Educational Audit as an Imperative of Higher Education Program Competitiveness in the Trans-Border Region

Dulma Dugarova*, Sesegma Kimova, Larisa Kalinina

Transbaikal State University, 30 Aleksandro-Zavodskaya Street, Chita, 672039, Russia

Abstract

The imperative of competitiveness of higher education programs in trans-border education is relevant to the requirements of international documents on evaluation and ensuring the education quality guarantees. In connection to this, the content of notions "education", "quality of education", "trans-border education" act as fundamental factors determining the mission and strategy of development of a higher education institution. The paper describes the activity of the higher education institution in the trans-border region (bordering on China and Mongolia) and its preparation to implementing the international principles and approaches to questions of educational audit, independent evaluation of quality of education, and ensuring the guarantee of quality of higher education in line with the new trends of internal and external assessment of quality of education at higher education institutions.

Keywords: educational audit; trans-border education; quality of education; guarantees of quality of education; independent evaluation of educational quality

1. Introduction

Directions of higher education development are dictated by the growing internationalization of social and economic relations in all spheres of human activity. The main imperative of Russian higher education in connection with Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization and joining the Bologna process aims to develop evaluation models and methods of common for many countries. General Agreement on Trade in Services (including

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +7-302-226-2655
E-mail address: dugarova_dc@mail.ru
educational ones), international conceptual approaches to problems of evaluating and guaranteeing the quality of education, UNESCO and Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) agreements concerning guidelines for quality assurance in the context of education internationalization determine the necessity for higher education institutions to be ready to accept international rules, to learn to carry out educational activity in conditions of growing competition both in the domestic and foreign markets of educational services.

The value of educational audit in the system of independent education quality assessment and education quality assurance consists of its being an effective tool providing the necessary information for improvement of higher education institutions management, education quality assessment and education quality assurance concerning the educational programs being the main subject of activity of a higher education institution.

2. Objectives, methodology and research design

The goal of our research is to define organizational and pedagogical basis for educational audit that would be relevant for design and implementation of high school educational programs under necessity to provide quality of trans-border education.

Research methodology is based on the philosophical justification of quality category (J. Dewey, E. Kant, John Locke, Fr. Engels), systematic and activity approach (V.P. Bespalko, A.I. Subbeto, V.D. Shadrikov), process approach (W. E. Deming, D. Dill, S.Y. Trapitsin) to the educational quality management.

The main objectives of our research include:

- analysis of foreign and domestic traditions, models and experiences in the field of evaluation of quality of education, and trans-border higher education quality assurance;
- organization of internal and external educational audit in accordance with applicability of the concept of quality to education as a "product" or "services" according to ISO;
- revealing the particularities of educational audit of institutional and program accreditation that consider the quality of education through the prism of the following characteristics: opportunity, start, potential for further development.

The internal and external audit as an imperative of competitiveness of educational programs show that education quality assessment and assessment education quality assurance are connected to determining the notion of "education" from the standpoint of ISO 9000 series standards as a "product" or "service", as well as to determining the notion of education as a socially significant good considered in Bologna process documents and the Federal Law "On education in the Russian Federation" dated 12/29/2012 №273-FZ.

3. Discussion of the research outcomes

As Russia entered the global education community and considering social and economic realities of the XXI century alongside with increased competition within the system of higher education, and the pressure of domestic and international labor market on practical aspects of knowledge, new requirements for quality of education are put forward. Taking this into account, one of the main tasks of higher education becomes the new understanding of what is high-quality education. The study of foreign experience and international principles and approaches to education quality assessment makes higher education institutions analyze foreign and domestic traditions, models, experience in quality assessment and education quality assurance in higher education.

This is especially relevant for higher education in the trans-border region of Transbaikal Territory.

