

**RESPONSIVENESS TO QUALITY MANAGEMENT SYSTEM ISO9001 IN
A HIGHER PUBLIC INSTITUTION IN MOROCCO: AN INTERNAL
ACTORS PERSPECTIVE**

**LA RÉACTIVITÉ AU SYSTÈME DE GESTION DE LA QUALITÉ ISO9001
DANS UNE INSTITUTION PUBLIQUE SUPÉRIEURE AU MAROC :
PERSPECTIVE DES ACTEURS INTERNES**

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of our study is to explore responsiveness of the quality management system (QMS) ISO9001 internal actors (mainly staff and students) to its dimensions in general and to the teaching process in particular. Our interest in this matter arises from its importance as well as the shortage of studies in this regard.

A qualitative study was based on a case analysis. 23 interviews were conducted with employees and students as well as a documentation analysis.

The results show heterogeneity of attitudes towards the dimensions of QMS ISO9001: A tendency to see positive effects from staff's side and a lack of commitment on the part of the students.

KEY WORDS: Quality Assurance - ISO 9001 - Organizational Learning - Higher Education

RESUME

L'objectif de notre étude exploratoire est d'investiguer la réaction des acteurs internes au système de management de la qualité (SMQ) ISO9001 envers ses différentes dimensions en général et envers le processus de formation en particulier. Notre intérêt à ce sujet est suscité par son importance ainsi que par le manque des études dans ce sens.

Une étude qualitative a été menée sur le terrain, basée sur une étude de cas. 23 entretiens ont été conduits avec les salariés et les étudiants de l'institution supérieure ainsi que l'analyse documentaire.

Les résultats obtenus montrent une hétérogénéité d'attitudes envers les dimensions du SMQ ISO9001 pour le personnel avec une tendance à voir ses effets de manière positive ainsi qu'un manque d'engagement de la part des étudiants.

MOTS CLÉS : Assurance de la qualité - ISO 9001- apprentissage organisationnel- Enseignement supérieur

I- INTRODUCTION

1.1- Context:

Since the era of time, quality and its assurance has been a major concern for humans. Almost, all great civilizations had an interest in standardization and quality control (Juran, 1995). Although, the interest in quality as a subject of academic reflection began with the American scholars (P. Crosby, W. Deming and J. Juran), those who excelled in this matter were the Japanese who revolutionized the world of business, especially with tools for continuous improvement as the Kaizen method, the Ishikawa diagram, the « 5 S » etc.). In this regard, some researchers attribute the Japanese success in quality matters to the prominent place given to the human being in their companies management system (Shiba, 1997). Above all, it seems that quality and its management is "a matter of human capital".

For this reason we intend to study the responsiveness to quality management system (QMS) ISO 9001 applied in the context of a higher education public institution in Morocco. This study is conducted from the perspective of its internal actors especially academics, quality managers and students.

The importance of this subject comes from the fact that quality has become a major issue in higher education in Morocco lately. For the latter, despite the introduction of a series of reforms, the education system is often considered "in crisis" since the 80s concerning for example, the integration of graduates into the labour market, as well as the quality of education and the relevance of learning (UNESCO 2011). A such situation coupled with a shift in the state's role from a position of control to an "ex-post evaluation", often called "New Public Management" (Van Vught and al 1994) has given rise to the approach of "quality assurance" (with all the nuances about its meaning and models of achievement) to be more present in the education's policies and its system of governance.

Also, managing quality according to the ISO9001 standard could be considered as a "quality assurance" approach that focuses mainly on managerial aspect and which underlies the idea that good management could produce quality of education (as an "output"). So, approaches of quality management, as ISO9001, come with tools such as "evaluation", "audits" etc. Such instruments may confer "quality" a centrality in a certified institution and its day-to-day operations.

In general, quality has been considered as part of the "the university's ethos". However, beyond the effect of global conjunctures and the national context that make this topic a major concern, an awareness seems to emerge that quality is not intrinsic and self-evident. Indeed, it is a concept having different significances depending on the perspective of each stakeholder and thus requires a special attention. One of the meanings of quality could be "excellence", as an "as being superior " and being something exceptional. After all, it is quality what makes higher education "high". Also, quality could mean a "fit for purpose". In this case, it denotes for example, a social demand of equipping learners with the necessary skills and tools to enter the labour market.

