
Quality of Educational Programs in Life-long Learning¹

Alica Lacková² – Marta Karkalíková³

Abstract

The paper deals with a systematic approach to education as well as to other areas, which represents a tool ensuring that education was performed effectively and efficiently, that it had positive influence on the society and the individual and it had improved their job performance and quality of life. This rational approach to the development of educational programs, their execution and quality evaluation enables to reach strategic education aims successfully and in a way that they suit and stimulate the requirements of practice.

Key words

Quality, educational program, quality evaluation, life-long learning, educational needs

JEL Classification: I20

Introduction

The aim of educational policies and educational programs is to secure qualified, educated and competent people in order to satisfy the current and future needs of society. To achieve this goal it is necessary to ensure that people are prepared and capable of being educated and they must understand what they must know. It is necessary, so that they are capable of assuming responsibility for their education in that they will fully use existing educational sources (Porubská, Malá & Prokypčáková, 2006). This concerns an uninterrupted process that not only increases existing abilities but also leads to the development of those abilities, knowledge and attitudes, which prepare people for the most demanding and, in the end, the most important tasks.

Education will likely be more effective when the educated person has a specifically defined goal within a given area. Educational goals, specific needs and the style of teaching students should be able to show what types of educational programs need to be proposed and implemented. The educational organization must have created its own educational program that is to be in accordance with the profile of its graduates' competencies as well as in conformance with the vision of the educational organization. Educational programs must be based on the development of key student competencies and innovated according to requirements. A parallel part of the implementation of an educational program must also be a method of securing feedback as to how the

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² doc. Ing. Alica Lacková, PhD.; University of Economics in Bratislava, Faculty of Commerce, Department of Commodity Science and Product Quality, Dolnozemska cesta 1, 852 35 Bratislava; E-mail: alica.lackova@euba.sk

³ doc. RNDr. Marta Karkalíková, PhD.; University of Economics in Bratislava, Faculty of Commerce, Department of Commodity Science and Product Quality, Dolnozemska cesta 1, 852 35 Bratislava; E-mail: marta.karkalikova@euba.sk

project has been created and put into practice. Each educational program must be formulated in a clear and understandable manner so that it becomes a call to increase quality by achieving results and a means of enabling the implementation of innovation according to need. The following requirements are placed on an educational project:

- The proposal of the educational program must be based on student needs and should contribute to their personal growth,
- The educational program must satisfy employer needs,
- It must be a quality project so that students are interested in the educational program.

An educational program develops students and their ability to cooperate within groups, it supports cognitive and emotional growth, develops interests, skills and creative thinking and finally allows the presentation of findings.

The aim of the paper is to analyze the processes and activities in the area of life-long learning and to propose a system for quality evaluation of educational programs as a platform for their improvement.

1 Educational program design

The design of an educational program may be defined as a process of preparing educational documentation that meets educational and development requirements. There are three main phases:

- **Preparation phase** - in which students' insufficiencies are analyzed. It determines which portion of these insufficiencies can be eliminated through education. The use of this method makes it possible to better specify educational goals;
- **Development phase** - in which the individual phases of the educational program are worked out, along with the outputs in the form of tasks as well as the content and order for the individual teaching hours. This concerns specifying the method via which such education will occur;
- **Mastery phase** - in which each section of the educational program is evaluated with regards to the educational goal wherein it is determined where improvements can be made.

When optimizing education and development activities, the following issues should be kept in mind while proposing an educational program:

- The efficiency of education,
- The effectiveness of education.

The efficiency of education is influenced by whether or not educational goals are achieved and to what level it enables the application of acquired skills and knowledge in work processes. The effectiveness of education relates to the cost and time required to impart knowledge to the level of required efficiency. The effectiveness of education depends on and is given by the characteristics of educational media. Here we determine if the educational course must be implemented in the form of lectures, via audio-visual means, or via the use of computers, etc. The proposal of an educational pro-

gram should be based on the application of individual education phases - starting with the needs analysis and ending with the evaluation of educational results.

