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The path to excellence of the Portuguese organisations recognised by the EFQM model

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This paper presents research carried out in seven Portuguese organisations recognised by the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) Model between January 2009 and August 2011. Using a qualitative methodology, based on case studies, we conducted semi-structured interviews to find out the motivations behind the adoption of the EFQM Excellence Model of self-assessment, as well the company's current state of maturity, their route to improvement for a greater maturity level, their desirable future state of maturity, and finally, the definition of a methodology for using self-assessment based on the EFQM Model with all the inputs achieved in earlier stages. The main findings of this study are in accordance with other studies carried out across Europe, namely the fact that the internal motivations are the key factor for the implementation of the EFQM Excellence Model, the prevalence of Public organisations due the investment of National Authorities, the key role of CEOs and Top Managers and the ISO 9001 standard role in the successful implementation of several criteria of the model. A new methodology has been designed where the self-assessment team, Benchlearning and Benchmarking have a remarkable mission in the implementation process of the EFQM Excellence Model.

Keywords: EFQM; maturity; self-assessment; organisational excellence; organisational performance; Portuguese organisations

Introduction

Nowadays customers have higher requirements than ever before, and to be competitive in the twenty-first century, organisations need to continuously improve and perform to an excellent standard in order to improve quality and performance. One of the ways to achieve excellence is by using Business Excellence Models (Dahlgard-Park & Dahlgard, 2007; Mohammad, Mann, Grigg, & Wagner, 2009, 2012). The EFQM Excellence Model is one of the most used Business Excellence Model across European Organisations and presents itself as a practical tool to help organisations on the path to excellence.

The practice of self-assessment is the strategy recommended by the EFQM Excellence Model for organisations aiming for improvement on organisational performance. The practice of rigorous self-assessment helps organisations, large or small, from the public or private sector, to work more successfully, and this is a comprehensive, systematic and regular exercise for the evaluation of activities and results by organisations. Organisations must adopt this assessment cycle and take action on a cyclical basis to achieve a genuine and sustainable improvement (EFQM, 2011).

Organisational excellence is the level that all organisations aim to achieve. Usually, they already have a mature quality management system and are self-motivated to move

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to total quality management (TQM), expressing it proactively, even when customers had a significant influence in ISO 9001 implementation (Claver, Tarí, & Molina, 2002). On the other hand, the social responsibility of organisations has become increasingly important with the emergence of ethical issues, with environmental and social aspects, which enable organisations to increase global perspectives and the integration of several aspects of quality through the Excellence Organisational Models (Talwar, 2011).

The change of paradigm is neither an easy nor a straight process. In fact, many organisations, despite considering the competitive advantages of the ISO 9000 series extinguished, do not opt for different models of quality management because of the constraints of different levels. The most common are economic or those related with organisational culture. Therefore, there is a long way to go, to progress from an ISO 9000 series standard to a position where they can compete by the recognition gained through an EFQM Award. Aligning the organisational management with the principles of organisational excellence is mandatory for the beginning of the self-assessment process.

According to the European Foundation for Quality Management, 15 Portuguese organisations were recognised by the EFQM Excellence Model, between January 2009 and August 2011. This paper shows how 7 of the 15 organisations recognised by the EFQM Excellence Model in Portugal, between January 2009 and August 2011, have progressed in relation to business maturity and organisational excellence. The seven organisations studied were: the Financial Management Institute of Social Security (IGFSS), the Servilusa – Funeral Agency S.A, the University Stadium of Lisbon (EUL), the Regional Directorate of Local Public Administration (DRAPL), the Groundforce Portugal, the Municipality of Águeda (CMA) and Bosch Car Multimedia Portugal S.A.

The paper is structured as follows: following this introductory section, the literature review and the conceptual framework are included in the second section; in the following – third – section, the research model and its corresponding hypotheses are articulated; in the fourth, the methodology and data used are analysed; the fifth section contains the results of the research; in the sixth the discussion and the conclusions drawn from the paper, with their practical implications and limitations are presented; the seventh and last section contains the bibliographical references.

Literature review

Since 1950, much scientific research has been developed concerning quality management and its importance for a company's sustainability. The increasing global competition stimulates organisations to improve their strategic initiatives to better serve customers with higher quality products or services, and the overall group of stakeholders in order to gain a competitive market advantage.

Many strategies are put in place and Business Excellence Models has been seen, as stated by Balbastre-Benavent and Canet-Giner (2011), reference frameworks that organisations use to develop a culture of excellence.