1.2- The ISO 9001 norme:

Standardization originated in the industrial field in order to establish common criterions developed on the basis of consensus and recognized internationally concerning technical specifications of products the beginning (Giard, 2003). The ISO 9001 is a continuation of this approach of standardization that evolved to become a management tool and control of the organization's activity (Benghozi et al., 1996). In addition to this "control" function, the standard also provides guidance and a sense of orientation regarding quality by implementing a quality management system (QMS).

So first, seen from the outside, the norm is a set of requirements that one should comply to; otherwise, one couldn't be certified. These requirements are to be considered as guidelines to interpret depending on the context of each organization.

Second, the ISO9001 is based on the notion of "process" which is a set of interacting activities in order to produce a desired result. Also, the process which is a transverse approach aims creating add value for the customer. To achieve this, it is necessary to rethink and formalize all the activities (especially those implicit) and place them with all the necessary tasks towards a common goal regardless of differences between departments and services within the organisation.

Finally, the standard is based on the Deming cycle (PDCA) that, once well implemented, helps mastering the process through planning, implementation, control and responsiveness as well as continuous improvement.

1.3 Objective and question of the study

Due to the fact that many and diverse organizations (such as health institutions, public administrations and educational institutions) has adopted quality management systems, the latter has become a social phenomenon (Hackman and Wageman 1995). Even though, the ISO9001 remains the standard of choice for educational organizations (Thonhauser, 2006), its introduction into the educational domain raises a number of concerns:

First, the implementation of ISO9001 in the industrial domain aims at customer satisfaction (as an ultimate dimension of quality) and the reduction of costs and production time supported by the process approach and the measurement of performance indicators. However, these are not completely the orientations of the educational system where we are rather in a logic of knowledge transmission.

Then on a basic aspect, according to ISO 9000: 2015 - "Quality management systems. Fundamentals and vocabulary" quality is: "degree to which a set of inherent characteristics fulfils requirements

Note 1 to entry: The term "quality" can be used with adjectives such as poor, good or excellent.

Note 2 to entry: "Inherent", as opposed to "assigned", means existing in something, especially as a permanent characteristic."

We could understand that this definition is made so, for practical and operational reasons. However, this perspective does not take into account the "perceiving subject", nor the full spectrum and richness "of what quality is" and the complexity of its measurement. Consequently, this approach to quality's essence seems reductive especially if the concerned domain is education that cannot be equated, in any way, with a product or service in the economic sense of term.

Finally, unlike commercial and services domain where the boundary between "internal" (staffs) and "external" (customers) is salient, the main actors and the beneficiaries of the training process are inside the educational institution: On one hand, we have academic and administrative personnel. On the other hand, we have students who are the beneficiaries (customers), "the product" and actors of the educational process in the same time. These internal actors constitute a human capital that ISO standard recognizes their importance:

"People at all levels are the essence of an organization and their full involvement enables their abilities to be used for the organization's benefit" (ISO9001: 2015).

So, we are interested in our study to explore perceptions and attitudes of these actors towards quality and its management by asking this main question:

What is the responsiveness of the QMS internal actors (namely employees and students) to its dimensions in general and to the teaching process in particular, in a higher educational institution in Morocco?

Our aim is not to measure their attitudes and perceptions, but rather to explore their broad nature by asking specific questions as follows:

What drives the implementation of QMS the higher institution?

What are the motivations of implementation, the obstacles, the positive outcomes and the negative ones?

What is quality for each category? What perceptions do they have about different dimensions of quality management?

What roles hold the documentation, leadership and students in the QMS?

Our interest in this issue derives from the importance of these actors in the successful implementation of this management tool and the influence of their behaviour on the accuracy and significance of the outcomes (Laughton, 2003). Also, few studies were done concerning attitudes and perceptions of employees concerning QMS and its implementation (Boiral, 2012). Indeed, knowing more about the attitudes and perceptions of these internal actors helps to control the activity of the organization because at the base they determine the processes efficiency, or even more, as Norbert Elias said: "Man is not subjected to a process, he is a process" (Elias, 2002).

1.4 Literature Review and frame of reference

While research on quality management is abundant, the classification of "quality management" by scholars is subject to divergence between those who relate it to scientific management, others view it as part of the general systems theory from Von Bertalanffy's work (Wang, 2004), while other researchers view it as a new framework for management (Dean and Bowen, 1994).

Two major topics are addressed by the ISO9001 research literature in general: motivations and obstacles to its implementation as well as the impacts and effects of certification. While

the internal motivations are mainly centered on operational control, the external ones refer to the pressure of the environment and the image promotion.

In terms of the effects of quality assurance in higher education, the benefits relate to operational improvements and marketing benefits, while the downside is mainly the cost of implementation and some structural stiffening (Debruyne, 2002).

Although research on the introduction of ISO in organizations is abundant, the diversity of perceptions of internal actors in a certified environment remains an under-exploited theme (Boiral, 2012). Heras-Saizarbitoria et al. (2013) points out to the lack of studies analyzing the adoption of ISO 9001 from the point of view of employees.

Our frame of reference is based on complementary theories: In addition to research on quality management in HE, institutional theories (Scott 1985, Selznick 1996), our analytical framework is based on the concept of "learning organization" (Senge, 1990). However, we use theories of organizational learning in a non-idealized perspective (Chanal, 2000, 2004), but contextualized in a system/ actor approach (Crozier and Friedberg, 1977, Bernoux, 2004).

II- Empirical study and methodology

The higher public institution, subject of our empirical study has 500 students (2018- 2019) and it has been certified ISO9001 (Version 2008) in 2015 and ISO9001 (2015 version) in 2018.

To explore responsiveness of staff and students towards quality management and its effects in general and to the teaching process in particular, we opted for a qualitative study based on a case analysis. Tools that were used: documentation analysis, interviews and participative observation. First we studied a rich documentation on the QMS system (management review, procedures, action plans, audit report etc.). Then we analyzed operational data, especially those concerning the quality assessment by indicators. The information we obtained from the documentation and from the data generated by the QMS served as a basis for developing an interview guide and asking relevant and detailed questions to the respondents.

23 interviews were conducted as follows: 12 interviews with school staff (where 7 have direct responsibility for quality management). Respondents were interviewed on various occasions inside and outside the institution, with an average of one hour per interview. Seven students in their last year of study were randomly selected to answer our questions in addition to 4 graduates met on different occasions.

III- Results

The processes at work within the higher institution's QMS ISO9001 are seven:

- Two realization processes concerning basic and continuing training.
- Two processes of management of which that of the continuous improvement.
- Lastly, processes of support: HR, Maintenance and General support services.

For each process, indicators, risks, concerned parties and its document management are established. For the present study we focus on the evaluation of quality by indicators of the training process, essential mission of the higher institution.

3.1- Staff's responsiveness to QMS and its dimensions

Despite the fact that access to ISO9001 certification for the public institution has been imposed by external decision-makers rather than being the result of internal negotiations, the processes managers see the adoption of ISO9001 system as a way to promote their work and a promotion for their school image:

"It distinguishes us as a school by comparison to others " process manager, interview #2

" Each time we set goals and we are audited. It allows us to improve continuously " process manager interview #5.

The system's continuous improvement and maintenance requires a continuous mobilization of different process managers to a degree according to their responsibilities and scope of action. This mobilization is mainly conducted through monitoring of performance indicators and it is at its peak especially in the days preceding the internal or external audits:

"It leaves us under tension, the internal audits quality meetings, etc." process manager, interview #4

"We do not wait until the end to correct a situation, the visit of an external auditor, we do not relax » process manager, interview #2.

Audits are perceived by the process managers as a constraint and their potential negative assessment as a threat. However, the interviewees perceived the main improvements in the 2015 version of ISO 9001, namely risk management, knowledge management and the consideration of stakeholders needs as facilitating factors to gain strategic knowledge about the institution and its challenges. In general, the discourse about ISO9001 effects on the services and operations within the higher institution are rather positive:

"We have been able to modify our training programs thanks to the comments and feedbacks of professionals". Process manager, interview #2

"The inclusion of employers as an "interested party" has served us well especially for the inclusion of our laureates in the labour market. " quality manager, interview #1.

A consensus seemed to emerge from different points of view that QMS ISO9001 adoption allowed to better organize and structure the institution's activities. This facilitated, as an example according to some of our interviewees, needs identification to set up an IT system for administrative and academic affairs called "ERP- (Enterprise Resource Planning).

