The Archetype of Excellence in Universities and TQM

Loukas N. Anninos, Ph.D Candidate in Business Administration

Department of Business Administration, University of Piraeus, Hellas

Holder of Scholarship, Onassis Foundation

lanninos@unipi.gr

Introduction and Paper Objectives

Universities have always been primary actors in the creation and utilization of knowledge. Since the age of Plato in Ancient Athens, where people enchanted by the mysteries of life and nature, gathered in Academia and under a strong bond discussed a variety of issues, until the birth of the first European university in Bologna and even today, the pursuit for objective and scientifically documented knowledge along with the need for individual and social development continue to permeate the idea of higher education. The university aims a) at transmitting scientifically documented knowledge through teaching, b) at advancing science through research and c) at engaging in economic development, social prosperity and progress.

The challenges that universities face and the pursuit of quality in mission attainment mark out excellence (to the degree it can be achieved) as a basic objective, a reference criterion and a seal of efficient and effective university management and operation.

In bibliography, there are many articles written regarding excellence in higher education (eg. Ho and Wearn, 1996; Badri and Abdulla 2004; Hides et.al. 2004; Osseo-Assare et.al, 2005; Badri et.al 2006; Sohail and Shaikh,2004; Calvo-Mora et.al 2006), prizes (Baldridge Award, European Quality Award) have been established for institutions that attain high performance level in specific dimensions and roadmaps to excellence have been suggested. The reason for all these actions has been the quality management school of thought and the discussion on its implementation in the university context. However, the concept of excellence is not something recently discovered; it is based on the idea of "good", it embraces "good" and is a basic presupposition for it in a dynamic circle.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to present the content of excellence through the parchments of the Ancient Hellenic Philosophy and its application in the university context. Further on, the meaning of excellence (aristeia) is presented and is compared with the main concept and principles of TQM, which is considered as a management philosophy that can lead an organization to excellence.

The archetype and the three hypostases of excellence

Excellence (aristeia) can be described as a situation in which its comprising factors exist in their absolute and exceptionally good expression / form. It is a dynamic situation in which people think, sense and act based on a mental framework consisted by fundamental values, ideas and knowledge. In Ancient Hellas, excellence meant distinction in battle or virtue. According to Homer (Iliad,D 260; B768) the excellent man had a noble origin and had been the best, the braver and the mightier. Excellence according to Socrates, as presented in the Platonic dialogues is constituted by ethical virtues, justice, beauty and benefit (Santas, 1997). As suggested earlier, the heart of excellence is "good".

For Aristotle, the supreme "good" is prosperity (Ethica Nicomachea, A1, A2,A4). It is based on intellectual and ethical virtues. Intellectual virtues are born and developed through teaching and this demands time and experience, while ethical virtues are a matter of habituation (Ethica Nicomachea, B1). Aristotle taught that people don't act rightly because they are excellent but they are excellent because they have acted rightly. Excellence can therefore be achieved through training and habituation and it was something that young people were striving for.

Plato considers "good" as the only element that assures prosperity of the individual and the society and this exists within the harmonic combination of knowledge, power and desire (Politeia, 505a-511e). The excellent state is a state of justice. It is a state in which philosophers govern and strive to transmit their knowledge to all. The habituation of good is indeed the key to knowledge of the cosmos and truth. In an astonishing description Plato in Politeia (509 c-511e) resembles "good" as the sun, which reigns in the perceived invisible cosmos. As the sun, so may "good" be considered as the king of the perceived invisible cosmos, whose knowledge (referring to good) provides science to which we head through understanding and intellect, which intellect perceives the knowledge of ideas and the highest of all which is "good".

Moreover, the word "aristeia" (excellence) comes from "aristos" which is the superlative form of "areion" (=best, braver and mightier). According to a study that de-codified the Hellenic language, "aristos" is explained as AR= the flow of light, the flow of good (in the divine sense) that creates ISTON=stability (in a dynamic state) (Simaioforos,2002).

Consequently, excellence is inseparable with the idea of good, which can be defined by the unique properties of the object or activity it describes. It has meaning only by reference to the intrinsic qualities of an object or activity, so there is no "one expression of good", there is no "one good practice". Good can be evaluated only in relation to the means it serves and the function it performs. The archetype of excellence had been an inspiration towards self improvement and constant quest and transmission of knowledge through dialogue and experiment.