3.1 International standards, principles and approaches to higher education quality assessment and education quality assurance in trans-border region

"Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Trans-Border Higher Education" developed by UNESCO and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) based on the UN and UNESCO documents determine the main directions for all countries to understand the importance of education quality assurance in order to resist the challenges of commercialization of higher education. The guidelines contain practical recommendations for protection of students and other parties concerned related to higher education against low quality of educational
services. In the context of the guidelines, recommendations on quality assurance are given not only to government agencies, higher education institutions, and student organizations, but also to institutions involved in recognition of academic qualifications, quality assessment and quality assurance of higher education. Thus, for professional organizations carrying out independent education quality assessment, they recommend determination, development and application of assessment criteria and procedures for comparative study of programs and qualifications; requirements for organization of learning process and teaching materials are determined. The guidelines are voluntary and serve as a guide for the parties concerned of the education services market that aim at issues of education quality assessment and assurance and at the phenomenon of competitiveness of the education system and its subjects conditioned by the quality. They provide practical advice not only for development of national potential, but also for international cooperation in the field of quality assessment and quality assurance of higher education.

In this study, we closely associate the educational audit of assessing the education quality assurance with the definition of "education" both in applicability to it of ISO 9000 series standards as to a "product" or "service" and in its being asserted as a common good according to the Federal Law "On Education in the Russian Federation" dated December 29, 2012 №273-FZ (Federal'nyj zakon «Ob obrazovanii v Rossii», 2014).

According to the first standpoint, the concept of quality of the "product" can be defined as a strict conformity to standards and, therefore, deviations from it should be minimized. In this case, the quality of education is determined by its correspondence to educational standard of the educational process organization and its result. The goal of educational audit is evaluation of this correspondence, and its methods are observation, testing, analysis of current statistics, and comparison to criteria (i.e. the standard).

The second standpoint is related to understanding the education as a service. In this context the quality is defined more broadly. It implies not only control over strict correspondence of the process to the requirements, but also the compliance of received service to consumer expectations, his ideas about quality. In this case, the quality is determined by those who consume it, and so it is not about the conformity to standards, but about satisfaction of consumers – i.e. students, employers and the government. The goal of educational audit in this case is to determine the level of satisfaction of participants of the educational process at high school. The methods in this case are questionnaires, surveys, interviews.

The third standpoint appeared due to the fact that under Bologna process, education is a common good – this definition was given by European ministers of education. Education cannot be obtained as a product or service. In this case, the quality of education is seen through the prism of the following characteristics: opportunity, start and potential. This determines the different purpose of educational audit: not the search for deviations or complaints, but "the definition of quality stability and its continuous increment along with the growing expectations of the individual and society" (Motova & Navodnov, 2008, p. 70). Methods of educational audit in this case are identifying and implementing the start opportunities, building up the capacity for further development, and continuously improving the quality of education. In this case education becomes a common good for both individual and society.

### 3.2 Educational audit as an imperative of competitiveness of educational activity of higher education institutions in the context of Mongolia, China and Russia’s accession to the WTO

The analysis of foreign and domestic traditions, models, experience in higher education quality assessment and assurance shows that the basic models of independent quality assessment system are formed, namely: certification, accreditation, audit, certification of qualifications, ranking and rating. Benchmarking is also considered to be a method and a system. In the process of these systems' implementation, audit serves as information and diagnostic, expert and analytical subsystem of all other systems. Audit consolidates organizational and methodological tools of collecting and primary processing of information on quality of education. During the audit consulting activity is carried out, there is interaction with main parties interested in reliable information on quality of education. The main task of this subsystem is the analysis and interpretation of data obtained about the quality of education. In specific cases of auditing it is not the information itself on qualitative characteristics of the educational system or its components that is of interest but rather the reasonable proposals on solving a particular problem of quality improvement are.

Parties interested in conducting educational audit are:
first, the government which determines the policy of higher education and becomes a major consumer of its results;
second, employers who are the end consumers, which gives them the right to influence the quality of staff training, the quality of ongoing educational programs;
third, the very education institution that is working in the educational market and is interested in maintaining certain competitive positions by providing quality educational services (Rubin, 2009).

Educational audit that includes objects and subjects of internal and external audit is one of important tools of information accumulation. It also serves as the basis for education quality management and for determining the prospects of its further development.