Another main effect of access to ISO9001 certification concerns the formalization of practices and operational data on documents that make it possible to explicit a know-how in management and capitalize on everyday experiences:

"With ISO9001 we do almost the same thing as before but in a more organized way " Employee, interview #9

"Everything is documented." process manager, interview #4

"Without SMQ we would do courses without knowing if we miss something," process manager, interview #6

"The TDB (dashboards), The PAGs (general action plans) allow us to have visibility and follow-up of the services provided. " process manager, interview #3.

In addition to learning concepts of quality, the documentation is approached as an organizational learning object and a reference to which the actors resort with more or less interest. Whether for the basic documentation that was developed especially in the phase preceding the certification or the dynamic one generated in order to improve the system, these are not apprehended "as a whole", but parts that get staff's interest if related to one's scope of responsibility or in case of need. Also, for some process managers, the formalization in writing of all the actions carried out within the system is perceived somehow as "heavy" and a bit of a burden. Yet, the formalization required by the ISO9001 standard is seen in general as having clarified roles and responsibilities. For some, it demystified the role of leadership obliging it to rationalize its decisions, to "democratize" access to information and to be accountable.

Talking about leadership, some respondents were critical about its role. They mentioned its simplistic approach to quality in practice. Other criticisms of leadership in terms of quality

imply that "The form outweighs content" as well as "some discordance between doing and saying".

Concerning the obstacles to a real introduction of quality within the higher institution, our respondents mainly focused on the restrictive regulatory framework that does not promote the status of teacher-researcher and the conducting of courses by a large number of visiting teachers who do not have a strong attachment to school.

With regard to the training process's indicators in particular, these are supposed to play an important role in maintaining the quality of training and its improvement. Yet, the process manager perceives the indicator as "a constraint": if the indicator is below the predetermined objective, it may imply that one does not do his job correctly. Consequently, the person in charge of the process may feel embarrassed and obliged to find a solution to restore the indicator in question to the desired level.

Scrutinised in details, some remarks could be made upon the training process indicators: on the saturation of some of them, on the calculation method used or even on the basis of the relevance of the dimension as a quality indicator.

3.2- Students responsiveness towards the QMS system

At first when interviewed, most of the students were not aware of the existence of a quality management as a "system". Then, while deepening the discussion about quality, they recognize a set of unrelated actions related to quality management: For some of them, the first thing they mention is suggestions boxes installed in few corners of the school. For others, they acknowledge having taken part in occasional events such as an annual meeting with professionally active graduates or a satisfaction survey.

Then, talking about quality in the various services of the institution and what evokes for them the expression "a school of quality", student answers were more about getting recognition by employers regarding their diploma. Also, they stressed on services within the institution that have a professional character (such as pedagogical visits to companies, the granting of internships and the end-of-studies project). Such answers reflect a concern for employability and integration into the labour market. On the other hand, the professionally active laureates we met have put more emphasis on the content of training, the development of design skills and versatility. They also emphasized the importance of active pedagogical approaches such as those based on projects or problem solving.

Finally, students recognised to be asked on a regular basis, to express their satisfaction about taught subjects (on the content of the courses, the achievement of objectives, the animation of the course etc.). Interviewed students say they have no feedback on their assessments afterwards.

According to interviews we conducted with quality managers a large number of students did not make courses evaluation. Once asked, students explained that they did not fill the evaluation forms for several reasons: to keep a good relationship with the teacher, for fear of reprisals or for lack of commitment and conviction as to the value of a such operation.

In contrast to these widespread cases of student disengagement from taught material evaluation, other but fewer cases (with very low scores) were widely attended. According to students, in such cases, the assessment was used in complicity by the class "to put in embarrassment" the concerned teachers.

IV- DISCUSSION

4.1- Responsiveness of staff

To understand the responsiveness of internal actors in the higher institution towards QMS ISO9001 and its dimensions, we consider their behaviour with respect to the context of the organization where they operate. In this sense, we consider their relation to ISO9001 in the theoretical framework of actors' power games with limited rationality (Crozier and Friedberg, 1977). Thus, if a process manager for example, perceives an opportunity to promote his work through the tools and processes of ISO9001 (such as the formalization and the communication of results), he also perceives a risk of mastering the tools and concepts of the standard that could put his work and skills to question. Therefore, the mobilization of the personnel to contribute to QMS is done by intrinsic motivation (to value its work and to show it), but especially at the cost of constraints (indicators, audit, etc.).

