Democratisation, Marketisation and Changing Power Relations

- A review of the academic literature on quality assurance in higher education-

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1. Introduction

The Romanian two-part film 'Tales from the Golden Age' (2009) portrays legends from the 'golden age' of communism. The anthology film turns the propaganda of the last 15 years of Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime into dark comedy by showing folk tales of survival during the mid-1980s. One of the tales recounts a legendary inspection of a village in preparation of a party motorcade passing through the next day. The whole village is nervous for the preparation and receives detailed instructions from two inspectors. They are to put up the right banners with the right slogans, prepare inordinate amounts of food and have white pigeons ready to fly when the guests arrive. Even if these are not available, other birds shall be made to fly as white pigeons. In a comical sequence of events, the inspectors end up getting drunk with the villagers, and finally both inspectors and villagers find themselves stuck in a merry-go-round for the night It is said that they were still spinning when the motorcade passed by in the morning.

It is not impossible to draw a parallel between the folk tale and current debates about quality assurance in Romanian higher education. Quality assurance is clearly connected to expectations of state officials (both foreign and domestic), while 'official experts', in turn, have a hard time to untangle the relations between administration, inspection and universities. This research project (realising that it is funded by an international organisation) is aimed at piercing through exactly that complexity, however. It addresses the research question *'to what extent is internal quality assurance in Romanian higher education fit for purpose?'* In answering this question, it will try not to fall into the trap of confusing folk tales for reality. Rather, it will try to disentangle the meanings and operations of quality assurance in (theoretically-driven) empirical research. This is by no means an easy task, and this – perhaps rather lengthy - literature review aims primarily to conceptualise the issues at hand.

A secondary objective of this literature review is more practical. It tries to address some gaps in the academic literature with a view to publishing the results of the project in a scientific journal. Indeed, little work has been published on quality assurance in Romania, at least in the English language. While some work has been dedicated to 'Central and Eastern Europe' as a region (Schwarz and Westerheijden, 2007, Dobbins and Knill, 2009, Kwiek, 2008), these overviews are usually built on rather far-stretched assumptions about the commonality between the countries in the post-communist space (Scott, 2002). Moreover, when Romania has been included in these overviews, only scant attention has been paid to the practical functioning of quality assurance (Beju, 1993, Tomusk, 2000, Temple and Billing, 2003).

The main argument presented here is that quality assurance has a political history and, as such, it is a highly contested field. This argument requires some specification. What is interesting about quality assurance is that political debate focuses on the *technique* of this instrument, rather than its general purpose (Lascoumes and Le Gales, 2007). Indeed, various techniques of doing quality assurance are being debated in the political sphere, while the underlying philosophy is hardly ever questioned. This has led to a complex vocabulary of 'newspeak' around the issue including words such as 'audits', 'performance', 'standard-setting', 'accreditation', and so on, that can in themselves be rather meaningless (Harvey and Green, 1993). As such, the literature will try to sketch an overview over both the political history of quality assurance and the particular techniques that are employed.

The review will start by sketching the 'big debates' in the literature. It will present three main approaches to quality assurance as *'democratisation'*, as *'market-making'* and as *'governmentality'*. These approaches all emphasise different aspects of quality assurance, leading to different questions about its functioning.

Moreover (unlike in the political sphere) these academic approaches do allow us to question its purpose(s). Informed by these debates, then, the review will continue by surveying the existing work on the **political history** of quality assurance in Romania. This analysis will pay particular attention to the dynamic interplay between foreign 'experts' and local elites. Simultaneously, it will summarize the Romanian-language academic literature on quality assurance in order to identify patterns and problems of implementation in recent years. Finally, the literature review will present an overview of different **techniques** of doing quality assurance. The intention will be to present a method to map out the different systems of internal quality assurance that may be in operation in Romania. The last chapter will also discuss the relation between internal and external quality assurance, which may be more complex to grasp from the earlier parts.

2. The academic debate on quality assurance

It may help (or not) that the topic of quality assurance has been widely discussed over the last two decades. This has resulted in several contrasting approaches to understand the rise of quality assurance in European higher education. Broadly, we think that three approaches are most dominant, namely (1) a view of quality assurance as a tool for 'democratisation' of higher education governance, (2) an analysis of quality assurance as a 'market-making' tool that reflects a broader 'neo-liberalisation' of the university sector and (3) an approach that sees quality assurance as a mode of 'governmentality'. Although the classification proposed here is slightly arbitrary, we think that it is useful for the purposes at hand. Moreover, while these approaches may seem to overlap at certain points, an attempt will be made here to contrast them as sharply as possible. In turn, this may sharpen our understanding of why the topic is subject to such fierce debate.

1. Quality assurance as 'democratisation'

The idea of quality assurance as a force to 'democratise' the governance of higher education is prominent in the field of 'higher education studies'. This approach usually separates 'quality assurance' from a long list of alternative control instruments, such as 'quality audits', 'quality control', 'accreditation' or 'quality management'. ***Compared to these other policy instruments, quality assurance is the 'softer' variant that allows a conversation about quality by 'empowering' various 'stakeholders' to have a say about what goes on in the university.*** In this view, '[q]uality assurance is about ensuring that there are mechanisms, procedures and processes in place to ensure that the desired quality, however defined and measured, is delivered' (Harvey and Green, 1993, p. 19). In other words, it is about (re-)assuring the 'public' that quality is an ongoing concern of the governance of higher education.

This strand of literature contributes three important understandings of the rise of quality assurance in higher education. ***First, (monopolistic) power of academics over their profession is seen as outdated***. While universities and academics had progressively obtained political privileges until about the late 1960s, these became the object of both cultural and political attacks (Tapper and Salter, 2000). Although these attacks came from different angle, both the political left and the right challenged the status of universities as 'ivory towers'. As a result, academics have been forced to share their power. The left emphasised the importance of sharing power with 'community members' in the 'democratic university'; the political right introduced the position of 'customers' in the 'entrepreneurial university'. As quality assurance is relatively neutral to the form of power-sharing (i.e. it can function in both the democratic and the corporate university), it has been a popular instrument to achieve this aim (Little and Williams, 2010).

Second, there has been a long line of argument that universities have neglected to teach properly (Parker, 2008). While universities have gone to great lengths to evaluate research (in peer reviews, in decisions on

promotions and so on), they have done less to evaluate their teaching. This discussion has become particularly strong in the era of mass higher education, in which many more social groups have enrolled in universities (Trow, 1973, Scott, 1995, Tapper and Palfreyman, 2010). These new groups of students demand more from universities, while the task of teaching itself has become more complex. Contemporary students may have very diverse wishes about their professors than their predecessors in the 1960s. As such, quality assurance has been constructed as a tool to measure and articulate these wishes, enabling professors to respond to the new demands.

Third, there has been a long-standing argument that rising public costs of higher education have to be matched by great involvement of the democratic polity (Van Vught and Westerheijden, 1994, Dill and Beerkens, 2010). In effect, quality assurance allows governments to get a say in what goes on inside universities. The overriding goal is that this will provide accountability for the increased investments in education, and to 'assure' voters that their money is spent efficiently and effectively.

While powerful in public discourse, the literature on the potential democratisation of higher education through quality assurance often runs into empirical difficulties. For instance, the role of students is typically more approached as that of a consumer, than as that of an equal partner as implied in a democratic discourse (Little and Williams, 2010). As such, it can be questioned whether the participative discourse is more than a veneer for market-like reforms. Moreover, the notion of quality assurance as 'democratisation' sits uneasily with the technocratic language that surrounds the topic. These topics are the subject of another approach, namely that of quality assurance as an instrument of market-making.

2. Quality assurance as an instrument of market-making
The view of quality assurance as a tool for 'market-making' is present in a variety of fields, including economics, public administration and sociology. As such, quality assurance is associated with the general transformation of higher education into a private-sector service that can be bought and sold on the market. ***This strand of literature argues that quality assurance leads to a transformation of academics into 'producers' and of students and the business into 'consumers'*** (Apple, 2005). The development of quality assurance is an essential step in this transformation, as it allows for an articulation of 'voice' instead of the alternative consumer option of 'exit' (Hirschmann, 1970). Importantly, 'voice' is seen to benefit both 'producers' and 'consumers' in the market. The (simplified) example given by Hirschmann (1970) is that parents have an incentive to remove their children from a public school that is declining in quality. Yet, if all quality-sensitive parents leave, the school has no idea what was wrong, which will enter into a vicious circle of quality reduction. Both the children left at the school and the school itself will suffer from this lack of information.

It is in the idea of market-making that 'quality assurance' becomes very much associated with the idea of 'fitness for purpose' (Harvey and Green, 1993). As 'fitness for purpose' is value-neutral, it is almost entirely concerned with the process of measuring and demonstrating how a certain goal is being reached. This is particularly useful within markets, where companies search for a niche for their product but still want to demonstrate that their product is being made through standardised processes. As survival of a university becomes dependent on its market niche, quality assurance is an essential tool to figure out whether the demand in this niche is being satisfied.

The view of quality assurance as an instrument for 'market-making' is embedded in a new philosophy of the public sector. This was most notably in the 'New Public Management' that aimed at importing private

sector management techniques into the art of public administration (Hood, 1995). The reforms carried out under this header changed the role of the state from a 'positive' to a 'regulatory state' (Majone, 1997) that would take a hands-off approach to service delivery. Indeed, the state would 're-invent' itself following the slogan 'from steering to rowing' (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992). *In higher education, this meant that it exchanged an increased managerial autonomy for increased standards on the quality of the output* (Maassen and Van Vught, 1988) Quality assurance would be a key instrument to ensure the three E's of 'efficiency, economy and effectiveness' as well as 'Value for Money' (Pollitt, 1987). The measurement of these values would be done at the level of outcomes, rather than at the level of inputs. This is in slight contrast to the 'democratic' view of quality assurance that underscored the importance of spending taxes wisely from publicly defined objectives. Indeed, the market-view was more interested in quality as a question of returns of investment.

Another opposition to the 'democratisation' literature is that 'market-making' is explicitly aimed at de-politicising the university. Markets are guided by independent regulators who have specialised knowledge, not by politicians who follow the whims of voters (Majone, 1997). The off-loading of political responsibilities to 'quality assurance agencies' has been based on exactly such arguments. Agencies were a 'buffer' between politicians and universities, and would understand the sector better than administrators (Westerheijden, 2007). As a result, political discussions tend to concentrate on the functioning of accountability procedures, rather than on the responsibilities of ministers or universities per se (Power, 1996). In other words, it may be rather difficult for a democratic system to control quality assurance than may be expected by the advocates of democratisation through quality assurance (Flinders, 2008).

The literature on market-making also faces some empirical problems, however. For instance, the global marketplace for higher education seems to be more driven by rankings and league tables than by quality assurance (Marginson, 2006). Moreover, the specific manifestation of 'new public management' in universities is more complex than pure marketization would imply (Bleiklie, 1998). The approach does make some important contributions, however. For instance, the literature tracks the import of ideas about quality assurance initially pioneered in the world of business such as 'Total Quality Management' or the ISO-9000 standard into the world of universities (Pratasavitskaya and Stensaker, 2010). This is relevant, as multiple models of quality assurance are being used in universities around the world. These themes have been taken up in another strand of literature, namely that of quality assurance as 'governmentality'.

3. Quality assurance as 'governmentality'
The literature on quality assurance as governmentality is mostly present in sociology and public administration, and amounts to *a sociological critique of quality assurance practices* (i.e. not of general principles). The term 'governmentality' is a neologism coined by Foucault, contracting the terms 'government' and 'mentality' (Burchell et al., 1991). This approach is perhaps best summarised as a research programme that aims at understanding the shared ways of thinking between the state and its subjects. Importantly, the focus of this research programme is not the general philosophy of the state, but rather the specific power relations embedded in an instrument of governance and their impact on the life of citizens (Rose, 2004). Indeed, what disturbed Foucault about the neo-liberal state was 'the idea of a kind of power which takes freedom itself and the 'soul of the citizen', the life and life-conduct of the ethically free subject, as in some sense the correlative object of its own suasive capacity' (Gordon, 1991, p. 5). In other words, the literature on 'governmentality' tries to problematise the persuasion of citizens that power relations are in their own interest.

There are two main themes here that resonate with the literature on quality assurance. *A first is the changing self-conception of academics and university leaders alike, who seem to conform to quality assurance procedures*. Shore and Wright, for instance, have argued that quality assurance 'has become a vehicle for changing the way people relate to the workplace, to authority, to each other and, most importantly, to themselves' (Shore and Wright, 1999, p. 559). As quality assurance requires academics to review themselves (through self-evaluation, peer-review, etc.), considerable effort has to be made to convince this group of people that this is in their best interest. Similarly, the primary responsibility for quality assurance is with universities, rather than the state. To achieve this, quality assurance is removed from direct political influence; the state speaks of itself as one 'client' among others (Marginson, 1997). Paradoxically, this has not removed government from the picture. Rather, the government is still nominally in control, and has to respond to any crisis in the system by adding more layers of accountability.

Indeed, the *second theme that is addressed in the 'governmentality' literature is the layering of accountability within and on top of universities*. The starting point is the argument by Power (1996, p. 15) that audit is the 'control of control, where what is being assured is the quality of control systems rather than the quality of first order operations'. As a consequence of this, the need for more accountability is never satisfied: in order to review the activities of academics, audit requires another audit, which in turn is based on an audit trail, etc. This may explain why some authors recently expressed their concern about the different levels of quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area:

> 'higher education institutions themselves check whether they have internal quality assurance mechanisms; national/regional quality assurance agencies check whether higher education institutions meet the criteria (either by programme or institutional accreditation); and, subsequently, European organisations monitor the quality assurance agencies. Moreover, at the ministerial meeting in Leuven (2009), a 'fourth layer' was introduced: EQAR should be externally evaluated' (Huisman and Westerheijden, 2010, p. 65).

Whereas the governmentality literature has a lot of potential to explain the rise and proliferation of quality assurance mechanisms, it may have its weaknesses as well. *Importantly, it tends to be rather fatalistic in nature, attributing little faith in the political realm to curb excessive auditing practices.* This theme has recently surfaced in a literature that calls for a debate about the democratic reviews of regulation (Flinders, 2008). Moreover, it has little to say about the differences between types of audit, and whether some may actually be more 'light-touch' or matching with the professional self-identity of academics than others. As such, even if it raises many interesting questions, it remains one perspective on quality assurance amongst others.

The implications of these three perspectives

It should be noted that the three approaches sketched above present 'ideal-types' or general philosophies of quality assurance. Indeed, there is no country or a higher education institution where these approaches match the current practices. As such, these approaches should be seen as avenues for investigation by raising key questions about the rise and practice of quality assurance. The following questions could be inferred that are particularly relevant for an investigation of quality assurance in Romanian higher education:

1. *How has the introduction of quality assurance in Romanian universities been legitimised?*

2. *Who is in control of quality assurance? Which different groups are involved and what role do they play?*
3. *Which approach is most useful to understand the rise of quality assurance in Romania?*
4. *What role has quality assurance played in regulating or creating a market for higher education? Is there a difference in approach to public and private universities?*
5. *To what extent are university leaders, managers, academics and students convinced of the value of quality assurance? Is there resistance to quality assurance and how is this expressed?*
6. *How does institutional quality assurance relate to other accountability mechanisms? Is there a proliferation of these mechanisms?*

3. The rise of quality assurance in political historical context

3.1 The debate about quality assurance in English-language sources
It is important to realise that quality assurance neither is a Romanian invention, nor has it been imported from a specific foreign context. It is therefore hard to speak of a specific 'Romanian' project of quality assurance. Indeed, there has been a dynamic between importing and translating foreign ideas that in which the interaction between foreign 'experts' and local elites plays a key role. This is addressed in the literature on *'policy transfer'* and the role of *'transnational élite networks'*. As analysts of policy transfer have noted, *it matters who disseminates these ideas, how these ideas are constructed and who translates these ideas into practices* (Marsh and Dolowitz, 2000, Evans, 2009). In the case of quality assurance, an important role is being played by expert or elite networks of policy-makers who meet their foreign counterparts and develop a shared purpose (Stone, 2001).

Romania was the first country of the 'East' to engage with the policy of quality assurance in the early 1990s (Tomusk, 2000, p. 176). After the revolution, the provision of higher education was liberalised and new private institutions quickly mushroomed. Like in other countries in Eastern Europe, the 'massification' of enrolment and 'privatisation' went hand in hand (Kwiek, 2008). The new policy-makers were relatively quick to respond, however, and organised a series of seminars with foreign experts. Of particular importance was a World Bank project that prioritised the development of quality assurance and accreditation in the country (1994). After the consultations, the government decided that an accreditation scheme would be most befitting the new challenge of ridding Romanian higher education from the 'bad' programmes and (later) 'bad' institutions (Beju, 1993). The explicit aims of the first scheme were rather broad, including the improvement of quality standards, solving the legal status of private institutions (by letting them follow quality standards) as well as promote 'internationalisation' by following western policy practices (ibid, p. 113).

To this end, Romania took the 'Dutch' model of quality assurance as its example, but gave this system a local flavour (Tomusk, 2000). The Dutch system of quality assurance had been created in the mid-1980s after considerable public debate about the relationship between universities and the state. This resulted in a grand bargain that exchanged university autonomy for a public evaluation scheme: a sort of 'Janus-Head' that gave the universities a semi-autonomous position towards the state (Maassen and Van Vught, 1988). Whereas the Dutch universities used their autonomy to establish a hegemony over the new evaluation scheme, Romanian higher education went down another path, however, namely that of **strict state controls**. A pseudo-independent agency was created, the CNEAA, which was to evaluate all public and private universities on the basis of a long list of quality standards (Beju, 1993).

The result of the first scheme was that it functioned as a sharp axe towards private institutions and as a blunt pocket knife towards public institutions (Tomusk, 2000). In effect, a university that fulfilled all the bureaucratic criteria gained a lot of autonomy (and had to do practically nothing to improve its standards of teaching), while those who did not comply were simply removed from the scene. In other words, the CNEAA was 'effectively in the control of the élite institutions' (Temple and Billing, 2003, p. 255). The élite institutions claimed that a liberal (as opposed to a communist) government had little to say about how they should teach their students. Moreover, both the public and the surviving private universities were able to enrol many more fee-paying students that would have otherwise gone to the private sector. This coalition between ideas and interests blocked any potential for reform, although several attempts were made (Marga, 2001).

Finally, in 2005, the government decided to establish a new quality assurance agency, **ARACIS**, by ministerial ordinance, rather than by parliamentary law (ARACIS, 2009). The aim of ARACIS was to be more active in quality-improvement, rather than simply developing long checklists. Moreover, it was to have a 'holistic' approach to quality, in cooperation with an agency that would evaluate pre-university education (ibid, p. 4).

This reflected a change in foreign involvement as well as a shift in local actors. In 1999, Romania had signed the Bologna declaration that started to promote a more improvement-oriented view of quality assurance. The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) had been established as part of this process, advocating for European standards in quality assurance. In 2005 (the same year that ARACIS was created), a document was negotiated between ENQA, the European University Association, the European Students' Union (ESU) and Eurashe[1] that created a set of European standards and guidelines on higher education (Bologna Process, 2005).

Meanwhile, the European University Association (EUA) promoted a specific view of quality assurance. It developed the notion of a 'quality culture' that aimed to 'ensure a grass-roots acceptance, to develop a compact within the academic community through effective community building, as well as a change in values, attitude and behaviour within an institution' (EUA, 2006, p. 6). It involved several Romanian universities in its European projects. In 2011, the EUA was even invited to carry out a review of all 90 universities in Romania.

The different views of quality assurance of these organisations reflect in different engagements with these topics. After only a few years of operation, ARACIS invited first the EUA, then ESU and finally ENQA to carry out three successive reviews of its operations on the basis of these standards and guidelines (EUA, 2008, ESU, 2008, ENQA, 2009). All these reports put a different emphasis on the meanings and methods of quality assurance, sometimes in line with the theoretical debate outlined above. Yet, all these reviews emphasise the important task of ARACIS as challenging established social and professional relations in Romanian higher education. This is not an easy task: two authors recently argued that for this reason, 'quality assurance seems particularly problematic in the re-contextualization of the Bologna Process in Romania' (Wodak and Fairclough, 2010, p. 36).

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[1] An organisation representing the interests of non-university higher education institutions.

3.2. Romanian Literature on Quality Assurance in Higher Education

The creation of ARACIS also coincides with an increased academic interest in quality assurance processes among Romanian scholars. In fact, one can identify several university professors, researchers and PhD students who work closely with the agency and publish academic writings on the quality of Romanian higher education more broadly. Their backgrounds are diverse, ranging from sociology to politics and educational sciences. On the whole, this emerging literature can be characterised as gradually developing from early descriptive writings (Miroiu et al., 2007; Vlăsceanu et al., 2009), to recent more analytical (Vlăsceanu et al., 2011) and even theory-inspired ones (Păunescu et al., 2011; Păunescu et al., 2012). So far, systematic empirical research was principally carried out in the context of **ACADEMIS**[2], an EU-funded project conducted by ARACIS during 2009-2011. ***The project's aim was to collect quantitative and qualitative data on several dimensions of quality in the Romanian higher education landscape, on the basis of a comprehensive annual survey of academics, students and employers – considered the main beneficiaries of the system*** (ARACIS, n.d.). The output of the project included two annual 'barometers on quality' (Vlăsceanu et al., 2009; Vlăsceanu et al., 2011) and a final 'stocktaking' type of analysis (Păunescu et al., 2011). Some of the main findings are briefly summarised below.

The first 'barometer on quality', using data from 2009, (Vlăsceanu et al., 2009) abounded in statistical information throughout its 300 pages (historical, demographic, survey results). It proposed a comprehensive analysis of the higher education system according to three types of 'quality' indicators: input, process and results (which included output, outcomes and feedback). These were ranked into 'traffic lights' categories - positive, moderate, and negative - according to their perceived degree of performance. The scaling was based on the perceptions of specialists in the Bologna Follow Up Group in 2009, Romanian employers, academics and students included in the survey, as well as on ARACIS standards. Overall, the study concluded that higher education in Romania was of a 'moderate' quality (in normative terms) and focused heavily on input indicators (human resources, content of courses, material elements etc). Furthermore, there were many discrepancies in the perceptions of quality between academics and students on the one hand, and between employers and the academic community on the other. More specifically, academics had a much more positive image than students of the education process in general (with regard to content, organisation and resources) and of the degree to which universities prepare students for the labour market. By comparison, employers were less convinced by the overall quality of graduates, and emphasised different sets of skills and knowledge demanded by the market. As a result, there was generalised confusion as to what quality meant (ibid, pp. 30-38). In relation to ARACIS, the agency was given credit for enforcing an 'external' quality assurance system, albeit in a uniform manner. In contrast, 'internal' quality assurance was seen as lagging behind because universities lacked the institutional infrastructure to implement it (ibid, p. 17).

The second "barometer on quality", using data from 2010 (Vlăsceanu et al., 2011) included several analytical elements. The report outlined a tentative theoretical framework guiding the research – institutionalist analysis. The purpose was to focus on rules, procedures and structures in relation to quality assurance implementation, the autonomy of universities and their 'ways of life'. Moving beyond meanings of 'quality' in higher education to quality assurance systems and their characteristics, the study put forward a number of interesting findings.

As shown in Table 1 below, problems in quality assurance implementation primarily stemmed from the legal framework in place, which rewarded formal compliance to external requirements of ARACIS to the

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[2] In fact, the study by Miroiu et al. (2007) is the only work published outside the ACADEMIS project.

detriment of an endogenous development of quality assurance systems. Consequently, universities did not develop 'sui-generis' models of internal quality assurance in line with their institutional needs (which would have been 'fit for purpose'), but simply copied the model employed by ARACIS (ibid, p. 25). Higher education institutions thus became homogeneous – very similar in terms of their mission, programmes provided, and procedural mechanisms used to assess 'quality'. Following institutionalist terminology, the authors describe this situation as 'structural isomorphism' (similarity across institutions determined by a given organisational structure)[3]. It is considered that such homogeneity has negative implications because it crowds out innovation, institutional diversity and the capacity to address targeted needs (idem). Another problem identified is the underlying relationship between ARACIS and higher education institutions – dominated by the external quality assurance process: since the legal and financial survival of universities basically depends on it, ARACIS is automatically placed in a position of control (an idea which bears important connotations regarding the actual autonomy of Romanian universities).

Legal framework on quality assurance	➢ the preamble sets the goal to include two philosophies: 1. "fitness for purpose" (allowing universities to assess quality according to their own institutional goals); 2. "standardisation" (evaluating quality on the basis of pre-established universal standards); ➢ BUT the body of the law only discusses the latter ("standardisation")
Internal quality assurance	➢ ARACIS is the main driver of the process by means of external evaluations: internal QA exists only formally - as a technical, preliminary step in the process of accreditation and external evaluation by ARACIS;
Implementation in universities	➢ formal compliance with ARACIS 'minimum standards' – leading to homogeneity among universities; ➢ cleavage between the mission, objectives and strategies declared and actual practices (which have nothing to do with the assurance of quality); ