

# THE QUALITY OF EDUCATIONAL SERVICES – INSTITUTIONAL CASE STUDY FROM THE ROMANIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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## Abstract

The present paper approaches the topic of the quality of educational services, emphasizing on higher education, as a field of services of large public interest that has high influences at individual, group and society level. The paper starts by looking at the influencing factors for the quality of higher education from the perspective of the regulations and practices at both European and national level. In this context, the internal evaluation of quality at institutional level is a new requirement for higher education institutions in Romania. Part of the evaluation process is represented by the requirement to develop informational data bases. The paper exemplifies the results that can be obtained by monitoring quality and collecting information, and concludes with a set of recommendations for managing quality at institutional level.

## **1. Quality of educational services – regulations and practices in higher education**

Boore (1993, p. 194) defines quality in education at a general level “as representing the standards that have to be met in order to achieve established purposes. At the same time quality assurance in education refers to a mechanism to monitor whether a set of objectives are achieved”. Quality assurance mechanisms include both internal and external processes and bodies. External quality assurance is usually conducted through external bodies, such as the quality assurance agencies. Many countries have now quality assurance agencies and this led to the formation of international network agencies. Such networks of agencies have produced codes of practice and guidelines for its members.

Quality of higher education is a specific field of ensuring quality for educational services. In Europe the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010 “is intended to increase employability, mobility, transparency and comparability of educational systems, as well as competition in order to provide quality services” (ENQA, 2005). Different forms of quality evaluation have been introduced in the field of higher education, as the concept of quality evaluation of academic activities has become an important reference in Europe. Comparability of quality of study programs is a prerequisite for the implementation of the common European Higher Education Area. According to the Commission of European Communities (2003) “improving quality in higher education should focus on three directions: a) ensuring that European universities have sufficient and sustainable resources and use them efficiently; b) consolidating excellence in teaching and research and c) opening up universities to a greater extent to the outside and increase their international activities”.

In May 2005 in Bergen, the ministries of education of Bologna signatory countries decided over the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ENQA, 2005), “standards and guidelines that are divided in three parts: internal quality assurance within higher education institutions, external quality assurance of higher education institutions and external quality assurance of quality assurance agencies”.

Quality in higher education in many countries in Europe is done using both internal and external quality assurance mechanisms. Internal quality assurance is ensured through internal mechanisms of quality monitoring in higher education institutions. External quality assurance is usually ensured through agencies. Traditionally, Romanian higher education institutions did not have internal mechanisms for quality assurance. This only became a requirement recently, starting with 2005, once new principles for external quality assurance in higher education have been introduced.

Generally speaking, there are a number of aspects to be considered when talking about quality assurance at institutional level: the variety of stakeholders in higher education, the multi-aspects of the educational process and others. Harvey and Green (1993, pp. 9-34) stated that “there are more stakeholders within higher education, including government, professional bodies, employers, parents, students, teaching

and non-teaching staff and auditors”. Each stakeholder has his own view of what quality of higher education means to him. It is essential that each stakeholder to be represented as a legitimate voice in the evaluation of higher education quality. For this purpose, Douglas and Douglas (2006, pp. 3-13) suggest “the use of three main ways to monitor service quality in higher education: feed back surveys, inspection via peer observation and mystery customers (students)”. There are different instruments that can be used to identify the views of different stakeholders on quality in higher education.

At the same time, internal quality assurance includes many components, such as inputs, processes and outcomes. “A monitoring process including all three components can ensure a complete and closer to reality picture of the quality in the respective higher education institution” (Jacobs and du Toit, 2006, pp. 303-314).

