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The 2020 EFQM Model digital transformation: New features and Assessors' view

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Abstract

Background: The EFQM Model, the most widely applied Business Excellence Model in Europe, can be used by any type of organization in order to conduct a thorough analysis of its strengths and its areas for improvement. The model can be used in two ways: both as a diagnostic tool for self-assessment and as a model for management control.

Purpose: The main objective of this paper is to identify and analyze the modifications introduced to the latest version of the EFQM Model (version 2020). In an attempt to depict the main elements of the revised version, a comparison is made between the last and the previous version of the model aiming to identify the key features that need to be considered by applicant organizations when they decide to fulfill the model's new requirements.

Methodology: A literature review is conducted in order to illustrate the evolution of the model to date and a comparative analysis is used as a key research method for studying the differences between the last two versions of the model. The research is supported by interviewing Certified Assessors of the EFQM Model who have already got trained in the new features of the latest version.

Findings: The 2020 version allows organizations and individuals to embrace change, drive performance and evolve for the future. The creation of the Assess Base has replaced the previous paper – driven process and it brought the assessment process a step closer to digitalization for both EFQM members and Assessors.

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Research Limitation: The latest version of the EFQM Model 2020 is very new and the knowledge related to its use is very limited. Therefore, the findings of this paper are mainly driven by the Assessors' knowledge and involvement with little possibility to question or confirm the points extracted from them.

Originality/ value: This paper is the first attempt to compare the last two versions of the EFQM Model. By illustrating the new key features introduced to the model, this paper may form the basis for further research on the benefits gained by the use of these features.

EL classification: M19

Keywords: EFQM model, 2020 version, comparative data, stakeholders

1 Introduction

Since its creation, the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) Model has led the way for all organizations to develop a culture of performance and innovation that will lead to sustainably excellent results. It is continually being developed and transformed with major revisions published in 1999, 2003, 2010 and most recently in 2020. Within the European cultural environment, the EFQM Model is clearly positioned as the basic reference model for those organizations that aim for excellence, by means of offering an integral and integrating approach to the most relevant dimensions of the reality of the organization and allowing to establish a framework that can be objective, rigorous and structured. (Martín-Castilla, 2002).

Research studies conducted so far around the model support the existence of empirical evidence for the validity, reliability, and predictive power of the EFQM model, namely when applied to different activity sectors (Suárez *et al.*, 2014; Alonso-Almeida & Fuentes-Frías, 2012; Calvo-Mora *et al.*, 2005; Pires Da Rosa *et al.*, 2003). However, despite its wide applicability, the EFQM Model is regularly revised in order to allow for new business trends and developments to be considered in the model's criteria. The previous version was revised with the aim to put more emphasis on agility, sustainability and innovation (Akyuz, 2015) whereas the last version has been modified in order to overcome limitations imposed in the light of the 4th industrial revolution. New challenges and opportunities have arisen, and old challenges have become more evident (Gunasekaran *et al.*, 2019), reinforcing thus the need for the model's revision.

The latest version of the EFQM Model was launched in November 2019 introducing major modifications in relation to its predecessor. The removal of the word "excellence" from the model's official title and a thorough change of the model's structure are two of the key adjustments made in the framework of the model (Nenadál, 2020). Additional changes include an emphasis on the achievement of the United Nations Sustainability Development Goals (SDGs) and also the use of the digitalized AssessBase for the assessment procedure (www.efqm.org) Assessments on the model's criteria are performed by the EFQM Qualified Assessors who are properly trained and certified by the EFQM organization. Since the Qualified Assessors are the ultimate applicants of the evaluation process based on the model's criteria, any modification introduced in the model is primarily presented to them so that they are able to apply it in a reliable manner. This paper discusses the latest version of the EFQM Model based on the Assessors' view aiming to identify the features that facilitate or hinder the evaluation process.

A literature review is conducted in order to illustrate the evolution of the model and a comparison is made between the latest and the previous versions aiming to identify the model's new current features. Interviews with Greek and Foreign Certified Assessors of the EFQM Model are used to collect information about the latest version of the model. The participants are experienced EFQM assessors and they have also got trained on the features of the new model. The research reveals that the EFQM model is a comprehensive management system that offers a holistic approach for a thorough evaluation of all activities and processes and helps to identify areas for improvement in any type of organization. According to Assessors views, the model's new elements and modifications are generally considered as a positive step towards model's advancement.

