Quality Assurance in Romanian Higher Education –European Principles and Priorities

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Abstract. The paper aims to propose a contextual framework, generating new interpretations and institutional information that underlies more rigorous argumentations, in order to elaborate some longitudinal analysis regarding the quality indicators of the Romanian higher education. In time, it is desirable that these contextualization references be not only national, but more explicitly European. One of the purposes of the present research is to offer a synthetic view of the Romanian higher education, by analyzing, measuring and assessing a set of indicators that will lead to a better place for Romanian Universities among European and international ones.

Keywords: Romanian higher education, quality assurance, quality indicators, European Union, Bologna Process

1. Introduction

The necessity and importance of a good quality of higher education depends, to a great extent, on the quality of the educational staff and its performance, in the academic environment. The Romanian education creates specialists that will lead the EU-integrated Romanian society and economy in the future [2] .

Since 1989 there have appeared or grown, in the Romanian academic education, a series of factors which have led to a decrease in the quality of higher education, in its credibility and competitiveness: - the massification of higher education; - an increase in the number of public and private higher education institutions, the emergence of domains of specialization not demanded on the labor market; - chronic under-financing; - the liberalization of education in the absence of appropriate marketing; - political pluralism; - problems in adjusting to European benchmarks [9].

Once Romania signed the Bologna declaration in 1999, the national concern for assuring academic quality became crucial again, since quality assurance is one of the main objectives of the Bologna Process [4].

The present research paper has set as its purpose, on the one hand, to put forward a parallel between data and information regarding the Romanian higher education system as opposed to other European ones; on the other hand, it aims to identify success and performance, as well as problems and critical aspects, with a view to opening argued debates on the future dynamics of Romanian higher education.

2. Research Methodology

The research methodology focuses on a complex set of qualitative and quantitative data gathering methods:

- *Questionnaires*, gathering the viewpoints and opinions of the teaching staff, students and employers regarding higher education functioning and performance;

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- *Interviews with ARACIS* (Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education) *experts*, about ways in which Academic Quality Assurance Commissions function;
- *Interviews with students and teaching staff* about the academic ways of life;
- *Secondary analysis* of information included in quality (self)evaluation reports and in strategic university documents.

The data gathered by qualitative methods (interviews) within this *Barometer* suggest the fact that we do not have a student-centred university; we have a self-centered university in a hostile environment, a university concerned with its own survival resources (for obtaining financing and accreditation) [10].

3. Literature Review

The authors considered the relation between the methods applied and the results obtained by prior studies on the paper subject. Acknowledging the missing aspects of earlier analysis of the topic, we have established the main objectives and the motivation of our scientific research work. (Stevenson, S., Evans, C., MacLachlan, M., Karmel, T. and Blakers, R. 1999)

Martin's paper (2003) notes that the destabilizing effect of continuing fundamental transformations in higher education creates the inability of many institutions to cooperate in the elaboration and application of strategic plans as well as in reviewing and improving them. McKinnon's paper [10] provides the benchmarking process with a unique approach, as it puts in the background some variables as life cycle, localization, government size within and between universities. Butcher, Howard and McMeniman (2002) emphasize that the universities' primary activities put forward the benchmarking process, referring in particular to the professors' training programs (Urquhart, J., Ellis, D. and Woods, A. 2002).

4. Quality Evaluation of the Romanian Higher Education - A Contextual Approach

In order to present a synthetic image of the quality status of the Romanian higher education, we selected a series of indicators, which are measured on a simple ordinate scale, defined on three gradations as follows: the positive mode (green color), moderate mode (yellow color), and negative mode (red color). The association of one of the three gradations to each of the proposed indicators represents an argued process through the quantitative and qualitative data that are being presented in a detailed manner in the current research paper [10].

The first set of indicators (S.1), which measure the quality status of the Romanian higher education, is thought of in the context of Romania's participation in the Bologna Process.

Table 1: First set of indicators: The Quality of Higher Education in the context of the Bologna Process , Source: ARACIS, 2010

Code	Indicator	Type
S 1.1.	Implementation of Bologna Process (3 cycles)	Input
S 1.2.	Access to the next cycle of academic studies	Input
S 1.3.	Development of national external quality assurance	Input
S 1.4.	International participation in the quality assurance process	Input
S 1.5.	Recognition of university diplomas	Input
S 1.6.	Student involvement in quality assessment procedures	Input
S 1.7.	External quality assessement of Romanian universities	Input
S 1.8.	Student mobility	Feedback
S 1.9.	Implementing the National Framework of Qualifications in Higher Education	Process

The second set of indicators (S.2) analyzes the context which results from the external messages (extra-institutional) of the actors involved in the assurance of the academic quality of the university process.

Table 2: Second set of indicators, Source: ARACIS, 2010

Code	Indicator	Type
S 2.1.	Transparency of the educational offers	Input
S 2.2.	Ratio of number of students to number of professors	Input
S 2.3.	Ratio of number of students to number of graduates	Output/Outcome
S 2.4	Participation in lifelong learning programs	Input

S 2.5.	Development of Information Systems of quality assurance	Feedback
S 2.6.	Academic scientific research	Output/Outcome
S 2.7.	Commission for evaluation and quality assurance	Feedback
S 2.8.	Equipment in laboratories and classrooms	Input

The third set of indicators (S.3) aims at different institutional aspects regarding the university world, at the manner in which they are embraced by employers, students and educators.