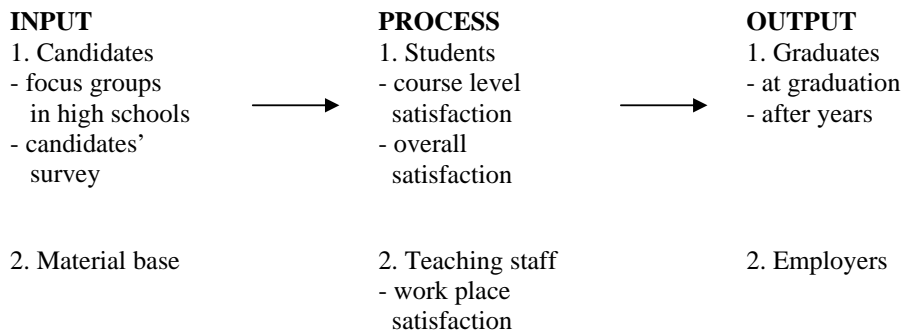
In Romania, according to the methodology of the Romanian Quality Agency in Higher Education (ARACIS), the standards, the criteria and the indicators of performance are meant to be used by both higher education institutions and the agency itself as (ARACIS, 2006): “a) a reference base for quality management in the higher education monitoring of the quality and for externally demonstrating the state of quality assurance in the institutions and b) reference points for ARACIS in the processes of accreditation and external quality evaluation”.

According to the Romanian law (Emergency Governmental Ordinance 75/2005, chapter II, art. 10) there are “three main domains for quality assurance in higher education: institutional capacity, educational efficacy and quality management”. Romanian higher education institutions that wish to obtain authorization, accreditation or the evaluation of the quality of their services will do the best to comply with the required standards in each of the three domains. One of the requirements of the Romanian Quality Agency – ARACIS – is that higher education institutions collect documentation demonstrating their commitment to quality assurance. At present, most of the Romanian higher education institutions are not used to do this.

## **2. Quality management: the role of perceptions about the quality of educational services. Case study**

The present paper focuses discussion on ensuring quality in higher education at institutional level based on an institutional case study – a higher education institution from Bucharest specialized in the economic field. A project was conducted in the institution with the purpose of evaluating the efficiency of higher education in the institution. “The project looked at the efficiency of the educational process in the institution by proposing a series of instruments for monitoring quality of the educational services and by testing these instruments through a number of pilot studies, some of them applied at university level and most of them applied at the level of just one faculty, the pilot faculty” (Nicolescu, 2007, p. 11). The framework proposed for quality monitoring and information gathering at the level of an institution in higher

education with regard to a project implemented by Academy of Economic Studies is the following:



**Figure 1:** Framework for quality monitoring in a higher education institution  
**Source:** Nicolescu (2007, p. 11)

Such a framework allows for a multiple layers perspective, considering some of the main stakeholders of the educational process: the students, the teachers, the employers, the external quality assurance agency, and the funding body. Surveys have been conducted with a number of the main stakeholders during the period 2006-2007.

We will present some of the perceptions of different interest groups about the studied institution, seen from different perspectives. We will focus on students, graduates and employers as main beneficiaries of the educational services.

A survey was conducted with all **students** from the third year in the pilot faculty in the academic year 2006-2007. The questionnaire was distributed at an exam and the total number of responses was 486 persons, representing 98% response rate. The survey illustrates the relationship between the importance given by these to different aspects in the faculty activity and the perception over the quality of those aspects in the pilot faculty.

**Table 1:** Importance versus quality of different aspects of the educational process as seen by students

Aspects related to the activity of a higher education institution	Importance	Perception over quality in pilot faculty
Scientific and professional content of courses and seminars	4.14	3.41
Teaching methods	4.31	3.06
Student evaluation methods	3.77	3,09
Administrative services (secretarial, financial)	3.21	2.13
Teaching staff prestige	3.32	3.39
Rewards (others than grades)	3.13	2.36

Importance: 1 = little importance and 5 = high importance;

Quality: 1 = very low and 5 = very high

We can notice that students consider the teaching methods as being the most important aspect (4.31), followed by the scientific and professional content (4.14), both having high and very high relevance. On the third place as importance, we can find the student evaluation methods with an average score of 3.77. By comparison, in terms of quality at the pilot faculty, the aspect perceived as having the highest quality (medium towards good) was the scientific and professional content of courses and seminars (3.41), aspect considered important by students. On the second place as perceived quality was the teaching staff prestige (3.39) and on the third place the student evaluation methods (3.09). The teaching methods seen as having the highest importance among the activities of a higher education institution have been perceived as having a medium quality at the pilot faculty, being ranked on the fourth place out of six.

