

**IPSA (RC 32) 2013 Conference**  
**'Europeanization of public administration and policy:**  
**sharing values, norms and practices'**  
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International scientific conference: *'Europeanization of public administration and policy: sharing values, norms and practices'*  
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PhD Workshop

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### **Doctoral thesis outline**

#### ***Doctoral thesis title***

Impact of quality improvement instruments on organizational learning in administrative organizations

#### ***Literature review***

The study on organizational learning is rather fragmented due to its multidisciplinary character, but also within the theory of organization there is a variety of conceptions depending on observer's starting point. Historically, the analysis and research in the field have been progressing in direction of increased complexity.

The initial thoughts on learning as a process that can occur on organizational level were set up by R. M. Cyert and J. G. March in the book *A Behavioral Theory of the Firm* (1963, 1992). The authors' approach to learning is based on conception of stimulus-response combination as a basis for organizational decision making and future actions.

This rather mechanical approach to organizational learning was extended with social-psychological and cognitive structures by J. G. March and his colleagues in the following works: J. G. March, J. P. Olsen (1976) *Ambiguity and Choices in Organizations* and B. Levitt, J. G. March (1988) *Organizational learning*.

In *Organizational learning: a theory of action perspective* (1978), *Organizational Learning II: theory, method, and practice* (1996) etc. C. Argyris and D. A. Schön construct their approach to organizational learning on the concepts of action theories, defensive routines and three types of organizational learning. Similar attitude was expressed by P. M. Senge in the book *The Fifth Discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization* (2006) where the importance of system thinking comprising five disciplines required for development of learning capacity is emphasized.

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In the article *A Dynamic Theory of Organizational Knowledge Creation* (1994), I. Nonaka proposes the knowledge creation theory based on a presumption that organizational knowledge is created through a continuous dialogue between tacit and explicit knowledge. In their work *SECI, Ba and Leadership: a Unified Model of Dynamic Knowledge Creation* (2002) I. Nonaka, R. Toyama and N. Konno develop SECI model based on a difference among four patterns of interaction between tacit and explicit knowledge, a shared context for knowledge creation (*ba*) and knowledge assets.

An increasing scientific interest in the field of public sector quality management in late 1980's and 1990's resulted in a proliferation of works analysing the concept from different perspectives and often in relation to specific public sector activities, i.e. areas (e.g. public education, health etc.).

In the book *Quality Improvement in European Public Services: Concepts, Cases and Commentary* (1995) edited by C. Pollitt and G. Bouckaert, a series of case studies on quality improvement illustrate a range of different types of public services in several European countries. C. Pollitt is the author of some other papers on quality management issues such as *Doing Business in the Temple? Managers and Quality Assurance in the Public Services* (1990) and *Editorial: public service quality – between everything and nothing?* (2009).

European quality of public services is analysed in the book *Improving the Quality of East and West European Public Services* (2004) edited by E. Löffler and M. Vintar.

The research of specific quality improvement instruments is provided by T. Bovaird and E. Löffler in the paper *More quality through competitive quality awards? An impact assessment framework* (2009), C. Pollitt in *The Citizen's Charter: A Preliminary Analysis* (1994) and other scholars.

A series of studies related to development and implementation of European quality improvement instruments was provided by different communities of practice, e.g. EIPA (2002) *Survey regarding quality activities in the public administrations of the European Member States*, EIPA (2005) *Study on the use of the Common Assessment Framework in European public services*, EIPA (2009) *European Public Sector Award 2009, Project Catalogue*.

Relation between the quality improvement instruments and organizational learning was empirically researched by the scholars such as J. Askim, K. Christophersen and Å. Johnsen in the paper *Explaining Organizational Learning from Benchmarking in Networks: Experiences from Norwegian Local Government* (2006) and S. Y. Oh as a part of his doctoral

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thesis *The relationship between quality management, organizational learning, and organizational performance* (2009).

There is a lack of interest in the field of organizational learning in Croatian science. Partly, the issues of organizational learning and learning organization have been researched within the economic, information and educational sciences. The master's thesis titled *Utjecaj razvijenosti organizacijskog učenja na poslovne performanse organizacije / Influence of the development of organizational learning to business performance* (2009) and the doctoral thesis *Međuovisnost razvijenosti organizacijskog učenja i izbora arhitekture organizacije / The interdependence of organizational learning development and organizational architecture choice* (2011) have been defended at the Faculty of Economics, University of Split, by I. Matić. In the book *Organizacija koja uči / Organization that learns* (1998) edited by J. Božičević, learning and teaching are considered as the basic elements for obtaining the effectiveness and competitive power of an organization. The concept of learning organization from the perspective of educational sciences has been analysed in the paper written by R. Čepić and J. Krstović (2008) *Cjeloživotno učenje i organizacije koje uče za održivu budućnost: izazovi i pitanja / Lifelong Learning and Learning Organizations for a Sustainable Future: Challenges and Issues*, in the article *E-learning potentials in building academic institutions as learning organizations* (2007) by N. Rupčić and N. Begičević etc.