TQM has attracted deeper attention from researchers over the past two decades according to Duh, Hsu, and Huang (2012) based on the studies developed by several other researchers (Cheng, 2009; Eklof & Westlund, 1998; Greising, 1994; Sohal, Ramsay, & Samson, 1993; Wayhan & Balderson, 2007). About this subject, Van Looy, Backer, and Poels (2011) consider that TQM could be defined as something that is both complex and ambiguous. Nevertheless, some key elements or principles are common to all TQM Models (Gómez, Costa, & Lorente, 2011; Reed, Lemak, & Mero, 2000; Sousa & Voss, 2002): customer satisfaction, continuous improvement, top management commitment

and leadership, employee's involvement, teamwork, Key Performance Indicators (KPI) measurement and monitoring. Mohammad et al. (2012) defend that organisations use the TQM initiatives to assess and improve their work practices and performance.

The EFQM Model is considered a TQM synonymous by many researchers (Adams, McQueen, & Seawright, 1999; Forza & Filippini, 1998; Hendricks & Singhal, 1996) and a step forward after ISO 9001 certification. We cannot forget the role of the ISO 9001 standard and its effect in the dissemination of worldwide quality management. Some authors consider it to be a good basis for a later implementation of the EFQM Excellence Model (Geraedts, Montenarie, & Van Rijk, 2001).

The EFQM Excellence Model is the most widely used in Europe and can be considered a holistic and integrative approach, in which strategic, managerial and operational control processes are integrated into the model (Dahlgaard-Park & Dahlgaard, 2007). It covers all the most important organisational areas and defines exactly what requirements should be fulfilled in these areas. Thus, the model serves as a complex tool of self-assessment and simultaneously an approach to excellence. Self-assessment highlights for the organisation the strengths and areas of improvement.

The EFQM Excellence Model was updated in 2012 and is structured according to nine different criteria that are grouped under Enablers and Results. Five of those criteria are Enablers and four of them are Results. The model represents a continuous improvement cycle which affects the entire organisation management system.

The systemic and dynamic nature of the model is, at the same time, enriched by the reasoning underlying the RADAR logic. The application of the RADAR logic in a full and appropriate way contributes to ensure that organisational processes will become more rational and systematic because it helps organisations to identify, prioritise, plan and implement improvements where needed (Balbastre-Benavent & Canet-Giner, 2011).

The elements of the EFQM Model create a reasonably clear path that the company has to follow in order to improve its results. Additionally, the EFQM Model is offered as a tool that could be used by managers in the self-assessment process of their organisations (Samuelsson & Nilsson, 2002; Van der Wiele, Williams, & Dale, 2000). Self-assessment, using the EFQM Model, helps management to identify strengths and opportunities for improvement which everyone in the organisation can address to achieve realistic goals.

During the analysis, it has been ascertained that the leadership enabler has a major impact on the pursuit of policy and strategy, and also on the people criteria and on partnerships and resources. The importance of leadership is clearly in evidence in the TQM literature (Heras-Saizarbitoria, Marimon, & Casadesús, 2012). It should also be pointed out that policy and strategy should not be detached from people or from partnerships and resources criteria. In the same way, customer results criteria seems to be related with the people and society results, from a holistic point of view.

Research methodology

A literature review of organisational excellence in European organisations shows that there is a significant variety of studies that are supported in qualitative methodology (Tari & Juana-Espinosa, 2007). Our strategy was based on the case study methodology, because of its strong ability to capture the dynamics of the phenomenon studied (Eisenhardt, 1989).

This study draws attention to the maturity status of the Portuguese organisations recognised by the EFQM Model between 2009 and 2011. This theme is inspired by three gaps that were identified during the literature review stage, more

specifically: (1) the scope, (2) the maturity status and (3) the methodology for self-assessment. Each gap is introduced in the subsequent paragraphs, and then linked to a research question.

Firstly, it was found that there are no known studies related to the motivations leading Portuguese organisations to opt for the EFQM Excellence Model, the tools, approaches or methods to conduct self-assessment. On the other hand, international published studies explore specific case studies of a particular organisation or sector or the conceptual model and no holistic studies about the model in a particular country were found (Antony & Bhattacharyya, 2010; Davies, 2008; Vorria & Bohoris, 2009). Secondly, no one truly knows the organisations' current maturity state, or the tools, approaches or methods used to achieve the desired future maturity state. The literature clarifies the role of top management during this process, which was corroborated by this research. Finally, there is no clear methodology for the organisations' self-assessment; there is a lack of theoretical basis (Klefsjö, Bergquist, & Garvare, 2008), given that the development of quality management has been dominated by consulting professionals. Thus, it becomes necessary to create hypotheses that increase the knowledge of the organisations' maturity process recognised by the EFQM Excellence Model, mostly related to their motivations and state of maturity, allowing the creation of a self-assessment methodology for these organisations.