Another survey has been conducted with the **graduates** of a whole graduating cohort at the pilot faculty (530 persons) in their final year. The questionnaire has been distributed in the week 10-14 July 2006 at the same time with the registration for the final exam for graduation. The total response rate was 91.1% with a number of 483 valid answers. One of the survey's objectives was to identify the extent to which a number of abilities have been developed for graduates during their study years in comparison with the utility of those abilities at the work place. Such a relationship illustrates the quality of the educational process from the perspective of their application at the work place.

On a 1 to 5 scale, graduates considered that the theoretical scientific knowledge has been stimulated and developed the most during their study period (3.85), followed by adaptability (3.80) and the ability to work independently (3.72). The abilities appreciated as being the least developed by the higher education program discussed were loyalty and integrity (3.26), decision making capacity (3.51), concentration power (3.53), as they were evaluated at a medium to good quality level.

Comparing the contribution of studies for personal development and the utility of those aspects at the work place, it is noticed a discrepancy between the two, as the aspect appreciated as being developed the most by university studies, namely the theoretical scientific knowledge (3.85) is seen by graduates as the least useful at the work place (3.22). However, besides this only extreme, the faculty is seen as having a major contribution in the development of a number of abilities perceived to be very useful at the work place: communication skills (utility – 4.3/skill development – 3.69), the adaptability (utility – 4.22/skill development – 3.80) or self esteem (utility – 4.1/skill development – 3.57). It can be appreciated that the studied faculty corresponds to a certain extent to the expectations of its graduates, as they consider that they have developed during their university studies abilities that are required at the work place. Their main dissatisfaction remains the insufficient accumulation of practical knowledge and abilities during university studies.

**Table 2:** Aspects developed through the higher education program and their utility at the work place (descending order)

Aspects	The degree to which the study program contributed to their development	Aspects	Utility at the work place
Theoretical scientific knowledge	3.859	Communication skills	4.309
The adaptability	3.803	Adaptability	4.225
The ability to work independently	3.729	Self-esteem	4.137
Communication skills	3.694	Ability to solve problems	4.091
Team-working abilities	3.671	Perseverance	4.059
Ability to solve the problems	3.580	Capacity to make decisions	4.046
Learning ability	3.573	Team – working abilities	4.042
Self-esteem	3.571	Power to concentrate	4.036
Perseverance	3.555	Ability to work independently	3.932
Power to concentrate	3.538	Learning ability	3.902
Capacity to make decisions	3.518	Loyalty and integrity	3.879
Loyalty and integrity	3.267	Theoretical scientific knowledge	3.228

Degree of contribution to personal development: 1 = developed to a small extent by the study program and 5 = developed to a large extent by the study program;

Utility at the work place: 1 = very low utility and 5 = very high utility

Another survey was conducted with 472 firms and institutions that employed graduates of ASE. The survey was conducted during academic year 2006-2007 and comprised a convenience sample. **Employers** appreciated the degree to which the graduates of the studied higher education institution corresponded to their requirements. They evaluated positively all aspects regarding the graduates, but the most appreciated was their capacity to accumulate new knowledge during training programs (4.33), followed by their IT knowledge (4.22).

Comparing the opinions of students and graduates with the ones of employers, it can be noticed that they have to a large extent similar types of expectations of higher education services, but the degree to which they emphasize different aspects varies. Graduates and students emphasize the most on getting practical knowledge, skills and abilities (and they perceive these should be acquired through their studies: capacity to assimilate new knowledge, capacity to work in teams, written and oral communication), while employers emphasize the most when selecting employees, on moral and psychic qualities of the individual (that are actually less related to being acquired through studies). However, practical abilities are also important for employers being on the second place on employers' requirements, but their acquisition is preferred to take place via professional experience, rather than university studies.