2 Literature Review

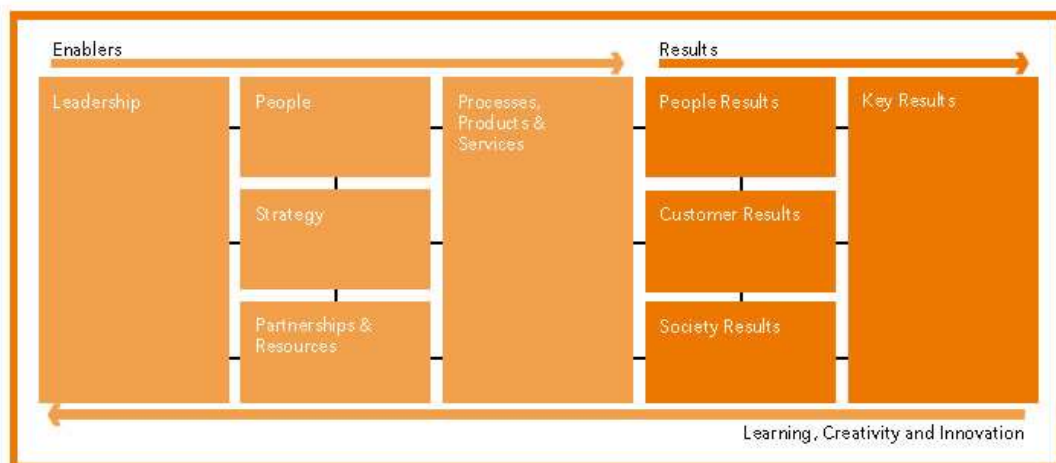
The EFQM Model is widely recognized as a valid and viable framework to design, implement and improve traditional total quality management (TQM) by expanding the narrow quality-oriented concept into a holistic management concept (Kim *et al.*, 2010) (Calvo-Mora *et al.*, 2015). According to Dahlgaard-Park *et al.* (2018) TQM evolved to incorporate process management, human resource management, and strategic management and Boulter *et al.* (2013) support the view that TQM principles and goals are incorporated into the major excellence programs and awards.

The model has been a topic of high academic interest (Dahlgaard-Park, 2008; Saunders *et al.*, 2008; Suárez *et al.*, 2014) and several authors performed literature reviews encompassing its features and successful applications. It is repeatedly tested and validated by researchers and the scientific literature supports the existence of the cause-and-effect relationships among the criteria of the model as well as of the benefits derived from its adoption (Heras-Saizarbitoria *et al.*, 2012). Based on the 2013 model criteria, "*excellent organizations achieve and sustain outstanding levels of performance that meet or exceed the expectations of all their stakeholders*". From an organizational point of view, the notion of "excellence" emphasizes on establishing internal structures of standards and processes to achieve (and if possible) exceed organizational objectives (Kautish, 2016). The EFQM Model is also the basis for the EFQM Global Award which is focused on recognizing outstanding organizations worldwide. These organizations demonstrate high track record of success in turning strategy into action and also show a continuous improvement of their performance (<https://www.efqm.org/services/recognition/efqm-global-award/>).

The Model of the EFQM is regularly reviewed to manage changes and operations introduced by new business concepts aiming to help organizations in their effort to adapt to the future. The review process of the latest 2020 version started in 2019 with working groups consisted of members of the EFQM and representatives from award-winning organizations, EFQM partners, academics, trainers, and consultants. During the development of the new version of the model, the EFQM gathered the inputs from nearly 2000 change experts, engaged in 24 workshops internally, spoke personally to leaders of more than 60 diverse organizations, and created a core team of experts and contributors from across industries and academia (EFQM, 2019, 2020b). This feedback addressed the EFQM stakeholders' concerns and highlighted the need for an updated business framework and methodology in order for businesses to deal with changes, transformation, and disruption while ensuring business performance.

The 2020 version of the model is based on five key concepts: Culture, Leadership, Transformation and Performance, Flexibility and Adaptation, and Focus on the Future (Fonseca *et al.*, 2021) and it is structured around three different dimensions: Direction (why), Execution (how), and Results (what). The dimension of Direction addresses the purpose of the organization and the reason it follows a particular strategy whereas the dimension of the Execution is focused on the means of delivering the scope of Direction. Finally the Results dimension points to what the organization achieves and what is intended to achieve in the future (EFQM, 2019).

Each dimension is controlled through the use of a number of criteria which support organizations to convert concepts into practice (Nenadál, 2020). The criteria of Direction and Execution dimensions are further analyzed into criterion parts. Comparing to the previous version of 2013 which consisted of 9 criteria (5 enablers and 4 results) and 32 criterion parts (Figure 1), the new 2020 version contains in total 7 criteria and 23 criterion parts (Figure 2).