In Croatian administrative science the quality issues are analysed by E. Pusić in the article *Kvaliteta ljudi u upravi / Quality of the people in administration* (1995), I. Perko-Šeparović in the book *Izazovi javnog menadžmenta – dileme javne uprave / Public Management Challenges – Public Administration Dilemmas* (2006) and V. Đulabić in the article *Povelje javnih službi: pokušaja podizanja kvalitete javne uprave i jačanja uloge građana / Charters of public services: an attempt to improve the quality of public administration and strengthen the role of citizens* (2006). In the paper *Hrvatska i europski upravni prostor: prema europskoj kvaliteti javne uprave / Croatia and the European Administrative Space: Towards European Quality of Public Administration* (2008), A. Musa analyses the issue of quality in public administration in Croatia in relation to Europeanization process. A part of the book *Europski upravni prostor / European Administrative Space* (2012) written by I. Koprić, A. Musa and G. Lalić Novak also centres around the problem of quality of public administration in Europe.

***Theoretical / analytical framework***

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Theoretically, the thesis will be based on the complementary application of several basic approaches developed within the organizational theory.

Cyert and March (1992) develop the conception of organizational learning within the decision making theory. According to their approach (1992: 118), each combination of external shocks and decision variables in the organization changes the state thereof. By memorizing those combinations, organization tends to use decision rules leading to preferred states and avoid those leading to non-preferred states, thereby increasing its adaptability to various states of the environment.

Accordingly, an organization is conceived as the open system exchanging information, energy and material with its environments (Koprić, 1999: 21). In this regard, organizational learning facilitates the process of organizational adaptation to changing environment while the latter represents the source of information required for the learning process.

Similarly, a contingency theory of organizations assumes there is a complex interrelation between organization and relevant organizational environments as well as among different organizational variables (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1985: 87). On the basis of these postulates, the idea of specific correlation among different organizational variables (application of quality improvement instruments, communications and organizational learning) will be developed in the paper.

According to main cybernetic principles, organization is conceived as communication, self-control, self-regulative system (Morgan, 1997: 83-86; Koprić, 1999: 25). Cybernetic approach in organizational theory is focused on the study of information processing and communication, especially on organizational feedback on the basis of information acquired from the environment (due to its main orientation to organization as open system) (Mehl, 1971: 135-138). Whereas certain quality improvement instruments are based on external evaluation, the data obtained in such a manner may be considered as external information on organizational performance and basis for organizational learning, planning and action.

However, some scholars, especially Nonaka and his colleagues (Nonaka, 1994: 14; Nonaka et al., 2002: 41), move away from a paradigm that conceptualizes the organization as a system that processes information or solves problems towards the understanding of organization as knowledge creation system. This orientation sees organization as an autopoietic, semi-open system, i.e. the one that is capable to autonomously create information needed for its own reproduction. Organizational self-evaluation thus can make an internal source of information suitable for organizational knowledge creation and development.

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In addition to organizational learning perspectives that can be included in chosen theoretical orientations, there are some other approaches to the phenomena of organizational learning, such as cultural and action-learning approach. Accordingly, the question regarding the possibility and needfulness for integration of different approaches to organizational learning or complementary application thereof may be posed. Whereas unilaterally scrutiny of organization is not appropriate, i.e. not sufficient for comprehension of such complex system, the application of different images of organization (Morgan, 1997) may be considered.

The basis for the theoretical framework construction and starting point for empirical research will comprise different **levels of learning in organization** (individual, group, organizational and inter-organizational); **organizational learning phases** (data/stimulants detection, codification of information, communication at group and organizational level, dissemination of information/knowledge among the members of organization, creation/change of organizational memory in existing knowledge system (Huber, 1991) and eventually transformation of (new) knowledge into organizational action); and **two types of organizational learning** (adaptive/single-loop learning and generative/double-loop learning) (Argyris and Schön, 1978; Senge, 2006).

***The aim of the research project, research question and thesis hypothesis***

The aim of the research is to conduct a preliminary verification of the hypothesis regarding the impact of quality improvement instruments on organizational learning in administrative organizations, on the basis of set theoretical framework and empirical research implementation.

