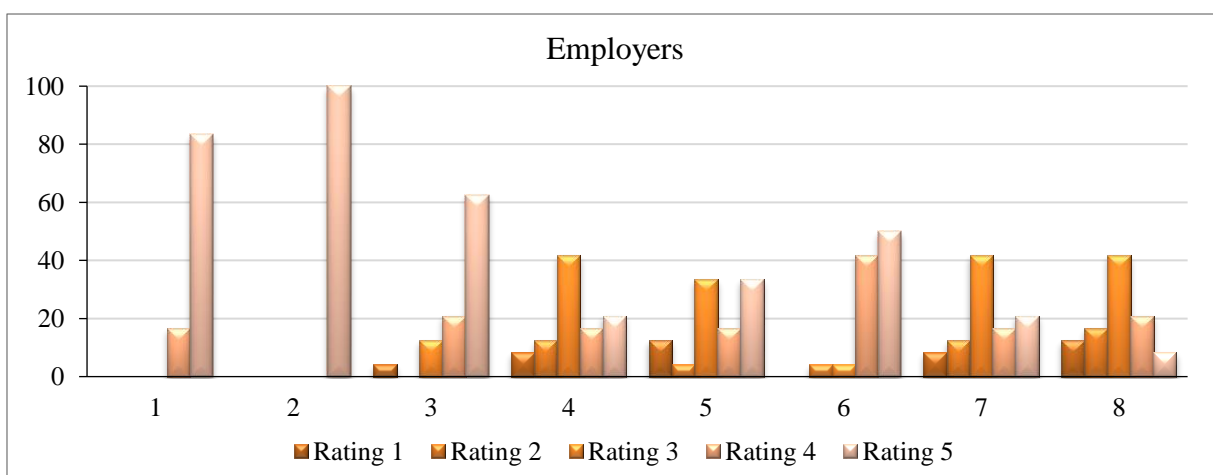


Figure 6. Significance of satisfaction among employers – results of evaluation factors (external stakeholders), (own study)

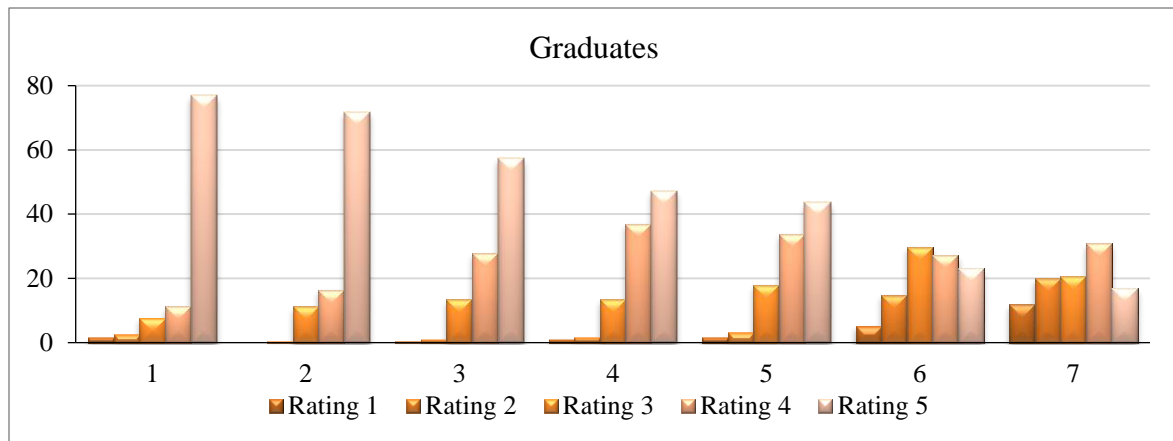


Figure 7. Significance of satisfaction among graduates – results of evaluation factors (external stakeholders), (own study)

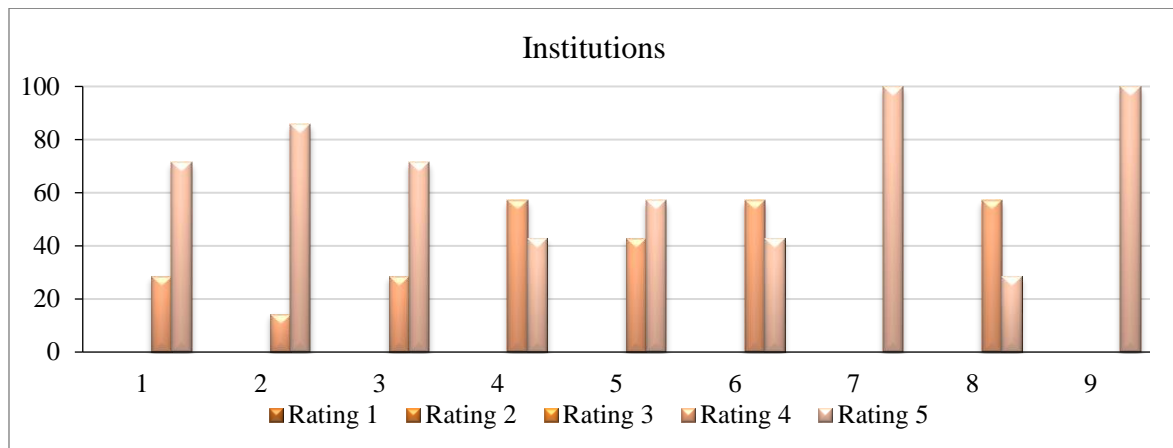


Figure 8. Significance of satisfaction among institutions – results of evaluation factors (internal stakeholders), (own study)

For external stakeholders, that are employers, the most significant factors include good preparation of a student to perform his job (factor 2) and student's knowledge and skills (factor 1). When weighted average is considered, factor 2 and the prestige of an academic institution (factor 3) are of primary importance. Graduates considered factor 1, 2 and 3 as the most important (in percentage) and the level of salaries (factor 2) and the demand for graduates in a job market (factor 3) and short span of searching for a job (factor 4) in terms of weighted average. Institutions considered all the defined factors as important which may suggest a necessity to conduct a further research in this area of stakeholders.

