

Quality management in Italian Universities: a case study in the University of Cassino and Southern Lazio

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Abstract

This paper examines on a wider scale, quality management in Italian higher education institutions, and then progresses to focus specifically on the case of the Master Course in Global Economy and Business (GLEB), held in the University of Cassino and Southern Lazio. An analysis of the way in which the University of Cassino manages quality is undertaken to identify the responsibilities of those accountable for quality assurance. A preliminary study was carried out through the completion of a digital survey distributed to GLEB graduates, to monitor the success of the course. The results obtained highlight that this course is quite appealing to students, and what also emerges is how innovation and improvement are the foundation of quality education. Being only the first step towards a more exhaustive evaluation, this analysis must be extended by collecting more data, to compare the results with similar courses in other universities through a benchmarking process.

Keywords: *Higher education; quality management; institutions.*

1. Introduction

Education and the formation of qualified professionals are the predominant factors, from an international level, which significantly impact both the economy and society. Their rate of development is correlated to the quality of peoples' lives and the entire development of the country itself. This produces a domino effect, leading to the search for a more competitive, dynamic, and capable education system to ensure the country and corporations have a sustainable growth and achieve their goals of internationalization. From this viewpoint, higher education (HE) represents a critical factor and thus has assumed a fundamental role in determining the level of success of a country's economy, in terms of the development of capital and innovation. For this reason, this process is in continuous adaptation to our society (Teixeira-Quiros, J. et al., 2022). Being humans the main consumers and beneficiaries of educational services, defining the level of quality education becomes quite a complex task. The pressure and need for quality education are increasing. The ceaseless demand for wealth and security of societies and their populations is what manipulates the degree of quality that is expected of higher education. This has been the prevailing scheme for the enhancement of higher education institutions (HEIs) across countries worldwide, because of the proven effectiveness that these educational systems have had in yielding outstanding professionals to govern nations. Because the improvement of quality is a continuous process, the perceptions of its execution and index rate are incredibly decisive in terms of achieving a successful outcome. However, there is never only one insight available since people perceive the concept and degree of quality in diverse ways. Both Crosby (1992) and Juran et al. (1988), had their own perception of quality with Juran et al stating that "Quality is fitness for use or purpose", while Crosby believed the idea of quality is more in line with the "conformance to standards" (Crosby, 1992; Juran et al., 1988). Therefore, to be able to assess the level of quality, it must be defined by recognizable elements which convey its essence, and in turn these characteristics must be identified and understood by HEIs (Justino et al., 2022). Globalization, along with the various developments that are occurring worldwide, are forcing HEIs to go in search of new instruments to improve the quality of higher education. The supply and demand model can be referred to when analysing HEI management nowadays, as universities and other higher education institutions are much more diversified than what they once were in the past.

Thus, a higher education system that is classified as efficient and effective can only be obtained through the achievement of a certain degree of quality in terms of teaching and learning, which are the most important strategic issues in this kind of system (Seyfried, M. et al., 2018). In recent years, universities have been forced to face several challenges including internationalization, the increasing need for effective competitive strategies, the rapid development of indispensable technological changes and the never-ending concern of needing to reduce and control financial costs.

For these reasons, institutions have no other choice but to implement dynamic strategies and technological innovations, to be capable of achieving and actually exceeding what their stakeholders expect of them (Texeira-Quiros, J. et al., 2022; Budiharso, T. et al., 2020). Over the past twenty years or so, high quality management systems have been gradually established in HEIs, on both governmental and institutional levels. The issuing of enormous governmental funds has made it fundamental for those involved in the education sector to guarantee the provision of a productive service in universities and learning institutions, with the aim to deliver an ever more proficient and outstanding quality of learning (Krymets et al., 2022). The most frequent models that educational institutions refer to for quality calibration, adjusting them of course to the institutional environment, include the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) excellence model, and SERVQUAL. Many HEIs also make reference to the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) which is a quality management method based on self-assessment that enables public organizations to achieve their objectives, facilitating a mode of comparison with other public entities. The significance of these quality models has been widely recognized among educational institutions (Sciarelli et al., 2020).

Having introduced these global concepts in relation to HEI quality management, the study can now progress forward to concentrate particularly on the quality management system instituted in Italian universities, taking as a case study the University of Cassino and Southern Lazio, which is the central focus of this paper. The primary objective is to initiate a preliminary evaluation on the success of the Global Economy and Business master's degree course. This case study analysis is simply the first step taken towards a thorough qualitative evaluation process that will be conducted for the GLEB course. Thus, it cannot be taken as a general reflection of the overall degree of quality of the master course.

