Chapter 1

Quality Management in German Higher Education: Approaches and Challenges in University Continuing Education

Anita Mörth
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0383-791X
FernUniversität in Hagen, Germany

ABSTRACT

This chapter provides an insight into quality management in university continuing education at German higher education institutions. First, it sets the context by explaining the position and characteristics of university continuing education within the German higher education system as well as current provisions, existing recommendations, and concepts for quality management (QM) within this area. Based on the analysis of selected university continuing education programs, the chapter then (1) outlines crucial aspects that need to be tackled in regard to QM, (2) presents a variety of concrete quality management activities that have been put into practice, and (3) describes empirically based quality dimensions specific to university continuing education. The chapter includes possible areas for future research and development.

INTRODUCTION

Demographic and societal changes towards an increasingly information- and knowledge-based society make lifelong learning (LLL) an ongoing necessity. In the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), various stakeholders, initiatives (such as the European Association for Quality in HE [ENQA]), and higher education institutions (HEIs) (for example, Open University UK) have been addressing the topics of lifelong learning and quality management. This chapter will focus on the specific sector within German higher education that addresses LLL: university continuing education.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-1238-8.ch001
In Germany, it is traditionally non-university institutions that have answered the need for LLL and that offer general or professional continuing education. However, almost twenty years ago, HEIs in Germany were tasked with providing LLL. Also because of various state incentives, quite a few higher education institutions have started to develop programs that specifically address lifelong learners. Yet, compared to what LLL comprises, these so-called university continuing education programs usually have a rather narrow focus on so-called new target groups, that is, students with a first academic degree coming back to university after some years of work experience, and also people without a first university degree but with comprehensive work experience. The programs for those learners seek to be professionally relevant, competency-based, student-centered, and flexible in regard to time and content. In spite of such developments, what Hanft & Knust (2009) stated about ten years ago is still valid today, namely that lifelong learning still has a long way to go before it becomes a central task of higher education institutions in Germany, as university continuing education is still a fringe issue for most HEIs.

This chapter examines LLL and quality management policies and framework conditions within the German higher education area and its links to the European level. In addition, the chapter presents various approaches to and models for quality assurance and management within university continuing education. Then, the author presents empirical results on quality assurance in university continuing education: crucial aspects of QM based on an action research process, and quality activities mapped along a process model of program development and quality dimensions, both based on a document analysis. The findings give insight into an area that has not been systematically researched yet. After drawing a conclusion, the author outlines possibilities for future research.

BACKGROUND

Lifelong Learning in German Higher Education Institutions

Lifelong learning was identified as a central element of the EHEA in the Prague Communiqué of 2001. At the subsequent conference in Berlin in 2003, it was stated that universities play a central role in the realization of LLL (EHEA, 2001, 2003). The German Rectors’ Conference (Hochschulrektorenkonferenz [HRK], 2001) affirmed the importance of LLL in 2001 for Germany and stated that HE must play a central role in developing an LLL strategy. As university continuing education (not as LLL, which would suggest a broader approach), it is nowadays set as one of the three central tasks of HEIs next to research and teaching, according to the HE framework law.

German HEIs differentiate between regular degree programs, so-called consecutive programs (Bachelor and Master, and PhD) according to the three-cycle system that has been introduced with the Bologna process, and university continuing education programs. The consecutive programs are mainly full-time programs targeted at students who usually come directly from secondary school, having achieved an entrance qualification certificate, and who then enroll in regular Bachelor’s programs and then may subsequently advance to a Master’s program, possibly followed by a PhD program.

University continuing education on the other hand refers to a range of program types that is targeted towards experienced and working learners:

- Continuing education Master’s programs are legally defined in all German states and lead to the same degree as the regular Master’s.