

THE QUALITY OF EDUCATIONAL SERVICES IN HIGHER EDUCATION – ASSURANCE, MANAGEMENT OR EXCELLENCE?

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Abstract

The present paper has as its target to present the regulations characterizing the quality of educational services in higher education, with a view to identifying the system which is the most efficient and revealing for their real quality. This approach also takes into account the central role that key intellectual and cultural responsibilities play in the development of modern society, as well as the moral impact of higher education on society as a whole. The authors reach the conclusion that, in order to have real quality in higher education, it is important to introduce a quality management system and to constantly improve it, using as feedback the satisfaction of clients and other interested parties, with the intention of attaining performance and excellence.

Keywords: excellence, performance, quality management, quality assurance, quality indicators

JEL Classification: I21, I29, M16, M53

Introduction

The issue of quality in higher education has been given attention in the academic and legislative environment starting with the Bologna Process.

Up to that moment, everyone considered it their duty as a professor to keep up a certain academic standard, which was in fact synonymous with a high quality of the message sent to the students in a manner assumed to be impeccable. It was normal then, as it is now, to present the latest developments in a given domain at the lecture, what you considered to be the most interesting aspects, and to assess whether you have reached your goal by the audience's reactions. It was normal to openly hold a lecture, to ask and be asked questions.

However, society has evolved and certainties are needed nowadays instead of assumptions, as far as quality is concerned.

The Bologna process has changed higher education not only in terms of structure, but also in terms of the place that quality assurance holds in the activity of a university. Together

with the Bologna Process, the Lisbon Strategy has led to the development and consolidation of universities, with a view to instating a quality culture, to providing confidence in educational services, as well as transparency and a continuous enhancement of quality [4, 8].

However, there is presently no consensus on a unique definition of quality in higher education, just as there is no unitary system of indicators offering a complete, accurate picture of quality in a university.

1. Quality in higher education

Among the definitions given to quality in higher education, the following stand out:

- *“fitness for purpose”* – describes the extent to which universities are capable of meeting their standards and of fulfilling their declared or implicit mission. This implies the existence, at university level, of mechanisms meant to make sure it constantly meets its objectives, within the framework of its declared purpose: that of conveying and assessing perfection. This definition acknowledges both the diversity of assumed missions in higher education, and its importance in the general education system;
- *“value for money”* – offers the possibility of calculating a series of indicators such as: drop-out rate, the ratio between the number of students and of teaching staff, etc. This definition is associated with an increase in institutional autonomy, in the context of enhanced transparency and better fund management;
- *exceptional or outstanding*
- *excellence, or maintaining the highest standards*, established on the basis of benchmarking criteria;
- *educational process of creating a “good quality product”*, obtained by defining a set of minimal standards;
- *transformation, as an increase in student skills* (adding value, as a key objective of the educational process) [1];
- *“a transforming process by means of which the students’ perception of the world is changed via the learning process”*;
- *“a lasting process meant to relatively even out and consolidate / enhance values, beliefs, customs, traditions and practices that the university shares with its students, generation after generation”*;
- *“a relation between university and society”*;
- *“in the long run, quality has to be looked on as practice, use and experience”*. [2]

In Table 1, a summary is presented of the directions which have led to the definitions of quality in the 90ies.

Directions in defining quality in higher education

Table no. 1

Dominant formal meanings of 'quality' in the early 1990s	Situated perceptions of 'quality' of front-line academics: post-1990s
Quality as 'perfection' or 'consistency'	Quality as 'failure to close the loop'
Quality as 'value for money'	Quality as 'burden'
Quality as 'total quality'	Quality as 'lack of mutual trust'
Quality as 'management commitment'	Quality as 'suspicion of management motives'
Quality as 'culture change'	Quality as 'culture of getting by'
Quality as 'peer review'	Quality as 'impression management' and 'game playing'
Quality as 'transforming the learner'	Quality as 'constraints on teamwork'
Quality as 'fitness for purpose'	Quality as 'discipline and technology'
Quality as 'exceptional' or 'excellence'	Quality as 'ritualism and tokenism'
Quality as 'customer satisfaction'	Quality as 'front-line resistance'

Source: Newton, 2002 [3]

Out of the multitude of criteria by means of which quality in higher education is described, we can conclude that there is no definition, but we all recognize it when we find it, as a result, not an action, and we also recognize that "quality is a never-ending journey".

Regardless of the definition ascribed to quality, a consensus has been reached in the international academic communities as to [2]:

- attaining and maintaining the highest possible standards, proved by mechanisms of identifying and meeting social needs;
- a commitment to the systematic identification of opportunities, of strong suits and weak areas;
- the efficient use of resources;
- renewing the education curricula and teaching methods;
- developing permanent programs of staff specialization and training;
- the capacity to adjust rapidly to the needs of students and other interested parties;
- the elaboration of realistic assessment procedures;
- supplying adequate financial resources.