2. Quality Management in Italian Universities

The management of HE and research institutes in Italy is dealt with by the MUR - *Ministero dell'Università e della Ricerca*, which is in charge of regulating funding, scrutinizing and assessing universities and establishing incentives based on their performance; applying student support policies and endorsing study curricula; making sure that the Italian education system has a significant international presence and is up to the standards of other institutions in the European Union. HEIs have been granted autonomy by the Ministry in 1989, provided they abide by the legal regulatory framework (Capano, 2014). They are free to establish their organisational governance, create their strategy and mission, design curricula and elaborate their own research projects (MUR, 2020). The Ministry also has strong ties with the ANVUR- *Agenzia Nazionale di Valutazione del Sistema Universitario e della Ricerca* (National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes) which was founded in

2010 to monitor and assess HEIs as well as to improve the quality of Italian research (ANVUR, 2022). The ANVUR conducts assessment programs, in accordance with EU standards, to evaluate the quality of activities undertaken in HEIs with the use of the following practices:

- *AVA - Autovalutazione-Valutazione periodica-Accreditamento* (Self-assessment, Periodic Evaluation, Accreditation): aims to ensure that Italian HEIs are offering services of adequate quality; to sustain HEIs in utilizing public resources responsibly and autonomously and in operating appropriate actions in terms of education, technological transfer, and research activities; to ameliorate the quality level of higher education and research.
- *VQR – Valutazione della Qualità della Ricerca* (Evaluation of Quality and Research): aims to monitor the quality of research project outcomes of national HEIs, and to stimulate an overall improvement of the quality of research projects, to accredit doctoral programs, and to assign funding on a merit-basis to national institutions (OECD & European Union, 2019).

Italian HEIs are aiming to increment the level of involvement of students in assessment processes by conducting detailed investigations, in order to augment the degree of quality attributed to the institutions (Fondazione Crui, 2018).

2.1. University of Cassino and Southern Lazio (UNICAS)

UNICAS, founded in 1979, currently has approximately eight thousand students enrolled and offers thirty degree-courses covering multiple disciplinary sectors (Skoola Network Srl., 2022). As in all Italian HEIs, the main body responsible for planning and monitoring quality assurance activities at the level of the course of study is the Quality Assessment Team which is responsible for:

- verifying the correct performance of the planned activities, the pursuit of the objectives set by the study program, the resolution of any critical issues.
- managing interrelations between the Joint Teachers/Students Commission and the Quality Presidium.
- dialogues with the coordinator of the study program, for the identification of improvement actions, as well as with the external members of the Review Group, to monitor the effectiveness of the training offer for the employment opportunities of graduates.
- contributing to the drafting of the annual and cyclical Review Report.

(Quality of Services Office, 2022)

The University Quality Presidium is the main actor called upon to supervise and support the effective implementation of the university's quality policies. Every year the Presidium issues the Quality Policy of the University, describing the objectives and actions regarding the aspects of quality and quality assurance (QA), in line with the priorities of the university and its strategic plans.

In recent years, UNICAS has been particularly working on enhancing its offering of international courses held entirely in English, one of which is the Global Economy and Business Master course (GLEB) (Consorzio Interuniversitario AlmaLaurea, 2022).

3. Case Study

The study consists of monitoring the relevance of what the GLEB graduates studied during the course to their job positions and the overall success rate of the study course. This analysis was conducted in collaboration with the Quality Assessment Team of the economics department whose objective is to monitor the performance of the GLEB course and the satisfaction rate among students enrolled, in compliance with the national standards established by the ANVUR. As mentioned previously, this study is simply a preliminary analysis undertaken to initiate a complete evaluation process that will determine successively the overall quality of the course, highlighting its strong points and weaknesses, as well as identifying where improvement can be implemented. Therefore, this analysis is not entirely reflective of the overall results that will be obtained upon completion of the entire evaluation process.

A questionnaire was conducted between June and December in 2022, for a population composed of students that graduated from the course, all participating voluntarily. The sample size was a total of eighty-seven participants who responded out of approximately two hundred and fifty individuals who had been contacted, in order to understand what kind of experience these individuals had with the course through the completion of a digital questionnaire, comprising a selection of multiple-choice questions and only a limited number of open-ended questions for statistical study purposes.

3.1. The Survey

The survey is composed of questions regarding the demographic profile of the participants, such as gender, age, nationality, and residence. The questions aimed to find out the graduation age range, the time taken to complete the course, and the time taken to find a job after graduation. It is then divided into two sub-sections based on whether the participant is currently working or not. For those who are currently employed, the survey proceeds to identify which country they work in, the type of occupation, the sector of work, the job position, the approximate monthly salary range, the degree of satisfaction with their job,

whether the work is related to GLEB studies or not and finally an open-ended question asking for their personal input on how the GLEB course could be improved based on their work experience. In the second part, for currently unemployed graduates, participants are asked to explain why they are currently not working, and for those who have chosen to continue their education, the questions focus on where they are studying. The survey ends for all participants with the recommendation section asking them if they would recommend the GLEB course to others and the reasons why.