The international practice supposes various approaches to the terminological systems of educational audit determination. It can be interpreted in terms of the tool audit (in Switzerland, Spain, Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands); in terms of quality audit (in Denmark, Finland, Norway); in terms of the system accreditation (in Germany).

The structure of the educational quality audit activity is a systematic, independent and documented process of obtaining the audit evidence (verification) and their impartial assessment in order to determine the extent to which certain approved audit criteria are met. In this context, educational audit of educational organizations, structural units, processes or individual educational programs, curricula and staff establishes the correspondence of the object under study to specific audit criteria, its goals and objectives.

The internal audits carried out by the institution itself (first party) determine the accordance of the results of educational activities to the current state standards. External audits are held by the second and third parties. The second party is the one concerned: here belong consumers or founders of educational institutions. The third party is external independent organizations that carry out audit for compliance with standards, e.g. GOST R ISO 9001, ENQA standards and guidelines, ISO 9000 series standards, "Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Trans-Border Higher Education".

Cooperation of the government, the second and third parties in the field of education quality assessment objectifies the value of procedures and indicators of public and professional system of education quality assessment. Incorporation of the results of educational audit in managerial decisions can take place in different fields, according to Yu.B. Rubin (2009): the certification audit, institutional and program accreditation, certification of qualifications, rating or ranking.

Guidelines for guarantees of quality in trans-border higher education developed by UNESCO and OECD provide comparability of programs implemented in the country and abroad. Timeliness and relevance of discussing the problem of higher education institution preparation for implementing the principles of quality assurance in trans-border higher education in line with its tools is also conditioned by Russia's accession to the WTO and risks arising on this basis: assurance of safety of the higher education institution as a whole, protection of teachers' rights in circumstances of the future quite tough competition in winning a task for educational services, protection of the graduates' rights to be competitive in the labor and employment market. Preparation of the higher education institution for implementing the trans-border education implies creating the conditions for the transition from the inner internationalization to the trans-border one (from foreign students' admission and inviting the foreign teachers, exchange education – to mobility of the educational process participants crossing the state borders, mobility of educational programs with all the necessary tools for their implementation). According to the guidelines, trans-border education can be defined as educational activity in which a student lives in one country while the higher education institution is in another one, and educational services, study materials, programs are delivered across the state borders via the Internet and educational resources created. In conditions of trans-border cooperation between Russia, China and Mongolia, Transbaikal State University carries out its educational activity in line with the overall strategy of higher educational institutions' development in the context of the country's accession to the WTO (Gomboeva, 2010) according to three agreements:

General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, GATT, 1947;
General Agreement on Trade in Services, GATS, 1994 (General'noe soglashenie po torgovle uslugami (GATS), 2010);
and Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights, TRIPS, 1994, that regulate the basic mechanisms of trans-border education (Soglashenie ob aspektah intellektual'noj sobstvennosti, svjazannyh s torgovlej obrazovatel'nymi uslugami (TRIPPS), 2010).

The most relevant documents are GATS and TRIPS which specify international regulations and standards in provision of services (including educational ones) and are binding for WTO member countries. Such measures include administrative regulations and decisions concerning purchase and payment for services, as well as laws and regulations being the basis for service provision. For example, the current Federal State Educational Standard in Higher Education (FSES HE), main educational programs (MEP) reflect the international and European trends in reforming and development of higher education, and the conceptual unity of the documents is conditioned by their belonging to the category of "social norm".

The implementation of trans-border education in Transbaikal Territory becoming topical reflects the interests of the regional economy and corresponds to the imperative of competitiveness of educational programs and mission of the trans-border region university. Preparation of the University to implementing the principles of trans-border education implies organizational development of quality assurance of vocational education in higher education institutions and determines the selection and validation of education quality assessment and education quality assurance models.