2. Quality assurance in higher education

At the European level, quality has always been the center of attention, being regarded as one of the success factors of the Bologna process. Its importance has increased with each meeting of the line ministers (Prague 2001, Berlin 2003, Bergen 2005) [4].

Once the *European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education* appeared, what is referred to as quality in higher education has acquired an ever clearer

shape. However, attention was not focused on the entire quality management system, but only on one of its parts: quality assurance, centered on creating confidence that quality demands shall be met.

The quality assurance system in higher education refers to the mechanism by means of which the university grants, both to the internal clients (employees, students) and to the external ones, confidence that all the conditions are met to attain the assumed standards. It can be defined as a set of policies, systems and processes directed at the maintenance and enhancement of educational quality, relying on constant assessment and comparison between intended results and obtained results, with a view to identifying sources of dysfunctional activities.

Quality assurance was meant to be achieved at three levels: at a primary, institutional level, raising awareness towards achieving quality, towards a quality-oriented culture and creativity projects; at a national, ideal level, by creating a partnership between higher education institutions, government and agencies, with the intention of developing procedures and requirements to assess conformity; and at a European level, aiming at the universities being attested by European institutions, in order to turn these universities into strong competitors to those in the USA, Japan, Singapore, India and China.

The *European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education* include requirements both for internal and external quality assurance within higher education institutions. In the case of internal quality assurance, formal statements are required about the expected practice in a university, regarding: policy and procedures for quality assurance; approval, monitoring and periodic review of programs and awards; assessment of students; quality assurance of the teaching staff; learning resources and student support; information systems and public information [7].

The external quality assurance is assessed on the basis of the following standards: use of internal quality assurance procedures; development of external quality assurance processes; criteria for decisions; processes fit for purpose; reporting; follow-up procedures; periodic reviews; system-wide analyses [7].

Concerns about the Romanian education system have naturally been affected by the conceptual and practical turmoil existent both at the European and the international level.

In Romania, the legislative / normative framework of assuring the quality of educational services in higher education institutions is provided by Law no. 87 / 2006 to approve the Emergency Ordinance on assuring the quality of education no. 75/12.07.2005, by Order No. 3928/21.04.2005 of the Ministry of Education and Research on ensuring the quality of educational services in higher education institutions, as well as by the Methodology of External Evaluation, the standards and reference standards of the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS).

At the national level, quality assurance in education refers to the set of policies, processes and actions of public authorities aimed at maintaining and developing quality in education, nationwide.

According to these normative acts, “quality assurance in education is achieved by means of a group of actions aimed at developing the institutional capacity to elaborate, plan and implement education programs; thus, recipients become confident that quality standards are

met by the education supplying institution. Quality assurance expresses the capacity of a supplying organization to offer education programs, according to the announced standards. It is promoted in order to lead to the continuous enhancement of education quality” [6].

Among the main objectives of quality assurance are the following: supplying information about the functioning of the education system, about results and possible ways to improve them; taking responsibility for creating conditions favorable to attaining quality; maintaining and improving high academic standards; proving a high quality of academic or professional training programs for all students in a higher education institution; developing an institutional culture of quality and of providing real protection to its education recipient – the student.

Therefore, in order to obtain real quality of the educational act, the following aspects are of crucial importance:

- the objectives of the educational act, the competence level and the curricula;
- the study environment, the competence of the teaching staff, of the technical auxiliary staff and the efficiency of work practices;
- the independent assessment of, on the one hand, the didactic and research activity and, on the other hand, the students’ results;
- a functional education system and sufficient financial resources.

Under Romanian law, as well as in the ARACIS Methodology, the assurance of quality in education refers to the following domains: institutional capacity, educational efficiency and quality management; for each of these, standards and criteria are defined.

ARACIS has taken things to the next level by supplying in its methodology, apart from the quality assurance standards compliant to the European ones, a list of performance indicators on the basis of which universities can be assessed.

Due to the nature of the criteria, standards and performance indicators, the focus is not only on the fulfillment of a predefined set of quantitative and qualitative conditions, but also on the deliberate, intended and pro-action commitment of the higher education institution to attain certain performances which effective results can demonstrate.

These standards correspond to the domains and criteria of quality assurance in education, while the performance indicators measure the extent to which an activity has been completed by reference to the standards. The standards are expressed in terms of rules or results and they define the minimal compulsory degree in which an educational activity can be completed (its performance indicators).