3.2. Data Analysis

According to the data obtained approximately 66% of the participants are males and the remainder females. Regarding the birth country, more than 50% of the participants are foreign students, while the remainder are Italian. Also, just over 75% of the participants reside in the European continent, which implies that most of the foreign students who enrolled in the GLEB course have remained in the continent even after their studies. Approximately 81% of the participants are currently working and 65% of these were either already working when they graduated, or they managed to find a job within six months after graduation. 59% of the working graduates earn an average monthly salary of €1500 or more (See Fig.1). Another important set of data to consider are the results of the job relevance to course study rating, in which almost 55% of the working graduates stated that their current job is related to their GLEB studies (See Table 1). Regarding the question of “Based on your experience, are there any contents/skills you would suggest providing to the incoming GLEB students?”, the main suggestions included to introduce more courses and training to acquire people skills, soft skills, analytical skills for data reading and interpretation, digital skills, project management abilities, project finance skills, SQL skills, statistical software utilization, debating skills, and how to use the Microsoft Office package. Other suggestions regarded the introduction of courses on new topics such as cyber security, cloud computing, financial modelling, regional and national policy, as well as supply chain management.

Some suggested to increase the knowledge of the students regarding economics by introducing more courses based on this topic, and to increase the opportunities for students to build connections with large corporations. Out of the total number of graduates, sixteen are currently not working, and among these, only two are continuing their studies, while the remainder are still searching for employment. Finally, over 85% of the total participants stated that they would recommend the GLEB course to other potential students.

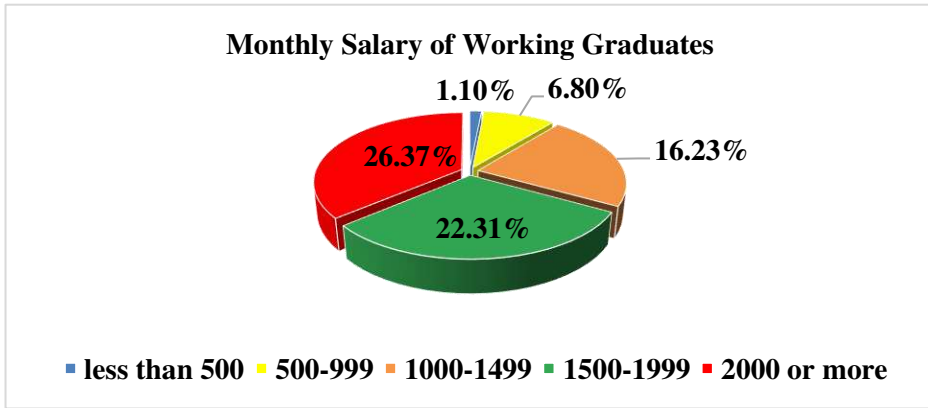


Figure 1. The average monthly salary ranges of working GLEB graduates. Source: Personal Data Source (2022/2023).

Table 1. The relevancy of the graduates' job to what they studied in the GLEB course.

Is job related to GLEB degree?	Working Graduates
Definitely yes	23.94%
More yes than no	30.98%
More no than yes	26.76%
Definitely not	18.30%

Source: Personal Data Source (2022/2023).

4. Conclusion

HEIs should be continuously assuring and enhancing the quality of their educational and research-based activities. Being well aware that for an advanced country scientific and technological research is the driving force of society, the University of Cassino and Southern Lazio makes an important contribution to the advancement of knowledge in the fields of humanities, social sciences, engineering, and economic-legal studies. From the results obtained, a critical issue has emerged, in that almost 50% of the working graduates stated that their GLEB studies are not relevant to their current jobs, thus a further investigation must be undertaken to verify the reasoning behind this issue. Despite this criticality, most of the graduates have expressed that they would most likely recommend the course to other students. This demonstrates that the methodological approach utilized has proven useful for this study, as criticalities can be identified and consequently rectified. However, it is not without limitations, since a limited number of participants responded to the questionnaire,

and thus, it is not completely reflective of the overall opinion of past students. For this reason, the results obtained may not be exhaustive and therefore a further study and evaluation must be conducted to obtain a more complete set of data.

From the suggestions received from the participants in the questionnaire, one of the future objectives of the University is to implement the program and the variety of courses offered. To do so as a future prospect, the benchmarking process could be applied to the GLEB course, firstly, to help maintain a certain degree of quality and stay in line with the institutional mission and reputation. Secondly, by undertaking a benchmarking analysis, the strong points and problematic issues currently connected with the course can be unveiled and monitored. Lastly, by comparing the performance of the course in UNICAS to other similar courses in other institutions, similarities and differences can be noted and subsequently evaluated to understand how this program can be improved. The concept of innovation and change is fundamental, not only because the GLEB course is open also to international students, but also because by implementing innovative methods, ideas, or processes it becomes more appealing to both national and international students, thus adding to the university's overall competitiveness on an international level.

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