Excellence has three hypostases as appears in the figure below: The first hypostasis relates to man. The excellent man has a precise perception of his role in the cosmos, of his relation to the Divine good and mankind, he respects the environment he lives in, is constantly in love with knowledge and what surrounds him, he is virtuous and has high ideals. He lives in harmony. In order to have excellent societies, men should be excellent citizens. The second hypostasis of excellence relates to citizenship. An excellent citizen is firstly an excellent man. Moreover, he cares about the society, he participates actively, he becomes creator (works for people) and he is aware of how to be governed and how to govern (if asked). Thirdly, the excellent citizen can be an excellent scientist or professional depending on his personal desires. An excellent scientist for example seeks knowledge in what he perceives to be true

through his senses and what he envisions. He philosophizes and transmits his knowledge and experience to newer generations.

Figure 1: *The three hypostases of excellence*

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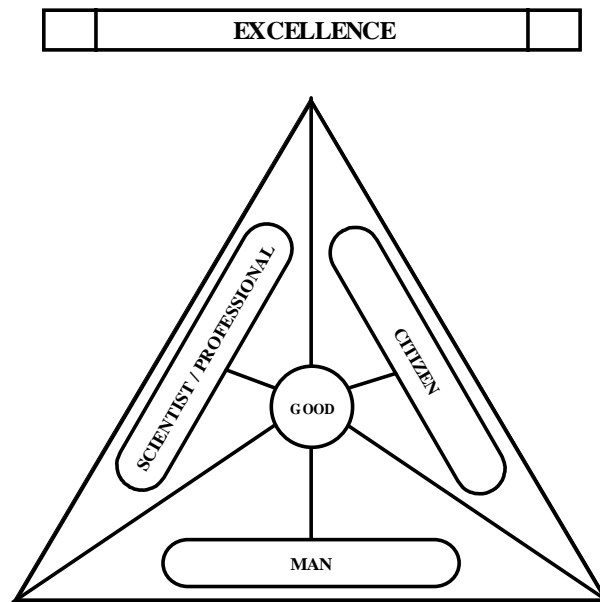

If these three hypostases exist within every man, then organizations and states can become excellent. The source of excellence is good; it is dynamic leading to constant transformation according to the changing needs of people in different time periods; it exists in harmony; it demands the participation of people; it is constantly present, able to be perceived (except for its essence) and is a source of inspiration and hope.

It is nowadays that comprehension of good and excellence should become a basic priority for every nation across the globe, for every organization and for every human being, as harmony has been seriously distracted and reflection on simple concepts, virtues and ideals is a necessity, especially for young generations. This is the enormous significance of excellence and the challenge for higher education institutions from a philosophical and practical perspective.

The Evolution of Excellence and its Application in Universities

In the organizational context, excellence is a framework that offers systemic view, asks for high engagement of human resources, enables self improvement and evolution and thus it contributes to constant change and conformance to new situations through quality monitoring at each stage and every process of the organization. From the management perspective, excellence acquired different meanings according to the dominating school of thought. The following table presents the different conceptualizations of excellence according to the different schools of management as well as individuals who contributed to the evolution of the Management Science (Hermel and Ramis-Pujol,2003):

Table I: *The Evolution of Excellence in Management Science*

School of Thought	View on Excellence	Models / frameworks suggested by	Excellence through
Classical	Work division, mechanistic orientation, hierarchical coordination	Peters and Waterman 1982 "Excellent companies present the strengths of innovation, ability to change and a leadership that excels through their vision and values"	A bias for action Being close to the customer Autonomy and Entrepreneurship Productivity through people Hands on value driven Stick to the knitting Simple form, lean staff Simultaneous loose tight properties
Behavioural	Emphasis on human, motivation of workers	Peters and Austin 1985	Care of Customers Constant Innovation People Management by Walking Around
Socio-technical	The enrichment of tasks and the implications of the actors in defining the socio-technical organizational environment (under a dynamic perspective)	Peters 1988	Constant improvement and constant change High value added Quality Flexibility
Structural / Systems	Global treatment, combination of management theory and hard sciences	Xerox Excellence Models 1990,2002	Mgt Leadership HRM Business Process Mgt Customer/ market focus Information utilization and quality tools Business Results
Neo-classical	Combination of learning from the classical and behavioral school	Peter Senge 1990 Influenced by Argyris, Forrester, Deming and Dewey	Shared vision Personal Mastery Working with mental models Team learning Systems thinking
Sociological	Analysis of organizational actors, their behaviours, the importance of power can lead to excellence	Aubert and de Gaulejac 1992	Intrinsic obedience Explicit Support (training, evaluation, positive re enforcement Implicit Support (internal competition, always more mindset and implicit management requirements
McKinsey 7S	Strategy, structure, systems, staff, shared values, skills and style	Deming Prize MBNQA EFQM	Rating organizational practices according to specific criteria Guide organizations to become excellent Offer a holistic mgt framework
Pascale and Athos 1981	Focus on human and superior values to form a guiding vision	The 4P model Dahlgaard and Dahlgaard-Park 1999;2003	People Partnership Processes Products
		Toyota 4P model Likert 2004	Philosophy Process People and Partners Problem Solving

Source: *Hermel, P and Ramis-Pujol, J., (2003), An evolution of excellence: some main trends, Vol.15, No.4, pp.230-243 (adjusted and supplemented)*

It has to be noted at this point that as Dahlgard and Dahlgaard –Park (2005) suggest, it is integration of a) tangible and intangible elements and b) individual and organizational levels inside organizations into a framework, which would be able to fully utilize previous knowledge regarding excellence as appears from the models and frameworks presented earlier.

A comprehensive definition of excellence in universities should incorporate all approaches that have been developed in the past (mainly for organizations) but

without ignoring the peculiarities of their profile. Excellence is meant to refer either to the academic pillar of universities or the managerial or both.

In 1854 John Henry Newman in his essay "The idea of the university" described Ancient Athens as the metropolis of knowledge in which the archetype of excellence was developed and praised. It was harmony between the physical surroundings, the academics and the students that made excellence a continuous experience in the process of knowledge acquisition through dialogue, experiment and insight. Pure love with everything that surrounded this learning community (visible and invisible, perceived or not) had been the motive for excellence in a relentless internal and external dialogue and self improvement with the final aim to approach truth and the elevation of soul to eternal light.

Hides (2002) in Hides et.al. (2004) refers to a working session for the Association of University Administrators, in which he asked the question "What is excellence in Higher Education?". The delegates answered that excellence was synonymous with achieving mission/vision, achieving/exceeding benchmarks and internal measures, best practice, community engagement; cost-effectiveness; customer/stakeholder satisfaction; dissemination of good practice nationally and internationally; learning outcomes; making optimal use of all resources financial, human, assets, match between desired and actual perception, positive atmosphere in staff and student environments, integration in teaching and research, quality of teaching and learning and relative to starting point – achieving targets.

It is indeed difficult to gain an understanding of excellence without first attempting to perceive the meaning of quality. In the case of universities quality in teaching and learning, in research, in external engagement, in management and infrastructure should be taken into consideration in every attempt to understand excellence.

Quality in University Management

A higher education institution that is characterized as excellent is definitely proactive, has a shared vision, aims at continuous improvement, instills trust and respect among its staff which is committed, is reflective and monitors quality (Lomas,2004). The main principles of total quality management that characterize a quality oriented university (Lagrosen, 2003; Evans, Lindsay, 1999) include:

➢ Orientation to the needs of university stakeholders (includes identification of needs and expectations, design and delivery processes based on these needs, commitment, effective relationship management, measurement of satisfaction and undertaking of necessary action)

➢ Leadership commitment (it should incorporate quality into objectives and daily activities, set high expectations, influence the motivation of human resources, demonstrate personal involvement, inspire through a customer oriented vision, provide direction, instil collective action, create and manage culture, support learning and improvement in a context of excellence)

➢ Staff full participation and teamworking (includes high employee involvement, use of suggestion schemes for improvement, reward and recognition schemes, teamworking and empowerment, investment in training and development and tracking employee satisfaction)

➢ Focus on processes (The accurate translation of needs into educational service requirements (QFD), the use of scientific tools to build quality into services (statistical data regarding student satisfaction, instructor performance, graduates` career), the effective management of the service development process, the controlling of quality and improvement activities)

➢ Measurements and management by facts (meaningful performance indicators, use comparative information for improvement, involve everyone (academic and non academic personnel) and use analytical methods, ensure reliable, accessible and visible data, and finally refine information and its uses.