2: The 2013 EFQM Model (www.efqm.org) Figure 1

Both 2013 and 2020 versions are assessed using the RADAR logic by taking into consideration the Elements of Relevance - Usability and Performance to support the assessment of the Results criteria and the elements of Approach, Deployment, Assessment and Refinement for the assessment of the remaining criteria (EFQM, 2013). According to RADAR logic, an organization needs to determine the Results it is intended to achieve, to apply the proper Approaches that deliver the required results, to deploy these approaches appropriately and finally to Assess and Refine the approaches in order to accomplish learning and improvement (EFQM, 2019).



2: The 2020 EFQM Model (www.efqm.org) Figure 2

The 2020 Model incorporates three tables with specific Attributes related to every Element aiming to support the assessment process of each dimension. Although the basic RADAR logic remains unchanged between the 2013 and the 2020 versions, the scoring system has changed. The reduction of weight scores for the Results criteria from 500 points of the 2013 model to 400 points of the 2020 model is based on research outcomes which indicated that the enablers' criteria should be more important than the results criteria (Eskildsen *et al.*, 2001; Eskildsen *et al.*, 2002).

A major amendment which was introduced in the 2020 version in order to facilitate the assessment and scoring processes is the use of an online platform. Driven by the impact of digitalization era the function of the AssessBase platform has replaced the previous paper – driven process. The EFQM states that it is a flexible and multilingual diagnostic tool which can

help businesses to improve and manage change by measuring, tracking and improving performance in specific areas of interest (<https://assessbase.digitalefqm.com/>). The tool can be used either to execute a simple assessment using a questionnaire or a complete assessment, and it addresses various topics such as purpose, culture, operational performance, stakeholder engagement, sustainability, leadership, satisfaction etc. (EFQM, 2020).

In shaping the framework of the new model, the results of the research of Fonseca, Amaral and Oliveira (2021) highlight that Leadership, Strategy, Product Process and Services, and Business Results are the EFQM 2013 model criteria that more strongly influence the EFQM 2020 Model. Conversely, the guidance points of the criteria of Purpose, Vision and Strategy, and Organizational Culture and Leadership of the EFQM 2020 Model are basically adopted from the guidance points of the EFQM 2013 Model. The new EFQM Model places an unparalleled emphasis on the importance of purpose, vision and agile strategies to organizations if they are to create sustainable value (<https://www.12manage.com/forum.asp?TB=efqm&S=28>).

A significant modification in the latest version of the model is the exclusion of the term “excellence” from the title of the model. It is commonly accepted that the term “excellence” is no longer present in the EFQM 2020 model. Given that the concept of excellence is strongly embedded in the academic world (Ghafoor *et al.*, 2020), this decision may well be confronted with resistance from academics, as was the case when EFQM shifted from quality management to excellence (Dale *et al.*, 2000).

The revised EFQM model recognizes that multiple changes can impact an organization. It expresses, besides the need of offering sustainable value to all interested parties and achieving performance, the need for economic, environmental, and social respect within the ecosystem in which the organization operates. It is positioned for outstanding organizations that create sustainable value, emphasizing their ecosystem and identifying, prioritizing, and monitoring stakeholder expectations (Fonseca *et al.*, 2021). The literature review about national quality awards and business excellence models, conducted by Jankalová and Jankal (2020) concluded that there is a relationship between business excellence and sustainability dimensions. The 2020 EFQM Model puts clear emphasis on sustainability by incorporating the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs represent a shared expression of stakeholder needs at a global level balancing economic, social, and environmental development (Fonseca & Carvalho, 2019) and measure progress towards Sustainable Development (SD) (Barbier & Burgess, 2017).

Based on Hervainé Szabó (2020) the broad discussion carried out with award holders has led to a deeper change of the EFQM Model which opened the way for the adoption of the concept of “ecosystem”. It is not enough for organizations to be merely excellent in leadership, operations, and results but they should demonstrate an outstanding role in their ecosystems. He argues that the first and most important factor in the case of the EFQM Model 2020 is the detailed description of an organization’s ecosystem.

A final important new aspect of the latest version is the concept of transformation. While the EFQM (2013) version requires from the assessed organizations to achieve and sustain outstanding levels of performance that meet or exceed the expectations of all their stakeholders, the EFQM 2020 model aims to simultaneously deliver performance and ensure transformation, creating enduring value for the organization stakeholders and achieving remarkable and enduring results (Fonseca et al., 2021). Based on the research results of Val, Regaliza and Maraña, (2020) the new model offers a framework and methodology to help with the changes, transformation and disruption that people and organizations face every day by measuring where they are on the path to sustainable value creation. The EFQM 2020 Model provides management tools and methods that facilitate decision-making in organizations to enable the transformation needed to create sustainable value in the face of future challenges (Arranz Val, 2020).