7. Conclusion

New governance principles expect active stakeholder engagement in all phases of policy making. Quality assurance is one area where stakeholder input is strongly encouraged. However, particular stakeholders may differ in their way of perceiving quality and defining factors which influence satisfaction level (Rosak-Szyrocka & Blaskova, 2016; Grabara, 2000).

An extremely significant, and, at the same time, controversial element related to the perception of responsibility for quality of education is, according to academic teachers, the

student (Ulewicz, 2017). Academic teachers are of the opinion that the responsibility of students for the quality of education is of utmost importance, hence, it should be highlighted and considered crucial. Academic staff also underlines the issue of unequal share of responsibility for the education process. It is claimed that, year by year, academic teachers are obliged to improve and enhance their skills and competence, while requirements imposed on students flatline or even are lowered. A similar situation can also be observed in academic institutions in other countries (Bezpalko, Klishevych, Liakh & Pavliuk, 2016). Following this, common objectives and shared satisfaction features can be identified. However, these are only intermediate solutions which guarantee achieving a certain level of satisfaction but do not guarantee a continuous improvement and constant adjusting to the requirements of turbulent environment.

As the author states, the issue of quality should be approached differently, namely, through integration strategy respected by all the stakeholders groups. The problem of quality integration not only concerns quality assurance but also it can be noticed in other areas of economic activity (Anttila & Jussila, 2017). It ought to be approached in the same way as operational and strategic management are approached (Senge, Roberts, Ross & Kleiner, 1994). Figure 6 shows a management model for the managerial domains of the quality of integration.

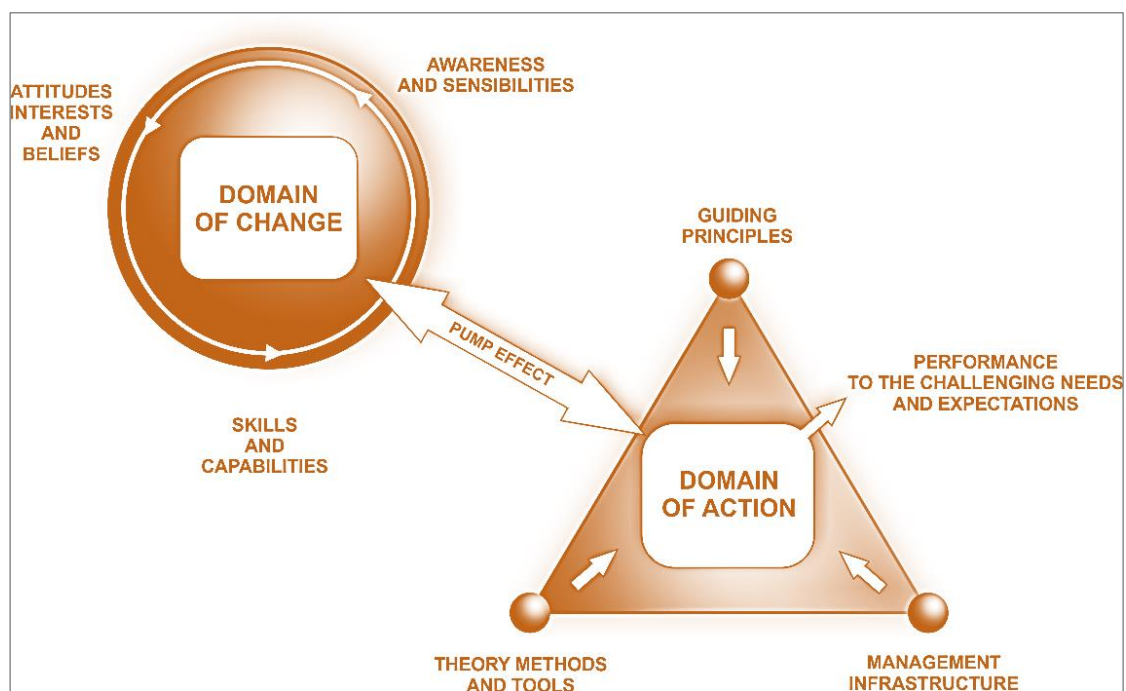


Figure 9. The comprehensive managerial model for the managerial domains of the Quality Integration (Senge, P., Roberts, C., Ross, B. & Kleiner, A. 1994. *The fifth discipline fieldbook*. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing Limited)

The domain of action – strategic management (e.g. realization of educational service) and the domain of change – improvement and adjusting to needs of internal and external stakeholders (strategic development). The author suggests that the use of the so called pump is supposed to trigger quality integration of particular stakeholders groups. In the prospect of demographic decline, integration strategy acquires a new meaning.

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Address of author:

Assoc. Prof. Robert ULEWICZ, PhD.
Rector's representative for quality education
Faculty of Management
Czestochowa University of Technology
Armii Krajowej 19B
42-201 Czestochowa
Poland
e-mail: ulewicz@zim.pcz.pl