**Table 3:** The degree to which graduates of the studied institution fulfill the employers' requirements

Skills required by graduates	Level to which graduates correspond to employers' requirements (average)
Professional knowledge	3.92
Foreign languages	3.89
PC knowledge	4.22
Written and oral communication skills	4.03
Capacity to solve problems	3.82
Capacity to work in teams	4.09
Creativity	3.66
Capacity to assimilate new knowledge in training programs	4.33

1= corresponds to a low extent; 5 = corresponds to a large extent

From evaluating the quality of higher education services by considering the opinions of the main higher education beneficiaries, result a number of general conclusions with implications for the quality management as also found by others (Nicolescu and Păun, 2009, pp. 23-32):

- a) Students' expectations are rapidly changing along with the emergence of a consumer service orientation in higher education resulting from political, economic and social changes. Expectations shift from the acquisition of mainly operational competencies towards the acquisition of generic skills;
- b) Providers of higher education services should consider the graduates' and the employers' opinions, as main beneficiaries of higher education in order to be able to improve their offers and activities and compete successfully;
- c) Higher education institutions and employers need to develop a more strategic relationship in order to better coordinate their needs mutually. In this way it can be ensured a systematic confrontation of academic knowledge with future professional tasks;
- d) Higher education institutions have to create new models of curriculum, teaching and student's evaluation strategies, in order to provide students along operational competencies also transferable skills, so that to ensure their survival in the new changing workplaces.

### 3. Conclusions

Quality in higher education at institutional level can not be ensured unless regular monitoring information based systems are put in place, so that decision is taken based on documented and recent information that takes into account the transformations in the requirements and expectations of the multiple educational stakeholders.

Therefore, using the results of different surveys conducted in a higher education institution in Romania, and the international good practices in the field, the present paper proposes a number of policy recommendations at institutional level. These

recommendations come to complete others' proposals (Nicolescu, 2008, pp. 107-128) for action in order to improve quality in higher education. They can be regarded as the main steps in a process of creating a quality monitoring system in a higher education institution:

- to promote a process of change towards a culture of quality by using sanctions, incentives and formal guarantees applied to obtain the desired behavior at individual, collective and organizational level;
- to formulate and implement quality assurance goals, strategies and plans, in other words to formalize things about quality;
- to set up quality assurance units at university level and quality assurance collectives at faculty level so that formal structures and processes to be conducted;
- to convince and motivate people to commit themselves to improve the quality of their jobs;
- to create regular data collection mechanisms from various stakeholders: a) to conduct student feed back surveys in order to identify students' satisfaction; b) to analyze statistically teaching performance; c) to analyze students' progression rates; d) to monitor learning academic progress and success by introducing student tracking practices. This would encourage regularly report on student development, progress and success; e) to collect graduate employment and first destination data on a regular basis; and f) to regularly obtain feed back from the market, namely from employers and the way they perceive the knowledge and skills of the graduates;
- to create liaison forums with both alumni and employers in order to regularly debate the relevance and the quality of the studying programs;
- to introduce means for public acknowledgement of academic staff with good teaching performance (formal reward, prizes etc.);
- to create a central department to deal in an integrative way with the "student experience", including all aspects of the student's life;
- to disseminate the quality evaluation's results, first of all to the internal audiences through internal information systems and secondly externally by publishing on university web sites or in documents designated to the public;
- to introduce periodical overall internal reviews at institutional level in order to monitor quality; and
- to use all information collected for decision making purposes. What happens to the findings after they have been collected is crucial, because if they do not feed back into the quality practices, they are collected in vain. Jacobs and du Toit (2006) also drew the attention over such risks in higher education institutions.

The existence of a system of quality assurance at university level is very important, but equally important it is its implementation, as there is the risk, that the system itself to become more prevalent than the goal of assuring quality (Anderson, 2006), as the system could transform in a number of ritual and practices meaningless on their own. It is the responsibility of higher education institutions themselves to lead the



implementation of internal quality assurance that would be compliant with national (ARACIS) and European (ENQA) standards and guidelines. “A modern management strategy is the key in the new competitive context, where a functional redesigning is a necessity, as to set up a dynamic equilibrium at the crossroads between universities and economic, social and political environment” (Brătianu and Lefter, 2001).

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