The main research question of the thesis is: *Does application of quality improvement instruments affect organizational learning in administrative organizations and what kind of impact is it?*

The basic research hypothesis is that organizations which do apply the quality improvement instruments have more chance for organizational learning in comparison with organizations which do not apply those instruments (H1). Considering the importance of communications for organizational learning process, the impact of quality improvement instruments as independent variable on organizational learning as dependent variable by intermediation of communications in administrative organizations, will be examined. Namely, further assumptions are that higher communication intensity stimulates organizational learning (H1a) and that application of quality improvement instruments and their complexity increase the communication intensity in administrative organizations (H1b).

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Whereas administrative organizations apply a variety of quality improvement instruments that differ from each other according to complexity degree, it will be examined if and which kind of impacts different instruments have on organizational learning in administrative organizations, i.e. if organizational learning type is conditioned by the complexity degree of quality improvement instruments. Complexity will be determined on the basis of accepted quality concept, dimensions of the quality instrument, number of the phases in the quality instrument implementation process and categories of actors included in the implementation process. The basic assumption is that complexity degree of quality improvement instruments influences the type of organizational learning (H2). More precisely, it is expected that administrative organizations applying more complex quality improvement instruments are more inclined to develop generative (double-loop) learning compared to those applying simpler quality improvement instruments (H2a) as well as that the latter are more inclined to develop adaptive (single-loop) than generative (double-loop) organizational learning (H2b).

***Research methodology***

Variables that should be determined and measured for verification of the hypothesis are the following: complexity of quality improvement instruments, communication intensity, inclination towards organizational learning and type of organizational learning.

***Selection of the approach and research methods***

In accordance with the aim of the doctoral thesis (verification of determined theoretical postulates and eventual development of the new ones in the research field), a multiple case study will be applied as the research approach. The research will be conducted in several administrative organizations as the basic units of analysis by application of mixed methods. It is supposed that combination of quantitative and qualitative methods will contribute to research validity. On one hand, usage of quantitative, verifiable data is required in order to keep necessary degree of objectivity in application of case study. On the other, the interview as qualitative method should serve as verification of the data acquired by application of quantitative methods, i.e. as clarification of eventual dilemmas.

***Case selection***

Depending on the possibilities of access to organizations and data availability, several (probably four) administrative organizations will be selected on the basis of objective data on application of the quality improvement instruments.

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In the selection process, the logic of 'theoretical replication' will be applied. The selected cases will differ from each other regarding independent variable, i.e. type of quality improvement instrument they apply, but will be, as much is possible, similar in other variables (e.g. regarding position in public administration system, organizational size, functions, relevant environments etc.). Accordingly, different results in the organizations applying different type of quality improvement instruments are expected.

*Variables measurement*

The **complexity of the quality improvement instruments** will be determined on the basis of the following factors: 1. accepted conception of the term 'quality', 2. number of the instrument's dimensions, 3. number of the phases in the process of instrument's application, and 4. number of the categories of actors participating in the implementation of the instrument. According to results obtained, the instruments will be aligned in ordinal scale from simpler to more complex and divided into two groups (simple and complex). The measurement will be based on the analysis of objective data.

In the theoretical model, **communication intensity** is indicated as dependent variable and intermediary variable that interferes the impact of quality improvement instruments on organizational learning in administrative organizations. The research is intended to determine the frequency of communication channels' usage before and after the application of quality improvement instruments, namely internal (vertical and horizontal) as well as external channels (in relation to users and other subjects from organizational environment – other administrative organizations, civil society). This variable will be measured on the basis of the objective data (e.g. costs of civil servants' training, informing, internal and external communication, intellectual services, travelling) as well as the data obtained by the survey (questionnaire) conducted among the staff of administrative organizations.

The questionnaires will also be used for the collection of data on **inclination towards organizational learning** and **types of organizational learning**. Additionally, the interviews with leading functionaries, i.e. senior civil servants, will be conducted in order to obtain deeper insights in the data obtained on the basis of objective data analysis. In order to determine the inclination to learn, different components of the organizational learning will be measured. If organizational learning is defined as processing of information which changes an entity's range of potential behaviour (Huber, 1991), or as broadening/changing of organizational memory made of various data basis and programs, then not all aspects of organizational learning will be evident in the change of organizational behaviour. A certain

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part of organizational learning may happen only at cognitive level. This will be considered when the questions for the survey are formulated.

*Data processing*

The data obtained will be processed by standard statistical methods accompanied by logical analysis of the thesis, theoretical discussion and usage of the results from certain previous empirical researching in the field.