The analysis of educational needs helps us to discover the most important problems and to decide which of these can be resolved via educational measures and which via organizational measures. In determining individual needs and the ability to study it is important to analyze students. Establishing clear and specific goals is important in terms of establishing the essence, scope and volume of knowledge, attitudes and skills that should be changed by the application of an education program. Assembling educational plans stems from working requirements and from the goals of the educational organization. The selection of an appropriate educational and development method is important because this ensures effective education in accordance with educational goals, so that knowledge is imparted via the most effective manner, the selection of appropriate educational and development tools must take place. Determining the results of the educational process serves to monitor the implementation of the educational program and to determine whether or not the established educational goals were achieved. In the event that the educational goals were not achieved, the reasons for this are determined along with what corrective measures must be adopted (Armstrong, 2007). With regards to the phases of the proposal of an educational program as described above, we can arrange the preparation phase as follows:

- Needs analysis,
- Student analysis,
- Establishment of general goals (including implementation of educational plan).

The proposal phase may include:

- Establishment of individual goals,
- Assembly of educational plans,
- Selection of educational techniques,
- Selection of educational tools.

The last mastery phase includes evaluation, feedback and necessary corrective measures in the previous phases, mainly for mid- and long-term educational program. While the needs analysis highlights the expected gains from the implementation of a successful educational program, the student analysis can provide important information about their learning abilities and about the necessary duration of education as well as its scope. Basic differences between individual students influence their ability to learn and therefore also influence the proposal of the educational program. These differences must be analyzed in the following areas:

- Intellectual ability,
- Prior knowledge in the area of instruction,
- Motivation for education.

Intellectual capability can be seen in students' abilities to plan their learning and in their conceptual and intellectual preparedness to handle educational tasks and materials. Prior knowledge or proficiency in the area of instruction influences the breadth and depth of the educational program, its content and the tempo of lectures.

Educational goals are regularly established by comparing the existing and expected work performance or on the basis of educational needs analysis and the devel-

opment of life-long learning participants. It is beneficial to divide educational goals between the following two categories:

- Educational program goals that closely relate to needs determined via analysis,
- The goals of lectures that contain educational goals wherein it is expected that as long as the goals of individual lectures are achieved, so too are the goals of the educational program.

The educational process always occurs in a better manner when the utilized educational techniques are interesting, if they place emphasis on practical application and are useful in practice. The more a student is connected to the educational process the more that student will learn. Active participation makes obtaining new knowledge easier via the exchange of experience and improves memory. When selecting educational techniques, student needs and their specific learning abilities are to be taken into account. The needs and abilities of the entire group must also be considered. The lector must obtain feedback as to what the students have learned and if they are capable of effectively applying such knowledge in practice. Feedback is of exceptional importance for lectors as it enables them to correct the schedule, the tempo of instruction and the methodology in a timely manner. Students within the educational program must obtain not only new knowledge, but also must know how to best apply such knowledge into practice (Belcourt & Wright, 1998).

The proposal of an educational program includes areas that secure the educational process and without these such projects would be either impossible to implement or ineffective. This concerns the following areas:

- Planning,
- Proposed schedule,
- Securing personnel,
- Marketing of the educational program.

In many cases planning, the creation of advertising as well as securing educational equipment and lectors mean that there exists some minimum amount of preparation time before the start of an educational course. This period depends on the number of students, their work tasks, the complexity of the educational program, the professionalism of employees and co-workers, etc. It should be well considered within the phase of proposing an educational project. The marketing of an educational program requires the completion of a strategy and the completion of materials aimed at building interest about the educational course.

2 Implementation and control of an educational program

The foundation of the project is determining educational needs, i.e. sensing a deficit of information, knowledge, expertise with regards to the current and perspective goal of developing education participants. After specifying educational needs and requirements, an ongoing deliberation is conducted towards the goals of the educational program. In this regard it is also necessary to consider the main educational process factors including content, program target groups, lectors, didactic form and

method, aids, didactic equipment and the organization of education. On the basis of these deliberations, it is then possible to later proceed to the actual construction of educational activities. The educational program represents a time constrained developmental process that resolves all problems from the first thought (program aims) to formulation until after implementation of the educational program. One characteristic of an educational program is the fixed length of its validity i.e. the beginning and end of the educational program are clearly established.