These three gaps prompt us to thoroughly investigate related concepts which are vital to guide organisations on their journey towards excellence. For this purpose, this research examines the following five research questions:

- Q1. What are the motivations for the self-assessment based on the EFQM Excellence Model?
- Q2. What is the current state of organisations' maturity and what are the different levels of self-assessment?
- Q3. What conditions and activities does the organisation need to develop from the current to the future state of maturity?
- Q4. Where does the organisation want to progress in terms of maturity and organisational excellence?
- Q5. Could a methodology for self-assessment in Portuguese organisations be defined?

The empirical analysis was based on data provided by the organisations studied.

Case studies

The results obtained are based on the answers to the five research questions, which allowed us a contribution to the assessment of the maturity level of the Portuguese organisations recognised by the EFQM Excellence Model, between January 2009 and August 2011.

The research questions express, firstly, our interest in understanding the motivations underlying the organisations' self-assessment based on the EFQM Excellence Model. Next, we tried to understand the current maturity state of the organisations, as well as their levels of implementation. The conditions and activities required for organisations to progress from the current state to the desired state was the next question. The organisation growth in terms of maturity and organisational excellence was the fourth question. Finally, we set up a new methodology for the practice of self-assessment in Portuguese organisations, using all the inputs given previously by the interviewed managers.

The answers to the first research question helped us to understand the motivations behind the evolution towards self-assessment based on the EFQM Excellence Model, in which were raised, as mentioned in the literature, the importance of internal motivations and top management investments to influence the organisational change process. At this

point, the correlation between the state of maturity of the organisation and their motivations hierarchy was raised, i.e. the more advanced the maturity state, the greater is the determination to obtain recognition by the EFQM Excellence Model. On the other hand, organisations with a less advanced maturity state are looking, mainly, to know their strengths and improvement areas as well as promoting continuous improvement of the organisation and its processes. As illustrated in Table 1, the ranking of these motivations diverges according to the maturity state of the organisations.

During this study, we ask the organisations to identify the three main motivations in order to understand their commitment to quality, and their answers helped us to distinguish the maturity of the organisations. First of all, we found that those organisations with a mature quality management system are mainly concerned with the organisation's emerging issues such as Benchmarking and recognition/EFQM Award. On the other hand, the promotion of continuous improvement, improvement of Quality Management System (QMS) and the identification of strengths and improvement areas are the main motivations for four of the seven organisations participating in this study.

As the second most important motivation, organisations intend to improve its QMS to mobilise the organisation for quality, identify their strengths and areas for improvement and promote continuous improvement. This ranking validates internal motivations as the most important reasons for self-assessment (Sampaio, Saraiva, & Rodrigues, 2010; Van der Wiele et al., 1996). The need for improvement has been seen by organisations as a growing need, regardless the level of excellence that they meet. Ideally, the process of self-assessment culminates in planned improvement actions, whose progress is then monitored (Samuelsson et al., 2002). Three organisations involved in this study consider obtaining recognition/awards as their third motivation for embracing the EFQM Excellence Model. Winning a prize/recognition is not an objective itself. It is, rather, an objective that organisations want to achieve in the medium/long term. These organisations are looking for something more than the award; more than external recognition. They want, in first place, internal impact with the implementation of good management practices and continuous improvement in the whole organisation.

Closely related to the motivations for moving organisations towards the use of self-assessment based on the EFQM Excellence Model is its current state of maturity. Thus,

Table 1. Organisational motivations by decreasing order of importance.

Organisation	Maturity level	Sector	Motivation 1	Motivation 2	Motivation 3
IGFSS	R4E	Public	Recognition/EFQM Award	QMS Improvement	Continuous Improvement
DRAPL	C2E	Public	strengths and improvement areas	Organisation quality mobilisation	Continuous Improvement
Servilusa	R4E	Private	Recognition/EFQM Award	Define strengths	Identifying improvement areas
CMA	C2E	Public	Continuous improvement	Organisation quality mobilisation	Recognition/EFQM Award
Groundforce	R4E	Public	Continuous improvement	QMS improvement	Recognition/EFQM Award
Bosch	EE FINALIST	Private	<i>Benchmarking</i>	Continuous improvement	Recognition/EFQM Award
EUL	C2E	Public	Continuous improvement	QMS improvement	Increase financial sustainability

during the period between January 2009 and August 2011, three organisations were recognised with the first level of excellence – Committed to Excellence (C2E), three were Recognised for Excellence (R4E) level and one reached the final stage of the EFQM Award and was recognised as Finalist, as shown in Figure 1.

The decision about scoring or not should take into consideration the objectives of the process of self-assessment and the organisation culture. If the score is desired, then the same should not be understood as a criteria for pass/fail as a test. It is more useful as an indicator of the current state of the organisation in the path to Excellence. When organisations decide to score, they can design their own method of scoring, or alternatively, apply the RADAR Matrix, used in the assessment of applications for European Quality Award and in most national awards. This option has the advantage of empowering and benchmarking the organisation results with those considered as best in Europe organisations.

Looking ahead at what organisations want for the future in terms of organisational excellence, we found that all intend to maintain or move to a new level of organisational excellence. The more mature organisations want to compete for the PEX-SPQ (Portuguese Quality National Prize) in the near future and later to the European awards. Organisations that started their journey towards excellence recently wish to consolidate their state of maturity, maintaining the same level of excellence but improving their score.

The Maturity Models provide managers a powerful tool and a disciplined approach to identify critical processes and define improvement actions aligned with the strategic objectives of the organisation. These objectives must be consistent with their maturity state, so that they may implement the actions needed to move forward, to a higher maturity and therefore achieve the desired objectives (Rocha & Vasconcelos, 2004).

The focus of Maturity Models demands the assessment of the entire organisation with respect to its performance of key systems in order to create a high-performance organisation (Van Aken, Letens, Coleman, Farris, & Van Goubergen, 2005). They are based on the principle that people, organisations, functional areas, processes, etc., progress through a process of development or growth to a more mature and advanced stage (Rocha & Vasconcelos, 2004).

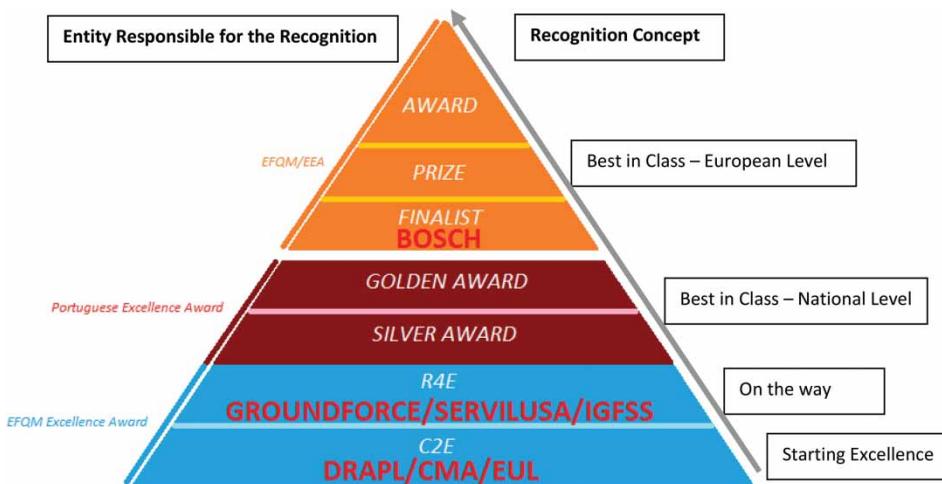


Figure 1. Path to excellence.

Portuguese organisations, as the model itself recognises, have different levels of maturity and ambitions according to the objectives to be achieved with the adoption of the EFQM Excellence Model (Table 2). Some want to keep the same level and improve their score, others intend to move to a more advanced level of excellence and others, more mature, seek to obtain an excellence award, initially at a national level and then at an European level.

Mohammad et al. (2012) state that Business Excellence can be defined as ‘Excellence in strategies, business practices, and stakeholder-related performance results that have been validated by assessments using proven Business Excellence Models’. Usually, organisations scoring at least 600 of 1000 points on the Business Excellence Models are considered to have achieved a state of ‘world class’ or ‘excellence’ performance (Mann & Grigg, 2004; McAdam, 2000).