Difficulties in determining the certification audit model for quality management system (QMS) of the higher education institution are first of all due to the following dilemma: despite the abundant requirements of ISO 9001:2008 / GOST R ISO 9001-2008, ENQA Standards and Guidelines, they still lack requirements for successful operation because they fail to take into account the specific character of the region, the educational organization and consumer wishes. The assertive dynamics of educational services market requires a rapid response to change. Second, analysis of the current QMS models has revealed the following groups of problems arising in their application.

The first group covers requirements to educational organizations accreditation authorities auditing the education quality and its assurance: e.g. in cases of external audits according to QMS of ISO 9001; QMS certification, licensing and accreditation of educational institutions, system and processes management according to QMS Standard model. ENQA documents do not contain any of these requirements at all.

The second group gives evidence of lacking requirements for documentation development and keeping, e.g. the development of strategic documents (such as mission and strategy of the organization, vision of development prospects (QMS of ISO 9001)), planning of product lifecycle processes (Standard model of QMS), management of records and documents are missing in the requirements of ENQA.

The third group points to insufficient requirements for educational audit determining education quality assurance. For example, in such fields as international activity, financial and economic, library and information services as well as requirements to information environment (QMS of ISO 9001), student services of students' support and their employment are not considered at all (QMS of ISO 9001; Standard model of QMS); there are no requirements on managing the higher education institution, science and innovation (ENQA).

The fourth group shows either impossibility of certification procedures or occurrence of difficulties in identifying the activities. In the first case, impossibility of the procedure is caused by the certification system missing: e.g. there is no regulatory document or no rules according to which the certification is to be carried out; there are no certificating authorities and, consequently, no accredited auditors (Standard model of QMS); in the latter case, there are no positions in the classification adopted by ISO 9001 for some activities. The activities include external audits and inspections, QMS certification, licensing and accreditation, informing the public, international activities, etc.

The above confirms the idea of using a complex model of certification audit – one meeting a set of requirements in the models presented: ISO 9001 / GOST R ISO 9001, Standards and Guidelines in ENQA, part 1; Recommendations on Standard model of EI quality system. This will allow taking into account the requirements of all parties concerned, which will then allow certifying the integrated model both in domestic and foreign agencies for compliance with GOST R ISO 9001 / ISO 9001.

3.3 Particularities of educational audit of institutional and program accreditation in trans-border higher education in Transbaikal State University
The organizational platform of external quality assurance at Transbaikal State University in the trans-border region concerning the questions of education quality and education quality assurance is based on the Guidelines of UNESCO and the Organization for Economic Cooperation. This allows building a path for improving the quality of trans-border higher education in the logic of ensuring its opportunities, start and potential. The opportunity is predetermined by availability and increasing access to higher education; the start is enhanced by innovation activities in higher education; the potential is summed up of the previous two aspects adding the internationalization of higher education as a basis for the development and presentation of scientific knowledge at various levels. In the context of international cooperation, the quality assurance models in higher education are presented and characterized at the following levels: supranational, national, and institutional. At all levels of quality assessment during audit, public and professional education quality assessment system is supported by the government. The main participants of public and professional education quality assessment system are the public and professional communities, higher education institutions, students, graduates, employers and special agencies.

The supranational level determines a tool for integrating the national education into the global education community, for solving the issues and mechanisms of trans-border education quality assurance and recognition of qualifications. At this level, to supranational institutions ensuring the quality of education, the European network of agencies in quality (ENQA), the Nordic Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (NOQA), and a regional network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education in Central and Eastern Europe are referred.

At the national level, independent education audit of education quality assurance provides for activities of specialized agencies for education quality control and assurance. In Russia, they are the Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance and Career Development (AHEQACD), the Association of Engineering Education of Russia (AEER), the National Center of public and professional accreditation (NCPA), the Association of Legal Education of Russia (ALER), etc. For example, the infrastructure of public and professional education quality assessment and assurance for higher education in China includes over 200 private, public and private structures and university structural units. Among them there are the Center of All-China rating of universities, the Agency for Education Assessment in Beijing, Shanghai Research Academy for Education Assessment "Huaxia" etc. (Dugarova & Van Ci, 2015).