3 Methodology

Due to the model’s novel characteristic and the lack of empirical data, for the purpose of the present study it was chosen to conduct a qualitative research addressed to experienced EFQM assessors. The purpose of the study is to validate the basic changes and to capture assessors’ view over the new elements of the 2020 version. The EFQM Assessors come from a broad and diverse range of organizations and they bring a wide spectrum of experience and knowledge to the assessment process. They are also certified following a rigorous training managed by the EFQM organization and therefore their view over the process is valuable.

Following the literature review which revealed limited available publications on the new model, a decision was made to conduct a research over the model’s modifications in order to expand the existing knowledge and produce a base for future research endeavors. Based on the new features of the model illustrated by previous researchers and described by the EFQM, interviews with assessors by means of a questionnaire was selected as the method of collecting the information needed to figure out their personal view over the fundamental new features of the model.

The questionnaire was used as the primary tool for collecting data and prior to forming the items to be included, discussions with participants were carried out in order to determine areas of interest to be studied. Experts recommend that the process of the development of questionnaire items should involve members of the population of interest to ensure that the questionnaire fully reflects their perspective and that items are acceptable, comprehensive, and relevant to their condition (McKenna *et al.*, 2003). It also ensures that all important aspects were explored and that no vital feature is omitted (Doward *et al.*, 2009). For this reason, informal interviews and discussions with assessors were taken place in order to develop the questionnaire items which structures the final questionnaire. During the interviews, the respondents were given clear and unambiguous instructions (O'Leary, 2014; Bell & Waters, 2014), they were encouraged to answer the questionnaire based on their own experience (Waldetoft, 2003) and they invited to make their own interpretations and submit their comments.

Although the primary focus of the research was to collect the opinions of the assessors with open ended questions, the final questionnaire was enhanced with closed ended items and it was divided into two main parts: Part I referred to the profile of the respondents regarding their gender, age and years of experience in conducting assessments using the EFQM Model. Part II was focused on evaluating the basic changes of the new EFQM Model as they revealed by the literature review. Each questionnaire item had an open-ended part aiming to map out the respondent's general view on the new features as well as a closed-ended part with a seven-point Likert rating scale aiming to measure respondent's assessment on each item. Following Bell and Waters (2014) suggestion, it was decided to administer the questionnaires personally, as this method enables the researcher to explain the purpose of the study and also increases the probability of receiving completed questionnaires. The researchers contacted the assessors personally and besides the use of questionnaire they made further discussions on the documented answers. During the interviews, the participants in the research were ensured that their personal data will be handled with strict confidentiality.

As far as the sampling method is concerned, taking into consideration the extremely limited population of the active EFQM assessors in Greece (according to the EFQM records there are 11 certified according to the 2020 EFQM Model assessors in Greece) and in order to ensure the greatest participation of the targeted population, the purposive and convenience sampling method was used aiming to contact all Greek Assessors who got trained in the new EFQM Model. The final sample was extended beyond the group of Greek assessors to include respondents from outside the country's boundaries. In total 14 completed questionnaires

were collected and used in the analysis (11 from Greek and 3 from foreign EFQM Assessors). The demographic profile of the respondents is presented in Table I. An almost equal percentage of males and females took part in the research, all of them were over 30 years of age and the vast majority of them have more than 8 years of experience in executing EFQM assessments. The limit of 8 years in considering the participants' experience was set to verify the familiarity of the Assessors with the revision process of the model. Since the previous version of the model was initiated in 2013, when an Assessor has more than 8 years of experience is an indication that he/she has been involved with at least one revision.

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	8	57
Female	6	43
Age		
< 30	0	0
30-50	8	57
> 50	6	43
Years of experience		
≤ 7	1	7
≥ 8	13	93

3: Profile of the respondents (n=14) Table 1

In the next section, the Assessors' comments on the basic elements of the new EFQM model retrieved via interviews are presented. However, as already mentioned, the questionnaire used for the interviews apart from tracing Assessors' personal experiences and opinions, it contains Likert scaled questions where the respondents were asked to rate the significance of or to evaluate specific statements on the new model's features. The quantitative data collected by these questions are analyzed using basic descriptive statistics.

4 Results and Discussion

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze responses and Table II shows the results of the Likert scaled questions. Viewing the key results, it is clear that according to Assessors the 2020 EFQM Model gives emphasis on the ecosystem and increases attention on the sustainability through the implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the European business ethics and values. The data suggest that the identification, prioritization, and monitoring of stakeholder expectations is of utmost important for the New Model as well as the purpose, the vision, the strategy and the culture of the organization.

Also, the results of the research make clear that all Assessors have placed great importance on the combination of performance improvement with transformation of the organization. They also agree that the process of the assessment becoming digital through the Digital Assess Base is of great value.