The way to achieve excellence is freely set by these organisations. They can decide to make their journey to excellence step-by-step or applying directly to the recognition level they consider most appropriate to their maturity level, as happened with Groundforce that went immediately to the R4E level and Bosch who applied directly to the EFQM Excellence Model Award.

Organisations’ voices reinforce the importance to their organisations of the self-assessment based on the EFQM Excellence Model, proving that the organisation self-assessment performance when compared with best in class organisations gives managers a new management tool to drive organisations’ key results presently and in the near future. In order to assess the progress on an on-going basis, it is essential that the exercise of self-assessment is performed from time to time and through this, the organisation will be able to identify, first, what their strengths are to keep on the route to excellence and even improve them and, second, to identify what the improvement areas are that must be reinforced and try to convert them into strengths (Benavent, 2001).

Finally, the analysis of the seven Portuguese organisations recognised in the several excellence levels allowed the development of an EFQM Excellence Model methodology based on the following 10 steps:

- Step 1: Certification/process control according to the standard ISO 9001;
- Step 2: Vision based on an excellence model;
- Step 3: Development of a plan to begin the TQM implementation;
- Step 4: Development of the top management commitment with the self-assessment;
- Step 5: Definition, development and training of the self-assessment team;
- Step 6: Start the self-assessment;
- Step 7: Conclusion of the self-assessment;
- Step 8: Development of the self-assessment cycles;

Table 2. Organisations assessment of the present state and future desirable state of maturity.

Organisation	Present state	Future desirable state
Bosch	640	700 and a <i>Prize Winner</i>
IGFSS	517	More than 600 points and the National Quality Prize
Servilusa	475–500	Excellence Award/ <i>WorldClass company</i>
Groundforce	350–400	Maintain R4E and improve their score
CMA	Didn’t score	Progress to R4E level and obtain 500 points
DRAPL	Didn’t score	Keep the C2E level and a <i>Best in Class Company</i>
EUL	Didn’t score	Keep the C2E level and a <i>Best in Class Company</i>

Step 9: Connecting the self-assessment with strategic planning;

Step 10: Benchlearning and benchmarking best practices.

The conception of this methodology for self-assessment exercise took into account the feedback from the Portuguese organisations recognised by the EFQM Excellence Model and the state of the art related with this issue.

This study highlighted the vital role played by the organisation management team in the self-assessment process. Top management has to 'buy' the process of self-assessment and feel enthusiastic about it, using it as a diagnostic tool. Van der Wiele et al. (2000) point out that this applies particularly to the development of action plans to deal with the results of self-assessment. In short, top management must have clear goals about the results to be achieved with the self-assessment. If they use it in the right way, the challenge, effort and involvement of top management help to generate an environment that is enjoyable to work.

Conclusions

Organisations, public or private, seek new ways and opportunities to improve, maximise their strengths and minimise their weaknesses in order to become stronger in the world market. As the practice shows, managers seek strategic tools to manage their business based on the well-known principles of the PDCA Circle, and the EFQM Excellence Model is one of such tools.

The EFQM Model is a practical tool that aims to position the organisation on the path to excellence, identifying their strengths and helping them to understand their present and future improvement areas, encouraging the identification of solutions towards continuous improvement. This project pointed out interesting results related to the gaps identified during the literature review and contributed to one of the first maturity state research of the Portuguese organisations recognised by the EFQM Excellence Model.

In Portugal, public sector organisations are the most suited organisations to embrace excellence through the EFQM Excellence Model. This fact is, in our opinion, connected with the stimulus given by the CAF Model and National Authorities. This model was used previously to the EFQM Excellence Model by the majority of the public sector organisations studied. Regarding the private sector, only large organisations adopted the EFQM Excellence Model because they consider the implementation of good practices related to excellence crucial to organisational improvement.

In our opinion, private companies, mainly SME, that are the majority of the companies operating in Portugal, do not see competitive advantages in the implementation of the EFQM Excellence Model, mainly because of the reduced promotion of the model in the country, the investment needed to conduct the self-assessment and the management maturity level of the companies – the majority of them are only concerned about fulfilling the ISO 9001 requirements and do not have the vision to go further in the path of organisational excellence.

Regarding the motivations underlying the practice of self-assessment, we consider that, more than an end itself, the implementation of quality management systems and improvement initiatives and projects within the EFQM Excellence Model is assumed as a nuclear tool to improve public and private organisations management systems, granting the implementation and continuous improvement of the requirements and expectations of the stakeholders.