An educational course can also be created by the composition of a number of educational programs. Educational programs can in the first phase go through a testing process known as pilot projects. A pilot project can be a completed educational program that is applied on a portion of the target group (selected participants) and on the basis of their comments; the program is further refined and adjusted before the actual implementation. It is necessary to evaluate an implemented pilot project and to correct the proposed program on the basis of the comments from the test group with the aim of creating a definitive version of the educational program, which will then be implemented. Practice has shown that also definitive educational programs undergo additional development during implementation. On the basis of implementation, the program is progressively perfected and is continuously evolving. Sometimes an educational program can have a linear life cycle i.e. at the beginning it has a wide range of application, which it then dynamically loses over time and remains in such a phase that there is minimal interest in the program. In connection with the repeated implementation of educational programs, practice also shows the reverse development of projects. In other words, a new program is not designed to meet educational requirements rather it is created from an existing educational program. In principle only modifications to this program are made based on analysis of the changes that have occurred from the initial situation when the original program was first implemented.

An educational program represents the basic document for each educational activity, and on this basis it is then possible to complete further necessary documentation including detailed study plans and a course scheme as well as a study program or rules for studying. We can highlight the implementation of the educational course as the mutual communication between four basic partners: the broadcasting organization – the organizer – lecturers – participants. In the case of lifelong learning, the aspect of the broadcasting organization is excluded. The organizer of the educational program should manage to provide educational course participants with necessary information about its goals, contents, forms, methods and other conditions for their participation in the educational program within a sufficient amount of time in advance. In the actual implementation of the educational program it is true that the organizer has the main responsibility for its actual progress. The organizer must create the best conditions possible for the lecturers so that they can perform their educational activities. This mainly concerns providing information necessary for their work (i.e. information about the composition of participants in the educational program). Individual lecturers within lifelong learning must create their own authority on the basis of professional competencies as well as didactic abilities and know-how. Participants in an educational program access the lecturer's outputs mainly on the basis of their own professional interests and previous experiences. It of course can also happen that some of the participants in life-long learning have in a specific professional area more experience and deeper knowledge than the lecturer. A good lecturer should use this fact to activate other participants and to provide such an erudite professional the chance to contribute as a way of

refreshing and improving the quality of instruction. (Dani, Harding, Case, Young, Cochrane, Gao & Baxter, 2006). In evaluating the results of instruction, the following should be adhered to:

- Evaluation should not be a one off event but rather the results of monitoring educational program participants during the entire course of study,
- It should correspond to the goal, content, character, level and length of education,
- The goal of evaluation should not only be remembering some facts, rather it should be their acquisition and application of knowledge when resolving practical problems,
- The evaluation approach (its methodology) should not de-motivate participants nor create worries or stress.

It is necessary to understand that the goal of education is to change the behavior and dealings of people and for this reason monitoring the effectiveness of the didactic process is important and conducted over the long term. It is completely logical that the course of education should not only be monitored from the qualification perspective, but it should continue to motivate participants to continue their education.

3 Educational program quality

The question of quality education has recently become a subject of interest not only in the individual entities within the educational system but also in the general public. One of the reasons is the growth of competition on the educational market and the attempts of educational organizations to convince study candidates of the high quality of offered educational program in comparison with competitors' projects. Educational organization quality is understood as the required (optimal) level of organizational functioning that can be described by specific requirements (i.e. educational standards) and therefore can be objectively measured and evaluated (Turek, 2008). Each evaluation of educational program quality is a very subjective event. Views regarding quality can be divided into three basic groups. The first originates from the educational system where evaluation of educational quality relates to the level of fulfilled criteria and norms established within this system. The second stems from society where the main evaluation criteria for educational quality is to what level the educational organization via its services satisfies the needs of employers or others from society. The third represents the individual view where emphasis is placed on evaluating the quality of to what level the educational organization contributes to the personal growth of its students. One of the foundations of evaluating the quality of an educational program is evaluating the development of knowledge, skills and student attitudes and as well as their final level. Data related to this development and final level can be called process indicators. The evaluation of educational program quality is regularly reduced to only how successful students are on their tests. This overview is of course very narrow and only includes a small part of the overall mosaic of the knowledge created by a quality educational program. Tests can never show all knowledge (or the lack of knowledge) that the students acquired and tests provide only a general overview of the quality of graduates from the educational organization.

In evaluating quality it is necessary to take into account also the fact of how the quality of the educational program is perceived by education participants. The level of satisfaction with the quality of the educational program is above all given by the difference between perceived quality and what the students expected from the program. The perception of quality instruction and student expectations closely related to their satisfaction and the level of awareness of the value of services provided by the educational organization.

The goal of the educational program is the development of special skills and knowledge via the educational process. The reason for evaluating the quality of educational programs is the increasing competition on the educational market, as well as the increased international mobility of both students and lectors. If we want to evaluate the quality of an educational program in a detailed manner, we must focus on four areas that create this quality. These are:

- Conditions, i.e. the external and internal environment and the conditions of the educational process,
- The inputs of the educational program, i.e. resources that secure the educational process,
- The teaching process within education, i.e. the method by which education takes place,
- The outputs of the educational program, i.e. the results of education.

The evaluation of the educational conditions relates to the environment and the conditions under which education takes place. The educational organization, in which mutual trust and respect is shared between lectors and between students and lectors, creates important basic conditions for the successful teaching of a quality educational program. Another area that influences the quality of an educational program concerns the inputs (STN ISO 10006:2004). We can divide these into three main areas:

- Formal curriculum, or a study plan that establishes the goals, content and method by which the educational process takes place,
- Material security of instruction, i.e. the quantity and quality of study materials, didactic technology equipment and its use,
- Human resources, i.e. lectors (or other employees that take part in the educational process), their personal level, personal preparedness and interest.

When evaluating the quality of educational program, it is necessary to establish quality indicators, wherein this data must be comparable with specific criteria established in advance. Comparison of discovered indicator values with those criteria established in advance enables evaluation of the organization's educational program and its quality.

4 On-line education and its use in life-long learning

On-line education occurs over a computer network, which enables communication between students and their lectors. Participants usually click to enter the virtual classroom via a web browser, a user name and a password. This flexible form of education enables a better response to market needs, to new knowledge, actively connects stu-

dents to their instruction and enables individual student care. This method of education also pushes students to be responsible and self disciplined. The use of the Internet requires that students are able to determine the level of truth and the reliability of information. The anonymous nature of the Internet also enables overcoming certain barriers (shyness, etc.) and also improves access to information. According to statistics students are able to remember, over the long term, 80% of the information that they simultaneously listen to, see and work with, which is provided by current e-learning courses.

On-line education is characterized by:

- The distance between the lector and the student, which is the basic difference in comparison with the classical form of instruction,
- The effects on the educational organization, which differentiates it from self study and private consultation,
- The use of a computer network for presenting or distributing the educational program,
- The opportunity to mutually communicate via the computer network between the students and the lectors.

In comparison with other forms, the uses of the Internet have a number of benefits. First, it is an exceptionally fast and effective form of communication - it provides the opportunity to sent text, image and sound information practically in real time for a very small unit cost. Thanks to this, space is created for the use of various forms of instructional materials - from texts and images, animation and audio records, on to video recordings and interactive multimedia applications.

The beneficial paring of the classical approach and e-learning in education can make it more interesting, addressed, individual and an interactive process that is integrated into everyday life. This also applies for areas where personal contact with a lector is irreplaceable. E-learning is delivered by a number of communication tools starting with e-mail and ending with video conferences, which all enable the lector to focus on individual students individually. Feedback provides the lectors with exact information as to how the student is performing, where and how many points have been achieved by the student and how much time is spent on the individual areas of instruction.

Conclusion

Fundamental changes in the educational micro and macro environment, shifting needs and requests from those interested in education as well as increasing competition on the educational market force the management of educational organization to change their strategies for development and also to make related changes in educational program. Educational programs offered by educational organization that are created by their activities on the life-long learning market are formed by short and long term courses. Their target markets are for example: the unemployed, people who are interested in obtaining new qualifications or employees who wish to improve their education in a specific profession.

In the case of launching a new educational program, the competition is normally weak. This gives the educational organization a chance that in the further qualitative development of the newly launched program it will be able to use it as a competitive advantage. The management of an educational organization must be very careful to consider the strategy it will use to create and introduce programs onto the market.

The termination of an educational program with no prospects enables the management of an educational organization to use existing resources to make meaningful changes to existing educational programs or to create new programs with better prospects.

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