➢ Continuous improvement and learning (mechanisms for organizational learning and processes for improvement whenever necessary)

Moreover, TQM is people centered, aims at continual customer satisfaction at a continuously lower cost. It is systemic, part of the high level strategy, involves everyone and everything. Learning and adaptation to change are basic success factors. Furthermore, it is based on scientific methods, on individual and collective contribution (Procter and Gamble Report (1992) in Evans and Dean, 2000).

It is highly obvious that there are striking similarities between the above principles and definition of TQM and the content of excellence, as conceptualized in Ancient Hellas and described earlier. However, unless quality is internalized at the personal level, it will never become rooted in the culture of an organization or a university institution. If someone embraces quality as a personal value then it's highly likely to perform better than expected.

Quality in the Educational Processes of a University

An excellent university is identified by superior performance not only in management but also in teaching, research and external engagement processes. Quality must characterize every policy, procedure or process in the educational pillar of universities.

Teaching quality for example is a multidimensional construct and its comprehensive evaluation should be based on students`, colleagues` and administrators` ratings on the issues of teaching abilities and knowledge of the instructor, teaching approach and methodology, course organization and structure and finally student learning.

Even though it is highly difficult to reach a consensus regarding the meaning of quality in teaching since it is not a visible process for colleagues or administrators, there is a significant number of researchers in bibliography that focus on teaching evaluation and have developed relevant models, methodologies and criteria by which teaching quality and excellence can be assessed (Martin, Berry, 1969; Wotruba, Wright, 1975; Kemp, O Keefe ; Sherman et.al., 1987; Gallaway, 1961, Barr, 1952; Zietz et.al, 1999; Gray, 1969; Kurz et.al, 1989; Wise-Hammond, 1985; Jones, et.al, 2003; Witcher et.al, 2003 etc).

The identification of research excellence is a less difficult issue than the one of teaching because there are specific quantitative and qualitative indicators by which it can be assessed. However, Johnes (1990); Korhonen et.al. (2001); Tijssen et.al (2002) and Coccia (2004) insist that evaluating research is also a difficult process. Quality in scientific work is evaluated in many different contexts. Scientific quality according to Hemlin (2003) is reflected in quality indicators (citations, awards, peer review), the research effort made by the researcher, the researcher himself / herself (knowledge, skills and abilities), the research environment, the scientific effect, the research policy and organization of an institution and finally financing. The same researcher also makes reference to a survey, according to which respondents from different disciplines stressed different aspects and attributes describing the quality of science. Research quality should be evaluated by a combination of methods and approaches. Excellence in research leads to the advancement of scientific thinking, the development of excellent reputation and the generation of income that institutions need to operate successfully and this fact explains much of the significance of excellence for scholars and researchers across the globe.

Furthermore, as universities engage actively in social contribution and economic development by diffusing knowledge and by undertaking entrepreneurial activity, excellence in that dimension becomes also crucial. Excellence can be identified through universities` performance as measured by the degree that research results are adopted by business and other social actors, the promotion of results in scientific and technological parks and finally entrepreneurial activity through the support of ideas and research results. Excellence in that area can also be determined through bibliometric indicators (such as co-authorships, intra-scientific indicators, knowledge interchange between parts, publications, citation impact etc). However, further research is needed in that area.

Conclusions

Quality constitutes a basic prerequisite to pursue excellence in a higher education institution. Inside universities, quality should be a way of life, a way of behaving so that individual and collective contribution is maximized along with personal and organizational advancement through continuous improvement and learning.

Excellence presupposes a smooth mantling of traditional academic values with values derived from the quality philosophy. Harmony, creation of stability (but not stagnation) in a dynamic self improving circle, constant monitoring, teamworking, continuous learning and personal advancement through reflection and conjecture, passion in the acquisition of knowledge and the advancement of science are factors that explain and describe "excellence" but also they constitute the teachings of quality management !

By reflecting on the parchments of the Ancient Hellenic Philosophy and combining it with the inferences of TQM, new approaches on excellence may be developed helping in the identification of performance dimensions and relevant quality criteria and the transformation of human behaviour and action through a mentality of excellence.

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