It was also found that motivations contrast depending on the organisations maturity state. We were able to set the organisations into three groups, i.e. organisations that are in the early stage of their journey towards excellence, those who are in a transitional stage and mature organisations that are already in an excellence level where they aspire for recognition through an excellence award.

Concerning Portuguese organisations' motivations, which are predominantly internal like in the European organisations, the self-assessment purpose is not to win a prize, but the adoption of a methodology to assess their progress to TQM and Excellence, as supported by Dahlgard-Park (2008). The continuous monitoring and comparison of the self-assessment results are some kind of validation to the top management that organisational improvements are real and successful. It is vital that top management 'purchase' the process of self-assessment and feel enthusiastic about it so they can use it as a diagnostic tool, like the organisations involved in this research did.

Another conclusion that we would like to point out is that the approach to quality management can influence the type of tools that are used. Thus, an organisation that is at a higher level on their route to TQM will use more sophisticated self-assessment tools. On the other hand, when the organisation is at the beginning of the introduction of TQM, unpretentious self-assessment tools should be used, which do not require high technical knowledge, given their general purpose, and are not so focused on problems or situations, in order to avoid demotivation.

The definition of the self-assessment team is another critical issue for the organisations. Based on the results obtained, the structure of the self-assessment team should be well planned, especially regarding to the characteristics of the assessors, team size, and specific training, among others.

After the self-assessment process, organisations know, clearly, their strengths and areas of improvement. However, it was concluded that the Criteria 9 – Business Results and Criteria 8 – Society Results, are two of the most sensitive criteria for the organisations. The first, because it is related to the organisation's tangible results which are often closely related to the financial performance. For the majority of the organisations, the second criterion is undervalued and its score is underestimated. However, organisations in a more advanced maturity stage, and since the other criteria already have high excellence levels, have attempted to meet this criteria. The criteria in which the organisations are stronger are Criteria 5 – Processes, Products and Services, because of ISO 9001 certification, and the Criteria 1 – Leadership, since without top management full commitment is not possible to progress towards excellence.

Another important issue is that all the surveyed organisations plan to progress in terms of maturity and organisational excellence. The less mature organisations want to achieve the same level of recognition or, in most cases, progress a step forward in their excellence journey. More mature organisations, with stronger quality management processes plan to obtain recognition through an excellence award.

The EFQM Excellence Model gives companies the chance to compare what they do and what they can achieve, and through that allow them to detect their strengths and improvement areas. Improvement areas cause analysis and the establishment of improvement plans and their implementation; enable the process of learning and knowledge conception within the organisation, making possible the understanding of their problems and not just the problems resolution without comprehension. It was also found that self-assessment provides relevant information to the process of strategic planning and operational business assessment itself, being an important competitiveness factor.

This study also highlights the need of a deep organisational change in the companies which involves three conditions:

- The current state (the current position of the organisation);
- The future state (the position that the company top management wants to reach);
- The transition state (the set of conditions and activities that the organisation needs to develop to move from the current state to the future one).

The previous conditions entail significant organisational changes and require an understanding of the current state of the organisation by the top management, as well an understanding of the desired future state (Hill & Hazlett, 2001).

The effective implementation of the EFQM Excellence Model in some organisations is still incipient, namely in those that conduct the self-assessment for the first time and are at the C2E level. The real implementation happens when it is integrated in regular practices of the organisation. Briefly, the integration of the EFQM Excellence Model can be achieved through the combined use of multilevel assessment, using it as part of the strategic planning, aligning its use with other systems, linking its use with management performance and involving the whole organisation. In summary, excellence is not a theoretical concept, but is made of organisational culture, values and people, which cannot be defined by a standard.

Concerning the research limitations, the most important one was the restricted number of interviews conducted in each case study. Due to the time constraints that this research was under and the limitations of the organisations themselves, it was not possible to interview more than one person or perform a second round of interviews in the organisations. The top managers were interviewed as the ‘voice’ of the organisation, which means that their contribution represents the organisation thinking concerning business excellence. Additionally, although 7 case studies of the 15 possible were conducted, this number does not allow a generalisation of the results.

The results obtained with this project will be enriched in future investigations by understanding the real impact of self-assessment in the organisations’ strategic planning and its contribution to an effective continuous improvement. It will be also important to understand the effective role of the CAF self-assessment in the adoption of the EFQM Excellence Model, regarding public organisations.

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