With regard to audit, it is perceived as "inspection" rather than "evaluation". So, the person in question apprehends this act in a spirit of compliance with the pre-established rules rather than an opportunity of new knowledge production and learning, instituting what can be considered as the borders or barriers of knowledge (Chanal, 2004).

Although, internal actors of QMS ISO9001 have diverse attitudes and perceptions regarding its different dimensions, the results show that there is an almost consensus of positive perception among the school's personnel concerning the restructuring and the reorganisation

of internal activities and operations. Also, there is a tendency of the employees to speak in a uniform way about the positive effects of ISO9001 and its benefits, except a mention of a downside of the organization's heaviness and stiffening (Debruyne, 2002). One may wonder then, if some of our respondents facing an external interviewer do not try to do their best to answer, as if they were facing an audit. In this sense, some of them were "distant" and way more critical towards quality management once met outside the institution on different occasions. This suggests that the positive and common inclination to see the effects of ISO9001 certification is due partly to the uniformity of discourse about QMS and its effects within the institution that has become a kind of "symbolic cage" (weber 1958, Boiral, 2003).

On the other hand, criticisms addressed to the leadership of the school imply that beyond a "professed quality", leadership plays an important role as a vector of organizational learning (Probst, Gilbert Büchel, Bettina, 1995) to convey a "practiced quality". Also, that the discourse emanating from leadership is institutionalized to become uniform for communication purposes may be sometimes in tension with a contextualized speech of circumstance (Chanal, 2004). In addition to the contradiction between contextualisation/standardization of speech, the latter could lose direction related to discordance between "saying and doing" in other situations. This surely affects internal actors perceptions and their commitment to the quality approach advocated by the institution.

4.2- Responsiveness of students

With regard to students, their lack of commitment to the quality approach in general may be partly explained by the neglect of including them as an important communication target in terms of quality and its management. In addition to the questioning about their commitment to the QMS as a whole, their refusal to express their satisfaction with the taught subjects or their use of the evaluation forms for other purposes of what was planned, question the relevance of the evaluation made by them as a quality assurance tool.

Certainly, the evaluation of teaching is a complicated matter: one can ask in absolute terms: "the right teaching" is the one that is given with clarity or the one that encourages students to discover themselves by giving them just guidelines? Or is it the one that pleases the students without necessarily teaching them something?

Beyond the subjective nature of evaluation, the use of "imported tools" without adapting them and without taking into consideration cultural and contextual differences is questioned.

Indeed, while the student assessment instrument is well known and widely used in North America as a tool for evaluating teaching performance (Ramsden, 1991), it can be used differently, as in our case to judge the individual.

Concerning the irrelevance of some quality indicators, QMS ISO 9001 standards require the establishment of internal means to increase the reliability of internal processes. That being said, such situations denote a focus on the procedural aspect and possibly imply a spirit of conformity and passive attitude rather than a search of quality improvement.

Lastly, the approach of quality assessment by performance indicators can be criticized for its simplicity and that a much more inclusive approach to quality assessment and its richness is needed.

CONCLUSION

What characterizes the responsiveness of QMS ISO9001 internal actors (namely staff and students) in our case study of a higher public institution is diversity. These actors are sometimes poles apart: for example, the position of a process manager who monitors "quality indicators" and that of a student who knows almost nothing about the QMS, are diametrically opposed.

For the attitudes and perceptions of academic and administrative staff, they are of a heterogeneous and diverse nature except for a tendency to see positive effects of QMS ISO9001 in uniform way. Discourses that seems following a "mechanical" and a rational sense. When it comes to management of the training process, the main activity of the school, students are the "major absentee". This situation cannot be related only to their lack of commitment, but also explained by the fact that there is little feedback to them from the quality management system. On the other hand, the attitude of the employees towards the quality assessment approach by indicators implies passivity and a spirit of conformity to the procedures rather than one of quality improvement.

Talk about school's leadership is widely present in the employees discourse: If the employees have different perceptions on its influence to quality and its management, they are almost unanimous to see the centrality of its role in the establishment of a true culture of quality.

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