Also, though most of the Assessors cherish the completeness of the model in the areas it covers the results regarding ease of application for the candidate organizations and ease for use by the assessors indicate there is still doubt about how ready all parties are by means of adaptation. The data for the changes in the way the criteria are scored also suggest there are further steps to be done and further instructions to be provided for both the applicant organizations and the Assessors. It is important to mention that our analysis supports the previously mentioned idea that the disappearance of the term “excellence” is not highly embraced by the Assessors.

Following in this section of the paper, the comments of the Assessors retrieved during the interviews for each question are presented and analyzed in order to better understand their attitudes and perceptions over the new EFQM model.

The first question requests their opinion over the exclusion of the term “excellence” from the title of the model. According to respondents the notion of excellence was embedded in the model and it was placed in the heart of its philosophy. Most of the participants indicated that it seems very strange to name the model omitting the term “excellence”. One of them strongly criticized the deletion of the term by saying *“excluding the term from the “EFQM Excellence Model” has the characteristics of a “suicidal action” by means of Marketing”*. The Assessor believes that the term “excellence” is well known and can be easily understood by anyone whereas the term EFQM may not been even heard! To support this view, the Assessor wonders how convincing it can be for a company to obtain a certificate which simply indicates “Validated by EFQM” instead of “Committed to Excellence”.

QUESTION	MEAN	SD
1. What is your opinion that the term “excellence” is no longer present at the title of the model?	2,21	1,251
2. Give your opinion on the new structure of the model based on the following elements:		
<i>a. Completeness (covers all the necessary areas for the success of an organization)</i>	5,71	1,139

<i>b. Easy for application (by the side of the candidate organization)</i>	4,71	0,914
<i>c. Ease for use during the evaluation (by the side of the assessors)</i>	4,57	0,852
3. The 2020 model gives increased attention on sustainability through the implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the European business ethics and values. How important do you consider this change?	6,79	0,579
4. The 2020 model emphasizes on the "ecosystem" of the organization. How important do you consider this change?	6,57	0,756
5. The 2020 model gives special attention on the identification, prioritization, and monitoring of stakeholder expectations. How important do you consider this change?	6,50	0,650
6. The 2020 model place emphasis on the purpose, the vision & strategy and the culture of the organization that did not exist so clearly in the previous version of the model. How important do you consider this change?	6,43	0,756
7. In the 2020 model, performance improvement is combined with the "transformation" of the organization, emphasizing the preparation of the organization for the future. How important do you consider this use of the concept of "transformation"?	6,85	0,376
8. Along with the changes in the structure and the content (in the 2020 model) there were also changes in the way the criteria are scored. Based on the grading instructions given to the assessors (for each category of criteria) what is your opinion about the grading system?		
<i>a. Rating in the DIRECTION category</i>	4,79	0,893
<i>b. Rating in the EXECUTION category</i>	4,86	0,949
<i>c. Rating in the RESULTS category</i>	5,00	0,961
9. In the 2020 model the process of recording the assessment results was converted from paper driven to digital using the Digital Assess Base. To what extent do you consider this as an important development for the EFQM Foundation?	6,21	1,122

4: Mean and standard deviation of the responses Table 2

In a similar way, another respondent shared the same opinion by arguing that the concept of excellence is inextricably linked to the principles of “Business Excellence” as these principles are experienced through the application of the Model in every business ecosystem that seeks its sustainable development through self-assessment processes and aims at continuous improvement. It is worth noting that the Assessor states that *“when people know and accept the concept of “excellence” as a basic principle in their behaviors and mentalities, then they voluntarily engage in actions of continuous improvement”*. It seems that the concept of Excellence ends up becoming experimental through the application of the model, though the model was made up to build the culture of excellence. Based on the scores for that question and on the review of the reported comments, it is clear evident that Assessors are quite negative on the deletion of the term “excellence” from the title of the Model. They believe that “excellence” is closely related with the EFQM culture and they express their skepticism by stating that *“the results of this omission will be judged in the future”*.

The second question is about the new structure of the model based on the elements of completeness, ease for application and ease for use. The results suggest that though the respondents do not question the completeness of the model there are mixed feelings regarding the ease of application by the applicant organizations as well as the ease for use by the assessment team. One of the participants pointed out the importance of digital assessments by stating that *“The ability to use AssessBase is useful. Particularly positive is the possibility of remote evaluation after the pandemic (for the first level of certification).”* Some of the assessors were quite reserved and they point out that their view on the matter is still quite early to be judged and only time will tell whether the new structure is easier than the previous one. However, it should be noted that the respondents would expect more guidelines and training on the subject so that they would be able to get in pace with the requirements of the assessment procedure. This view is supported by the following comment: *“The results of its (the structure) practice will be proved while using the model and we will assess the impact of these factors in time”*. As a guidance, an Assessor proposed that the Model should be applied with flexibility of thought and with appropriate adjustments in order to cover the changing internal structures of the assessed organization and also to balance the uncertainty posed by external conditions. Taking into consideration scores and comments regarding the new Model’s structure, it is clear that the factor of “time” is an important element not only in judging the completeness of the model but also in evaluating the level of ease for both applicant organizations and Assessors. The digitalization process through the

use of AssessBase is obviously positively perceived when the practical application of the new Model is considered.

The third question reviews the participants' opinion on sustainability which is emphasized in the new Model where a distinct reference is made on the implementation of both the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) and the European business ethics and value. Assessors clearly supported this new feature in the EFQM Model and they confirmed it was in the right direction. There were comments such as *"The emphasis on sustainability through the goals of the United Nations was one of the best additions in the new model"* and *"It shows the clear positioning of this excellence model towards economic, social and environmental development"*. The respondents also argue that performance without sustainability is meaningless and that emphasis on the sustainable goals of the UN and European Ethics demonstrates the launching of an important requirement that transcends the boundaries of Corporate Social Responsibility and initiates the concept of responsible management. Through the sustainability approach, the company's goal is not simply to perform business results but also show evidence of respecting the environment and the society. Further than showing a social responsibility profile, there is a clear need for assessed organizations to employ Responsible Management based on ethics and principles. The findings on that question show consensus among participants over the high importance of the notion of sustainability within the Model and the way which this is practiced through the implementation of the UN SDGs and the European business ethics and value.

The next question of the questionnaire is about a newly adopted term, the organization's "ecosystem". In this question the opinions of the participant Assessors were divided. On the one hand it was stated that *"the 2020 EFQM Model is positioned for organizations that look towards sustainability, emphasizing the fact that their ecosystem leads the way to a more sustainable future. The extensive use of the word ecosystem is of great added value. We now have dynamic ecosystems where culture must be based on and shared with the ecosystems of the partners"*. While it was also supported that *"it (the notion of ecosystem) serves the larger organizations that they are able to define and manage their ecosystems"*. However, most of the respondents argue that through the use of the ecosystem, the Model recognizes and focuses on the fact that the world (and therefore the economic and the wider environment in which companies/ organizations operate) is complex and in a constant interaction with the organizations. The actions and activities of each company/ organization affect and at the same time are influenced by the micro and macro environment (= ecosystem) in which it operates. In addition, the concept of "ecosystem" is intertwined with the concept of "transformation".

Thus, the question “how do we deal with change?” has been replaced by the question “what do we want to achieve with change?”. Based on these findings, it seems that the Assessors support the addition of the term “ecosystem” and they consider it as an essential and necessary concept of the Model.

Following the question of ecosystem, the questionnaire brings the topic of identification, prioritization, and monitoring of stakeholder expectations to the attention of the Assessors. The previous version of the Model referred to stakeholders but the 2020 version makes a clearer focus on them by introducing them as a basic element on the Model’s structure. The Assessors seem to embrace this change by quoting comments such as *“Stakeholder management gets on the spotlight”* and *“Stakeholder management is in my opinion the most important addition to the model. It was pervasive but now it is being defined and it is becoming clear that the operation of quality systems is built on defining and monitoring their needs.”* According to the Assessors’ view, the 2013 Model had recognized Customers, People and Society as the organization’s key stakeholders but the 2020 Model is more flexible on the topic as the assessed organization has to identify its key stakeholders concerning its Purpose, Vision and Strategy. In addition, the measurement of the stakeholders’ perception is also adjusted to the purpose, strategy, and ecosystem of the organization. Identifying and managing organization’s stakeholders becomes vital and it is closely related with the organization’s strategy and the key performance indicators. There is undoubtedly a consensus among the respondents on the significance of the concept of stakeholders which complements the novel idea of the ecosystem and defines the forces and the interest groups that surround an organization thus highlighting the need to manage the relationships that each interest group develops with the organization. Assessors in general stress the importance of stakeholders and one of them noted that *“It was about time to incorporate the Stakeholder Theory as clearly as needed. All models and standards tend to incorporate the need of stakeholder management (see ISO 9001:2015)”*.