***Structure of the thesis***

Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. Basic issues of the study
- 1.2. Significance and expected contribution of the study
- 1.3. Research question and hypothesis
- 1.4. Research plan

Chapter 2: ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

- 2.1. Theoretical approaches to organization
  - 2.1.1. Decision-making theory
  - 2.1.2. Open system theory
  - 2.1.3. Cybernetic approach in organizational theory
  - 2.1.4. Theory of self-referential and autopoietic systems



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- 2.2. Perspectives to organizational learning
  - 2.2.1. Introduction
  - 2.2.2. Organizational learning as adaptation
  - 2.2.3. Cognitive perspective on organizational learning
  - 2.2.4. Organizational learning and organizational culture
  - 2.2.5. Action learning
- 2.3. Learning organization
- 2.4. Dimensions of organizational learning
  - 2.4.1. Levels of learning
  - 2.4.2. Phases of the learning process
  - 2.4.3. Types of organizational learning
- 2.5. Organizational learning – integration or complementarity of existing perspectives?

Chapter 3: QUALITY IMPROVEMENT INSTRUMENTS IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

- 3.1. Contemporary administrative doctrines and public administration reforms
  - 3.1.1. New Public Management – incentives, content and effects
  - 3.1.2. Governance
- 3.2. Quality management in public administration
  - 3.2.1. Development of the concept of quality in public administration
  - 3.2.2. Features of quality management in public administration
- 3.3. Review and classification of quality improvement instruments in public administration
  - 3.3.1. Introduction
  - 3.3.2. Quality improvement instruments developed within public sector
    - Public service charters*
    - CAF – Common Assessment Framework*
    - Public sector quality awards*
  - 3.3.3. Quality improvement instruments acquired from private sector
    - CSQ – Customer Service Questionnaire*

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*EFQM - Excellence Model of the European Foundation for Quality Management*

*ISO quality management standards*

*BSC – Balanced Scorecard*

*External and internal audit*

*SWOT and PEST analysis*

*PDCA (Plan-Check-Do-Act) circle*

*QFD – Quality Function Deployment*

*BPR – Business Process Reengineering*

3.3.4. Classification of quality improvement instruments against the complexity

3.3.5. Quality Management in Specific Sectors of Public Administration

Chapter 4: RESEARCH IMPLEMENTATION AND RESULTS

Chapter 5: CONCLUSION REMARKS ON THE IMPACT OF QUALITY IMPROVEMENT INSTRUMENTS ON ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING IN ADMINISTRATIVE ORGANIZATIONS

***Expected original contribution of the thesis to the subject scientific field***

It is expected that the thesis will contribute to:

1. designing of theoretical framework for research of inter-correlations among various variables of quality management and organizational learning in administrative organizations,
2. new understandings on application of quality improvement instruments, types of organizational learning as well as on factors that foster or limit development of certain type of organizational learning in administrative organizations,
3. formulation of practical proposals for future regulation of the subject-matter and strategies on the application of quality improvement instruments with the purpose to foster the organizational learning in administrative organizations.

***Short outline of the thesis***

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The aim of the research is to conduct a preliminary verification of the hypothesis regarding the impact of quality improvement instruments on organizational learning in administrative organizations, on the basis of set theoretical framework and empirical research conduction.

The basic research hypothesis is that organizations which do apply the quality improvement instruments have more chance for organizational learning in comparison with organizations which do not apply those instruments (H1). Considering the importance of communications for organizational learning process, the impact of quality improvement instruments as independent variable on organizational learning as dependent variable by intermediation of communications in administrative organizations, will be examined. Namely, further assumptions are that higher communication intensity stimulates organizational learning (H1a) and that application of quality improvement instruments and their complexity increase the communication intensity in administrative organizations (H1b).

Whereas administrative organizations apply a variety of quality improvement instruments that differ from each other according to complexity degree, it will be examined if and which kind of impacts different instruments have on organizational learning in administrative organizations, i.e. if organizational learning type is conditioned by complexity degree of quality improvement instruments. The basic assumption is that complexity degree of quality improvement instruments influences organizational learning type (H2). More precisely, it is expected that administrative organizations applying more complex quality improvement instruments are more inclined to develop generative (double-loop) learning compared to those applying simpler quality improvement instruments (H2a) as well as that latter are more inclined to develop adaptive (single-loop) than generative (double-loop) organizational learning (H2b).

In the empirical research a multiple case study with application of mixed, quantitative and qualitative methods, will be used.

The PhD thesis will comprise the following thematic areas: 1. identification of scientific and practical problems of quality management and organizational learning in administrative organizations, 2. setting up of theoretical framework for conduction of research and interpretation of the results, 3. review of different perspectives on organizational learning, identification and assessment of different organizational learning types, 4. identification, review and classification of quality improvement instruments in the public sector, 5. implementation of the empirical research in selected administrative organizations, 6. analysis of the research results and formulation of final conclusions.

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