Unlike these, the reference standards are those standards which define an optimal level where an activity can be completed by an education supplying organization, relying on the good practices existent at the national, European or international level. These can vary from one educational institution to another; thus, there is the possibility that universities may create their own standards, at the highest possible level, competitive nationally and internationally [11].

However, the quality of the educational process cannot be measured solely by calculating quantitative indicators of the type: number of students per professor, the capacity of lecture

rooms, of the laboratories, libraries etc. There are a series of specific indicators in this domain, among which: the academic, psychological and pedagogical competence of the teaching staff, the capacity to satisfy the social needs and demand, the moral aspects of a university's activity; student satisfaction; the cultural, ethical and social responsibility of a university; employment and labor conditions offered to staff; academic mobility etc. [2]

3. Quality management in higher education

Before 2005, when the "European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education" was adopted in Bergen, the only reference point in the domain of quality in higher education was considered the ISO 9001 standard. This was generically applied to all quality management systems, regardless of the activities carried out in an organization. This offers general principles and requirements leading to the coordination of activities aimed at orienting and controlling an organization in terms of quality [10]. By implementing a quality management system in a university, its capacity to meet objectives in one domain could be assessed; however, the quality of educational services provided in the higher education institution and its capacity to attain the quality level specific to the academic environment could not be assessed.

In order to help education institutions, the ISO IWA 2 standard appeared in 2003: "Quality Management Systems. Guideline for the Application of ISO 9001:2000 in Education" (revised in 2007), adopted as a Romanian standard in 2006. It did not add anything to, did not replace or modify the requirements of ISO 9001: 2000; it was conceived with a view to allowing a clear understanding of the ISO 9001:2000 and ISO 9004:2000 standards' requirements and of the way in which they are implemented in the education area [10].

The reason for adopting this international agreement relies on the fact that education curricula and syllabuses provide subjects to be taught, their short description, such as the assessment method; however, they supply no information about the extent to which they meet the recipients' needs and expectations, in case there is any dysfunctional activity in the educational processes.

The arguments the standard supplies for the implementation of this system in education rely on the following advantages:

- the continuous assessment of the curricula and of educational processes which support training (required by ISO 9001) can ensure the learning process' efficiency;
- internal quality audits guarantee the fact that requirements are fulfilled (proof of the declared achievements), thus supporting the assessment of human performance;
- the implementation of the quality management system is paid once, while its advantages continue indefinitely.

The principles of the quality management system depend on the domain of educational services (not only in higher education), to which other four specific principles are added, all facilitating success: creating learner value, focusing on social value, agility and autonomy.

The quality management system in education must be understood by also taking into account the curriculum, the learning processes system, the organizational structure, the responsibilities, processes and resources that ensure the quality of all activities carried out in education, not only those strictly connected to the teaching act.

According to this standard, the educational organizations should define the processes for quality management system, processes related to their aim, following the provision of the educational services: education design, curriculum development, education delivery and assessment of learning. A list of the processes is provided in the appendix of the standard, so that, according to the provisions of a quality management system, the standard can be applied [10].

Naturally, in this quality management standard in higher education institutions, the requirements of a quality assurance system can be found, as part of the quality management system. By studying the standard's requirements, and also the list of processes specific to education, we discover that the requirements related to the quality assurance system developed in the ARACIS Methodology are also found in some specific requirements and processes in IWA 2:2007; for instance, the ones presented in Table no. 2.

The examples could continue by comparing the requirements of the quality assurance system with the documents filed in accordance with the quality management system (examples of filed documents: complaints, annual self-assessment, control of design and development changes in curricula, course calendar, timetable and prerequisites, exams, tests or paperwork performed by the learner, research contracts etc.). Also, there are similarities between the quality indicators of the two systems, such as: in "Measures", Annex B, in IWA 2:2007, the following examples are provided: satisfaction survey of learners and other identified parties; Number of national and international awards granted to academic personnel; Competencies of the teaching staff; Yearly number of research publications; Success rates, etc.

However, given the fact that the quality management system is wider than the quality assurance system, the relation between the two being that of whole – part, the requirements specific to the first, described in the applicable standard, will exceed those of the second. The following processes (indicators to be calculated, filed documents and instruments to use) can serve as examples of such specific requirements: identifying preventive action, providing security, safety and civil protection services, deciding which measurements will be of value to monitor, measurement of variables related to learners, teaching and support staff, performance outcomes from the quality management system, costs analysis related to the achievement of quality objectives, financially focused methodologies to ensure that the expenditures are justified in relation to the resulting benefits, employee survey and suggestion schemes etc. [10].

Comparison between the requirements of ARACIS quality assurance with the requirements of the IWA 2 quality management system

Table no. 2.

Quality assurance – ARACIS Methodology	ISO IWA 2 Requirements
Domain A: Institutional capacity, Criterion A.2 – Material basis	6 Resource management, 6.4 The work environment in the educational organization, <i>specific processes</i> : „Allocating spaces for classrooms, laboratories, workshop, libraries and other similar spaces”, „Providing library, audiovisual equipment, computers, and other services” etc
Domain C – Quality management, Criterion C2 – Procedures regarding the initiation, monitoring and constant revision of the programs and activities that are carried out.	5. Management responsibility, 5.1 Management commitment in the educational organization, 5.2 The client-oriented approach in the educational organization, 5.4 Planning etc., <i>specific processes</i> : „Designing and developing validation results of curricula or syllabuses”, Designing and developing curricula”, „Developing course material”, „Developing, reviewing and updating study plans and curricula”, „Monitoring and measurement of educational process” etc.

All these provisions, additional to the requirements of a quality assurance system are natural, if we think that IWA 2 was conceived to allow a clear understanding of ISO 9004, which supplies guidelines with a view to taking into account both the effectiveness and the efficiency of a quality management system and, consequently, the potential for enhancing an organization’s performances, paving the way towards excellence models.

4. Excellence in educational services

Although both in European regulations and in national ones, a quality culture is mentioned, all the standards leading to a quality assurance strategy are far from illustrating what quality culture is really about. Quality culture refers to tasks, standards and responsibilities of individuals, units and processes, and to psychological aspects: understanding, flexibility, participation, hopes and emotions [8].

Quality culture is imposed by the exigency level of excellence awards. The Baldrige National Quality Program – Education Criteria for Performance Excellence falls under the category of excellence methods applicable to education institutions. The evaluation framework includes 7 categories: Leadership; Strategic Planning; Customer Focus; Measurement, Analysis, and Knowledge Management; Workforce Focus; Process Management and Results.

This award is based on TQM philosophy and evaluates the whole university and its associated activities (environment, relationships and challenges) from a system perspective. It promotes awareness of performance excellence as an increasingly important element in competitiveness and sharing information about successful performance strategies and the

benefits derived from using these strategies [12]. It helps stimulate educational organizations improve the quality of their activity and it acts as a driving force for a national movement on quality improvement.

Another excellence model which can be used to compare and assess the activity of a university one belongs to, is the one managed by the European Foundation for Quality Management – EFQM; this also lies at the basis of the J.M. Juran Romanian Prize for Quality. The evaluation framework also includes 7 criteria, out of which the first 5 are considered enablers, while the others, results of the organization [13].

Their assessment takes place in different ways. Thus, the element taken into account when assessing enablers is the approach, which has to be well documented; its processes have to be well defined, in accordance with the requirements of the interested parties; it has to be implemented and carried out in a structured, well-planned and accurate manner. The effectiveness of the approach has to be proved by regular measurements, whose results have to be used in order to identify the best practices and enhancement opportunities etc.

The assessment of the results is carried out with a view to: the positive tendencies and the continuity, if it exists, in attaining performances; the targets have to be adequate, they have to be met, while the results have to be close to those of the leading organizations; the obtained results have to be an effect of the approach, they have to reflect relevant domains etc.

As can be seen, on the basis of these models, an educational organization is assessed much more rigorously, and the results of the assessments show indeed the tendency towards all the meanings of quality. We have to show that, when we speak about quality, we have to prove how we do it, how we know we are doing well and how we improve things.

Conclusions

In the domain of educational services in higher education, there is an incoherent outlook on quality, on performance standards and indicators.

The quality management system is more complex than the quality assurance system, leading to better results within a university.

There is more and more talk about a quality culture. It presupposes the acquisition of a certain approach to quality, rather than of a system; it presupposes the focus should be on the student; the student has to be considered not a product or a client, but a partner.

Among other things, quality culture implies the periodic reassessment of the university's mission, values and vision, the personal example set by leaders, interaction with stakeholders, risk management, acknowledgement of the employees' efforts, taking the "best in class" as a role model, etc.

A strong quality culture no longer needs a quality assurance system; it relies on mutual trust among all partners in the educational act; it is no longer implemented; it is built step by step, action by action, until it becomes reality.

Taking into account the complexity of socio-economic life and the dynamic nature of quality (defined in the academic environment through its opposition to non-quality more than through its own description, reflecting various cultural, political, national, regional or global socio-economic outlooks), we believe that universities in Romania need to establish

their own value system; also, their target should go beyond meeting certain imposed criteria; they ought to compare themselves with standards of excellence awards requirements.

Attaining excellence in the entire activity of a university is the only factor which can place it among the first, at an international level, implicitly leading to acknowledgement of the merits of both its professors and its students.

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