Table 3: Third set of indicators , Source: ARACIS, 2010

Code	Indicator	Type
S 3.1	Number of students who continue their academic studies in the next cycle	Input
S 3.2.	The quality of the learning process (Professors' perception)	Process
S 3.3.	The quality of the learning content (Professors' perception)	Process
S 3.4.	The quality of the learning process (Students' perception)	Process
S 3.5.	The quality of the learning content (Students' perception)	Process
S 3.6.	Quality of teaching staff (Students' perception)	Process
S 3.7.	Quality of university training	Output/Outcome
S 3.8.	The existence of resources students need in the learning process (Students' perception)	Input
S 3.9.	The usefulness of the diploma (Students' perception)	Output/Outcome
S 3.10.	Institutional communication of faculty (Students' perception)	Feedback
S 3.11.	Degree of corruption in the university (Students' perception)	Process
S 3.12.	Students' chances on the labor market (Students' perception)	Output/Outcome
S 3.13.	The quality of education in the context of implementing the Bologna System (Employers' perception)	Input

From the selected indicators, 8 are of green color, 10 have the red color and 12 are yellow. Therefore, by forcing the results, we can say that the quality of Romanian higher education can be assessed as predominantly *moderate.* As these indicators evaluate the **outcome** of academic education, the conclusion that can be drawn is rather alarming: unless we apply quick and thorough measures of improvement, we run the risk of having less and less competitive universities, more and more diplomas, less and less individual professional competencies and, finally, a chronic lack of European competitiveness.

As we can see in the matrix below, the quality indicators that frequently obtained a "positive status" (green color) are of the input type. These indicators, at the level of the higher education sector, provide a general concern for meeting a certain quality form, defined by means of the "input values".

In terms of its outcome, the quality of higher education appears to be at a deficit: out of the 9 outcome indicators, 5 describe a negative state, 4 a moderate state and none of them describes a positive state. It seems we are still focusing on system entrance values, without aiming at effective, specific results.

Table 4: Matrix of the Quality Indicators, Source: Authors' Conception

S 1.1.							
S 1.2.							S 1.8.
S 1.3.	S 1.6.	S 2.1.		S 3.4.		S 3.7.	S 2.3.
S 1.4.	S 1.7.	S 2.2.		S 3.5.		S 3.9.	S 2.5.
S 1.5.	S 2.8.	S 2.4.	S 3.2.	S 3.6.		S 3.10.	S 2.6.
S 3.1	S 3.8.	S 3.13.	S 3.3.	S 3.11.	S 1.9.	S 3.12.	S 2.7
INPUT INDICATORS			**PROCESS INDICATORS**			**OUTPUT / OUTCOME and FEEDBACK INDICATORS**	

Quality indicator – positive status
Quality indicator – moderate status
Quality indicator – negative status

At a European level, in the context of the Bologna Process implementation, the Romanian higher education enjoys a positive appreciation and a good image. The progresses connected to the implementation of the Bologna Process do not represent a specified and exclusive feature of Romania, but a rather dominant feature for the national systems integrated in the process [8].

5. Romanian Higher Education: statistical data and university flux

The Romanian universities are not found in the European or global classifications of the best higher education institutions and do not belong to the top 5 destinations chosen by the students of the European

countries. The exception is the Republic of Moldova, a situation that can be explained, due to the Romanian policy of offering special study conditions for the Moldovan citizen. This situations raises questions not only regarding the competitiveness and openness of the Romanian universities towards the European Education Area, but also their capacities to create the necessary conditions to host the foreign students; all these under the conditions of public underfunding of higher education [5].

Romania finds itself in the European and global trends of ageing population and demographic decline. This extremely high increase in the student population has at least two features:

The process of massification had no correlation to a direct growth of the needed resources (the main feature of the system is underfunding);

The process of massification was not uniformly distributed as far as the study areas were concerned: some areas had to face an inflation of candidates, while other areas had to struggle with depopulation.

These two features of the massification process generated a series of contradictory effects for the system. **First,** at a general level, a gap appeared between the students' number and the number of educators. The number of students grew faster than the number of educators. This situation made it possible for the ratio between the students' number and the educators' number to grow from 13,8 in 1990/1991 to 1, to 25,7 to 1 in 2009/2010. In other words, in a period of 16 years, the average number of students corresponding to one educator almost doubled. **Second,** the universities have developed at least two types of behavior. The ones that faced massification chose, because of underfunding, to cover their costs by attracting a larger number of paying students (exceeding the average value, from the year 2010 of 25,7 students per educator). Some faculties, that struggled with the decrease of population, chose, also because of the underfunding process, to concentrate their behavior on gaining more research grants. From the two behaviors described above, it seems that the attraction of more paying students was dominant. **Third,** due to the decrease in the student population, most universities chose to relax their admission conditions for candidates, from the urge to cover the places offered for competition.

6. Conclusions

This barometer aims to propose a harmonized system of indicators for higher education, starting from the idea of the diverse nature of universities and university studies areas, which cannot be left out during the evaluation process. The results of this research (that is currently running at our university) – the new system of specific indicators for the economic education – will compete for a better positioning of the Romanian universities alongside the European and international universities. Once these indicators have been defined, a useful national database is also desired for benchmarking between universities, according to their specific area, for identifying the national performance for its generalization and, later on, for comparing it to the European performance.

In order to carry out this research, the acquisition and use of knowledge in several domains was necessary: management, education, economics, econometrics, statistics etc. This was required with a view to opening a new line of research that could contribute to a better understanding of higher education quality assurance. In line with the Bologna Ministerial Conference, a set of higher education quality assurance indicators was drawn, with a view to implementing a coherent, competitive system on the European and international education market.

The three sets proposed for quality assessment clarify the evaluation method of indicators distributed along the three dimensions: the foreign perception of the extent to which Romania has met the objectives undertaken in the Bologna Process, general aspects of quality assurance and the domestic perception of quality.

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