The next question of the questionnaire is about the emphasis on the purpose, the vision/strategy and the culture of the organization which were not clearly mentioned in the previous version of the Model. More specifically, by these three elements (purpose, vision / strategy and organizational culture) the innovative one is the explicit reference to organizational culture. The Assessors agree on the importance of this addition in the new EFQM Model and they support the relation of organizational culture with performance and creation of value for the Organizational Stakeholders. The responds are in line with the literature review and as one Assessor claims *“The EFQM 2020 Model is based on the link between the organization’s*

purpose and strategy, in order to deliver performance and create value for its key stakeholders”.

After the important topic of organizational culture, the following question aims to examine the feature of transformation and its connection with performance improvement. The results of the response data show an overwhelming acceptance of the way transformation is placed inside the model. Assessors agree on the significance of transformation and its contribution to the requirement for sustained results. According to a participant in the research *“Straight after the concept of sustainability, the transformation required by organizations is a passport that allows their continuation in the future”*. Since the previous version had no reference to the concept of "transformation" – except for project management/ change management – its initiation is somewhat considered as one of the most important changes (additions) in the new Model. In view of the fact that the (digital) transformation (especially after the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic) is the key factor that has already changed the economies of the modern world, the 2020 Model’s explicit reference to "transformation" makes the Model compatible with and relevant to contemporary business environment. These results build on existing evidence by the research performed by Arranz Val (2020) who argues that the EFQM 2020 Model provides management tools and methods that facilitate decision-making in organizations to enable the transformation needed in order to create sustainable value in the face of future challenges (Arranz Val, 2020)

Apart from investigating the fundamental new elements of the Model, the questionnaire requests from respondents to provide their feedback on the actual changes of the RADAR scoring system which they have to use when they perform their assessments. Their views over the scoring assessment tool are considered quite important since the scores calculated by the Assessors provide a valuable feedback to the applicant organizations and also shape the organizations’ achieved outcomes. Although no considerable changes were made in the RADAR logic which has always been perceived as set and clear (as of previous version of the Model) by the Assessors, the participants of the research seem to be quite positive on the modifications initiated in the logic. They prefer the new focus on strategic cycles, future orientation, and valuable usable data than the three-year trends and data validity and segmentation required before. One of the respondents noted that *“The results category now has equal scoring weight in terms of stakeholder perception (200 points) and strategic & operational performance (200 points) and I consider that as a more correct approach compared to the subdivision of the points into four results criteria as it happened in the*

previous version of the Model". Based on their comments, it can be assumed that Assessors have a positive attitude towards the modifications of the RADAR scoring system.

After reviewing the fundamental new elements of the 2020 Model, the questionnaire could not miss investigating Assessors' view about the new innovative process of documenting assessment results. The entire documentation process has been converted from a paper driven to a digital based procedure which is supported by the EFQM's Digital AssessBase. Assessors welcome this major change and they state that a digital platform such as the AssessBase is an essential tool to produce comprehensive reports and tailor-made dashboards so that assessment procedure and feedback reporting are facilitated. With regard to the significance of the digitalization aspect, the respondents gave positive comments such as *"Digitalization especially after COVID era has become a necessity"* or even more *"I consider this change the second most important change after the management of stakeholders as it shows that the Model is innovative and keeps pace with technology advancements"*. Despite their enthusiasm, the participants express some reservations regarding the use of the digital tool and they stress the need for sufficient training time in order to integrate businesses and assessors in the new digital era. It seems that the transition to this era requires preparation and good training for both candidate organizations and Assessors. As it is stated by one of the participants *"The Assessors cannot familiarize themselves with the digital platform in a single training and certification. Such a change requires a lot of time and systematic training and information"*. However, the general positive feeling on the topic of digitalization is captured by this comment: *"It is the proof in practice that the (digital) transformation introduced by the EFQM also as an evaluation criterion, is a new reality for the EFQM itself. It would at least be ironic if the EFQM remained in the obsolete paper-driven assessment procedure and I do not think it would be "convincing". It is a change which I believe will upgrade the EFQM itself and it will be a proof that the Foundation implements in practice what it advocates!"*. From the comments and the scoring results it can be derived that the digitalization of the Model is embraced by the EFQM Assessors but there are still some concerns about the training needed in order to get the best of the digital AssessBase.

Finally, the questionnaire requests the respondents to report any extra comments and/or issues regarding the new Model which have not been addressed in the questionnaire's questions. This section aims at capturing the Assessors' possible worries about the application of the new Model and it brought some weaknesses of the Model to light. Some of the respondents argue that the "language" of the Model is still difficult to understand by businesses. One Assessor comments that *"Despite the expressed desire of the EFQM to*

address small and medium-sized enterprises, I believe that language and phraseology do not contribute in this direction". The difficulties faced by small companies when implementing the Model, is stressed in various commentary statements such as that small companies will have difficulty to follow the new Model as it is not prescriptive enough, that the new Model addresses mostly the needs of high-class and in general big scale companies and that small and medium-sized companies should be provided with extra training. Another concern is about the difficulties introduced by the AssessBase in the work of Assessors who have not received sufficient instructions so far and regardless their computer skills, they have to get acquainted with the use of the digital platform. A more radical view is expressed by an Assessor who claims that *"The EFQM Model has become a different model. I understand the changes and I agree with most of them but the form of the model has changed radically. It seems as if the EFQM wanted to take out every "traditional element" of the model's structure, starting with the elimination of the term of excellence"*.

Finally, some of the participants bring attention to the issue of limited reference to process systems and the emphasis on agility that an organization should have in relation to adherence to processes. There is the belief that no clear reference to process management is made, there are more criteria that diffuse the meaning of the former "People" Criterion (which was considered to be solid and clear) and that examples of indicators previously included in Criteria 6: Customer Results and Criterion 7: People Results are missing. An issue of concern is also the relation of the new Model with the new trends in technology which is not clearly addressed. What is the connection of the new Model - Criteria 1.1-1.2, 2.1-2.4, 3.2, Criterion 6 and Criterion 7 - with the 4th industrial revolution (Industry 4.0) and what is the role of people in the business ecosystem and business in the wider social ecosystem in the age of the Internet of Things (IoT)?

5 Conclusions

The EFQM Model has long been established as a fundamental framework to achieve business excellence and improved performance. The model is regularly updated to include new ideas from the business world and the latest 2020 version has been developed with new concepts considering global trends and global changes. The review process of the EFQM 2020 Model involved specialists, business leaders and collaborators representing various industrial sectors and academia. It has shifted from Quality Award for Business Excellence to a Business model that aims for outstanding results (Fonseca, 2021).

Although the basic structure of the previous EFQM Model was deeply modified in the new version, the model still remains a generic tool for any organisation striving to be successful on its journey towards quality and excellence. For this reason, the exclusion of the word “excellence” was criticized by the EFQM Assessors of the present study who believe that the model was recognized and accepted as a model for excellence. However, the new framework of the model, which covers three key sections and contains seven main criteria, is positively considered by Assessors and as Nenadál (2020) states the new structure, though radical, is regarded as a positive shifting.

The new model also appears to be more flexible and less bureaucratic, therefore, responding to the criticism that excellence programs are often quite bureaucratic when compared to alternative quality tools and methods (Bandyopadhyay & Leonard, 2016). However, Assessors are still cautious with the new structure and they believe it is quite early to make any judgements. There may be a need for further training and for detailed guidelines on the application of the new model. According to Fonseca (2021) due to its generic and non-prescriptive nature, it should be complemented with specific layers of detail for each organization.

With regard to the conceptual modifications of the new version, the Assessors who participated in the study strongly agree on the high significance of the inclusion of the notions of “transformation”, “sustainability” and “ecosystem”. The participants have also highly appreciated the use of the digital assessment procedure but they seem to be reluctant to judge the completeness of the Model’s structure. On the whole the Assessors who took part in the study have a positive view regarding the new features of the 2020 EFQM Model.

6 Limitations & Future research suggestions

This paper is an attempt to highlight the EFQM Assessors view regarding the modifications introduced to the new EFQM Model. The findings of this research build on existing evidence about the positive aspects but also about the gaps and the missing information around the New EFQM Model. The views and comments presented by the EFQM Assessors who participated on the research support the need for further analysis.

The originality of the study is stressed by the fact that the literature about the 2020 EFQM Model is very limited. Apart from identifying the new features of the latest version of the model, the present study makes a contribution to the model’s theory by investigating the Assessors’ views on the key aspects of the new model. There is no prior study published on the opinions and thoughts of the ultimate evaluators and users of the model’s features and

the results of the present analysis may form the basis for further research. From a practical point of view, the findings of the study may be used by organizations wishing to make self-assessments or to be prepared for an official EFQM assessment using the new model in order to have a comprehensive idea about the features that differentiate the latest version from the previous one.

The study has some limitations which should be considered when the results are interpreted. The small sample size and the inclusion of specific respondents in the research are the primary restrictions of the data analysis. In addition, the participants were asked to express their opinions on a model without prior experience in applying it. Although the aim of the study was to collect and present the thoughts of the Greek Assessors who got trained and certified on the new model, a greater number of participants, would produce more generalizable results. Based on the limitations of the study, future research suggestions could focus on conducting this or similar research on a wider sample of Assessors from various geographical locations who may have already got practical assessment experience with the new model. Finally, it would be interesting to investigate the view of the organizations that have already been assessed using the new model and conduct longitudinal studies to examine the views of both Assessors and organizations in the long run.

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