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Quality Culture in the Romanian Higher Education

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Abstract

In modern times, the concept of quality of education has undergone a series of transformations so that the universities could better meet the growing expectations of the various members of the society. The objective of our paper is to highlight and analyse important aspects related to the quality culture evolution in the Romanian higher education. In compiling this article, we have used as information sources the Romanian and foreign literature. Also, the content analysis of the Romanian legislation on Romanian education after 1990 was an information support for this material. To reach the purpose of the study, we have used as research methods the analysis and synthesis and conducted a reflection type study. We conclude that there has been a shift in the quality culture in the Romanian higher education in the last twenty years, following the European and international trend of passage from quality definition, assurance and guarantee from inside the university to outside it.

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1. Problem Statement

Useful knowledge presents itself in two different forms: “propositional knowledge – that describes very natural phenomena, including scientific and epistemological approach/prescriptive knowledge, which suggest how this knowledge can be applied, meaning full instructions on necessary activities. The purpose of a society based on knowledge is to build an interactive link (feedback) between this type of knowledge (Butnariu and Milosan, 2012)”. (Barbat, 2013, p. 186). *Educational capital* has two distinct forms: “on one hand, there are the abilities acquired as a result of participating at the formal educational systems, knowledge confirmed by diplomas; on the other hand, there are any other knowledge and abilities that have been acquired during the life time, by personal efforts or by contacts

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with experts in different fields finalized with knowledge gains as a result of assimilating the knowledge received by interaction with them” (Popovici (Barbulescu), 2012). Introduced in the sixth decade of the 20th century in the U.S., *the concept of insuring quality* has also expanded to *education*. The term “*quality*” refers to “performances that an organization providing services can achieve and arises from the contribution of all activities directly or indirectly related to the conception and development of the service” (Pițurcă & Popovici, 2011). In modern times, the concept of *quality of education* has undergone a series of transformations so that universities could better meet the growing expectations of the various members of society among whom being and working. *Education quality* is defined as a set of characteristics of a study program and its provider which meet beneficiaries’ expectations and quality standards. Under the nowadays approach, *quality* is directly related to learning outcomes: knowledge level, attitudes, beliefs, values, general skills and competences. *Culture* represents a very important factor for progress, the word “culture” being most commonly used in three basic senses:

- “An integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behaviour that depends upon the capacity for symbolic thought and social learning”;
- “The set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes a population, community, institution, organization or group”;
- “Excellence of taste in the fine arts and humanities, also known as high culture” (Cristea & Popa, 2013). The cultural capital “[...] underlies the human and social capital, describes the potential of a group or society and defines the culture of progress / stagnation / regress” (Cristea & Popa, 2013).

Society has accepted the universities’ “ivory tower” attitude until about thirty years ago, being pleased with the quality assurance inside the university. *But in the late 1970’s, in different European countries and on other continents the first accrediting bodies have occurred. Higher education quality has thus become to be defined and guaranteed not by the university, but outside it. Accreditation in higher education* is a final process, which aims at measuring the quality of the education of the higher education institution, based on criteria, standards and indicators. It leads to the modification of the status of specialization, faculty or institution, in this case the university (Pițurcă & Popovici, 2011). *In Romania, accreditation* is a multifunctional process that has been imposed in education, generated by the creation of private universities. This process characterizes only the post-communist era, not having existed ever before in our country, due to the inexistence of the private higher education in Romania prior to 1990.

2. Purpose of Study

The objective of our paper is to highlight and analyses important aspects related to *the quality culture evolution in the Romanian higher education* in the last twenty years. From the three definitions of the concept of *culture* quoted before, we have used the second one: “The set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes a population, community, institution, organization or group”. We have applied it to higher education institutions.

3. Methods

In compiling this article, we have used as information sources the Romanian and foreign literature. Also, the content analysis of the Romanian legislation on Romanian education after 1990 was an information support for this material. To reach the purpose of the study, we have used as research methods *the analysis and synthesis* and conducted a reflection type study.

4. Quality Culture Evolution in the Romanian Higher Education

The Romanian higher education has been following the European and international trend of passage from quality definition, assurance and guarantee from inside the university to outside it. In this purpose, in 1993, *The National Council for Academic Evaluation and Accreditation (N. C. A. E. A.)* was established by the Law no. 88/1993. It represented *the first accrediting body* and it was seen at the time as a bold initiative, a pioneering action at European level. On the other hand, *the establishment of a national accreditation authority was an urgent need in Romania.*

Amid the legislative vacuum of that time, a large number of companies have stated that they deal with providing higher education study programs. At that time, the criteria and standards for the coordination of private initiative in higher education were lacking. In the public sector, initiatives were present, as well, so that, in a short period of time, there were a number of new universities. The simple criteria and standards setting for the establishment of new higher education entities, possibly through a government decision, could not have provided in the historical and social context of the post-December period the compliance with those minimum requirements for guaranteeing a good quality education. In 2005, *The National Council for Academic Evaluation and Accreditation (N. C. A. E. A.)* was replaced by *the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (R. A. Q. A. H. E.)*, established by the Government Emergency Ordinance no. 75/2005, which has since been providing monitoring, evaluation and accreditation for institutions and curricula. *The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (R. A. Q. A. H. E.)* has the difficult task of demonstrating, by criteria, standards and performance indicators, by procedures of interaction with the higher education entities and by its conduct that it is a modern European institution, which promotes transparency, fairness, practicality and professional ethics. The recognition by *R. A. Q. A. H. E.* of some European reference standards for universities, in addition to the national ones imposed by it, is an evidence of its modern conduct, in comparison with the rigid approach of the former accrediting body. In the context of the shared concern of governments for growth, competitiveness and convergence of income, employability of graduates of all cycles of education becomes a priority for *the reform of European universities encouraged by the Bologna Process*. For contributing to the progress of the Romanian society, there should be no discrimination in the higher education quality assurance process. The assurance of quality in the Romanian higher education is mandatory for producing very-well prepared graduates in the future and a condition for the integration on the labour market of the national, European and international community. The indicator represented by the integration on the labour market of higher education graduates within a period of eighteen months should receive a special attention, as it indicates the quality of education, the correlation between the quality of education and the labour market (Pițurcă & Popovici, 2011; Popovici (Barbulescu), 2012). Most affected by the poverty in Romania are working people who work on their own and those unpaid persons who are part-time employed, employees with temporary employment contracts, employed persons with low education and the households where work intensity is reduced. To reduce poverty, it is necessary to intensify the efforts to increase the educational level of Romanian people, especially its quality, so that through higher education to increase the Romanian inhabitants' chances to integrate on the labour market, to have an effective and decent job (Herman, 2013, pp. 165-166). The results of the statistical-economic analysis carried out in a research (Herman, 2012), based on the data recorded in Romania, between 2000 and 2010, points out the positive influence exerted by the education level, especially higher education level, on the labour market. The study confirms that "a better-educated population, with a qualification corresponding to the needs of the labour market, is characterized by higher employment rates and implicitly lower unemployment ones." Therefore, measures must be taken for increasing the Romania population's education level. *Assuring the quality of Romanian education, especially of the higher education*, is very important in this direction. *The quality of Romanian education, especially of the higher education*, of university management can be understood only in close connection to the changes and transformations that took place in post-revolutionary Romania. Following this event, the entire Romanian society was subject to a major interest and reform, restructuring and social renewal process. This was normal and necessary, as it made the transition from a closed, anti-democratic social system to a new one, open to development, based on new principles and values, quite opposed to the other. Education itself, with all its forms, systems and sub-systems, from primary, gymnasium, professional, to its final form, higher education, could not be excluded from this process of social renewal and restructuring (Pițurcă & Popovici, 2011). *The Romanian higher education* reorganization, since the 2005-2006 academic year, in the three successive cycles of study recommended by the Bologna Process, the liberalization of the access to education in the first cycle of university studies and its transformation into mass higher education, as well as the openness towards internationalization of youth university training are undeniable realities in Romania. In this context, *education quality assurance* has significantly enriched its sphere. Quality management inside the Romanian universities, as well as external factors, such as the competition between accredited providers and the need to assure the transparency and reliability of the information circulated by the suppliers of the same type of study programs, the need to make the academic qualifications, expressed by the learning results, not only inside academia, but also outside the university, understood have imposed the successive

change of the way to understand and operationalize *the Romanian higher education quality assurance*. *The Bologna Process and the Lisbon 2000 Agenda* have been catalysts of this update concern and European compatibility making of quality assurance theory, procedures, methodologies and institutional practices. *The “Europe 2020 Strategy”* aims at achieving a growth which is smart, but also sustainable and inclusive, through more effective investments in education, research and innovation (Popovici (Barbulescu), 2012). According to the European Commission’s website, *the “Europe 2020 Strategy”* refers to the supply of an economic growth which should be:

- *intelligent*, through more effective investments in education, research and innovation;
- *sustainable*, due to a decisive move towards a low carbon economy and
- *inclusive*, with a strong focus on creating jobs and reducing poverty (European Commission, 2013a).

It must be underlined the importance attached by the European Commission to the employment problem, in order to strengthen social cohesion, for acting towards the priority of *the “Europe 2020 Strategy”*, represented by the economic growth which is favourable to social inclusion. So, the first of the five main objectives of *the “Europe 2020 Strategy”* is related to employment and its target is that 75 % of the persons from the 20-64 age group should be hired until 2020 (European Commission, 2013b). *In Romania*, the average employment rate is lower than the EU employment rate, being of 57.4 %, and the discrepancies between men and women are wider: 65.7 % compared with 52.5 %. With regard to older workers, these differences in employment rates are more significant: only 34.4 % for women, compared with 53 % for men (Voinea et al., 2010). The same authors consider that the objective of *increasing the employment rate* is of capital importance to Romania. In their opinion, this is the most important objective of *the “Europe 2020” Strategy*.

5. Conclusions

In the context of the increasing demands of the society and of the labour market, as well as of the competition among the European and international universities to occupy a good position within the European and international universities rankings has led to *a shift in the quality culture in the Romanian higher education in the last twenty years*. Our paper reveals that, *in the nowadays Romanian quality culture*, internal quality assurance responsibility, external quality assurance evaluation and assuring employability of graduates of all cycles of education represent key priorities of the Romanian higher education during the last decade of the 20th Century, the first decade of the 21st Century and the beginning of the second decade of the 21st Century. We need clear and stable regulations, transparent procedures, effective methodologies that do not allow the expression of arbitrary and pressures outside the scope of scientific professionalism. Only in this way we can make a real screening of the university studies supply and of the study programs providers, as well as a correct ranking based on the value of the study programs from the same field of knowledge. Under these regulations, the link between the volume and quality of the scientific output and the disciplines for which a teacher receives from the academic community the right to teach law must find clear formulation as a criterion, a standard. Perhaps a multi-criteria analysis of this relationship, with rationally assigned weights to each type of connection would be a solution that meets both the goal and the variety of forms in which the influence of high quality scientific research on the quality of teaching in the teaching-learning process of each study program, irrespective of the Bologna studies cycle, manifests itself.

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