Institutional level is the one of implementation of various models and methods of internal and external education quality assessment in higher education institutions where the QMS system of the educational organization is developed and certified.

The points of tension occurring in implementing the trans-border education are due to ambiguous interpretation of requirements of trans-border education principles and the content of the model standard of the quality management system (ISO 9001:2008 / GOST R ISO 9001-2008). The positive side of this is that requirements of the standard are formalized and have general character, which on balance leads to applicability of them to any educational institution. The same feature, however, does not allow reflecting the institutional and program particularities of a higher education institution, which a priori implies a great professionalism of auditors, both in education quality theory, in education quality assurance, and in practice of designing an educational organization QMS and performing its activity. The greatest problem is to overcome stereotypes in education quality assessment, to adopt new functional proceedings for its implementation. Hence comes the naturally occurring strategic decision of the educational organization management on training all the participants of educational process. For example, the educational program for main interaction participants of education quality assurance in Transbaikal State University consisted of two parts: theoretical and practical. Theoretical part included the following questions.

- Topic 1. Models of quality assurance in higher education
- Topic 2. International ISO 9000:2000 series standards.
- Topic 3. Model of ENQA standards.
- Topic 4. Role of UNESCO in ensuring of the quality of trans-border education.
- Topic 5. Models of internal higher education institution quality management systems.
- Topic 6. The process approach to enterprise management. Definition of processes needed for a higher education institution QMS.
- Topic 7. Quality management system documentation.
- Topic 8. Audits of quality management system.
Topic 9. Conceptual bases of design of an education results assessment system.

Topic 10. Institutional and program accreditation of higher education institutions.

The practical unit implied studying the needs of the educational services of the higher education institution, as well as practical mastering of expert assessment methods and sociological research techniques. The information obtained became the basis for regular quality improvement of educational services in accordance with principles and standards of trans-border education. It was preferable to invite for training the independent auditors who were certified in European and other international agencies and who familiarize with the content, procedures, criteria and requirements of independent education quality assessment and education quality assurance. According to the results of internal and external independent audit, Transbaikal University received a certificate of the Association of France (AFNOR No. 2009/34874) – member of the international EU project on certification of teachers PROCERTU, the European leader for standardization. After the certification audit, the university educational services were found to comply with the requirements of ISO 9001:2008 standard.

The next step in preparing the university for implementing the trans-border education principles was its participation in the competition arranged by the RF Ministry of Education and Science, "The system of quality of preparation of graduates of educational institutions of vocational education." The model of this competition was constructed in line with requirements of the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM), Standards and guidelines for quality assurance of higher education in Europe developed by the European Network of Quality Assurance (ENQA) in the field of higher education, Standards for quality management ISO 9000:2000. The model of competition involved assessment according to two groups of criteria. The first one reveals efforts of the university in achieving the quality of education and education quality assurance, i.e. it characterizes the "opportunities" of the university. The second group describes the "results", achievements. The procedure of the competition is identical to that for the Prize of the RF Government in the field of quality. The content of the contest main stages is determined by the Board of the competition which consists of rectors and vice-rectors of the leading higher education institutions, as well as heads of federal education authorities. Seminars for the higher education institutions – contestants – were conducted by the Technical Secretariat of the competition on the basis of MISA.

The seminars paid attention to developing a strategic plan for the higher education institution in accordance with the selected model of QMS and training was conducted in the following topics:

- Upgrade of the organizational structure of the higher education institution;
- Improving and considering the multi-level training of professionals;
- Determining the mission, goals and objectives of the University;
- Development of teaching materials of disciplines;
- Introduction of modern management system for all activities;
- Development of the higher education institution infrastructure, and others.

The expert examination was carried out by independent certified auditors (experts), the subject of examination were the materials of both external and internal audit.

An independent education quality assessment conducted by the Federal Service for Supervision of Education and Science within the competition of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation "Systems of quality of graduates' training in educational institutions of vocational education" became the basis for giving to Transbaikal University the status of the competition award winner (Dugarova, 2012). This promotes the image of the university both in the domestic market of educational services, as well as in trans-border higher education.

Within the broad and universal globalization process, the interest in education and its quality is increased while the level of population education reduction is now regarded as a national security aspect. For most countries of the world having market-oriented economies, this explains the rapid development of subjects of education, certification of education in education quality assessment and assurance in the recent decades. In such a situation there is a notable shortage of systematic knowledge in the field of education quality assessment and assurance in higher education institutions in general, as well as in procedures for internal and external audit as an competitiveness imperative for educational programs of the university main subject.

The program and institutional accreditation held by the Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education and Career Development (AQAHECD) that is a member of the majority of the most respected European and global
networks on education quality assessment and assurance reduces the risks of the higher education institutions lagging behind the international requirements to the quality of higher education.

The obtained positive result of the external educational audit and certification awarded by AQAHECD will confirm that the educational programs, their courseware, qualification of teachers, material and technical equipment, students' satisfaction and the demand for graduates – all the indicators comply with international standards.

The process of program accreditation, and preparation for it according to international standards and regulations, a long period of internal self-research, also become a powerful incentive for development of the educational process participants.

The external audit by AQAHECD during program and institutional accreditation consists not only in examination and assessment, but also in expert advice and recommendations given on the basis of the results of educational audit. Since the commencement of its activity in 2005, AQAHECD has relied on well-known standards and recommendations of the European Network of Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). These are the most balanced documents for efficient educational programs quality assessment and assurance in line with requirements of the Bologna agreement, and they have been successfully applied in most developed countries. Moreover, AQAHECD approaches to criteria take into account the requirements of Russian state educational standards used in the state accreditation of educational institutions in the Russian Federation, the experience of their own expertise and best practices of other domestic and international accreditation agencies. On this basis, their own standards of quality and quality assurance assessment were developed that comply with the worldwide trends in the field of education quality assurance to the full extent. The assessment techniques are based on the competency model that allows efficiently assessing the quality of graduates training.

Educational programs accreditation in accordance with international standards is the desire to be objectively assessed and to improve the quality of educational services in Transbaikal State University. On top of that, this contributes to the reputation. Accreditation in an agency acknowledged abroad is a good way to improve the competitiveness of the education institution. Program and institutional accreditation gives the university the right to interact with universities in the trans-border region on equal ground – in implementing both the joint educational programs and scientific research and other projects.

As for the choice of AQAHECD, the main reason was quality and fair practice of its activity, confirmed by its being approved by the leading international networks of education quality assurance. AHEQACD is an independent Russian agency having associate status with the European Association for Quality in Higher Education (ENQA). At the same time AQAHECD is a full-fledged member of the following leading international foundations and networks of education quality assurance: EFQUEL, INQAAHE, APQN, ECOKO, CEE Network.

This is why the high quality of educational programs according to the international standards being confirmed by an external independent agency AQAHECD greatly enhances the status of the education institution in the eyes of direct consumers of its services: students and employers.

4. Conclusion

International Organization criteria, techniques, tools and procedures are the basis for internal and external audits of education held by independent certified Russian auditors and promoting responsibility, professionalism, objectivity, and self-assessment of all participants of educational process at higher education institutions.

The organizational and pedagogical bases for educational audit that are relevant for the design and implementation of educational programs in conditions of education quality assurance in trans-border region were the promotion of the idea that institutionalization of an independent quality assessment and quality assurance system for higher education is important and applying of established independent assessment cases. The idea was conveyed to the participants of the higher education institution educational process (managers, teachers, students, employers).

The organizational development of educational audits in Transbaikal State University under certification audit held by the Association of French standards (AFNOR), an independent expertise by the Federal Service for Supervision in Education and Science within the Ministry of Education and Science of Russia's competition "Quality systems of preparation of professional education institution graduates", educational audit of the Agency for Quality
Assurance in Higher Education and Career Development (AQAHECD) with institutional and program accreditation allows the university and the employers to couple the sphere of labor and that of higher vocational education.

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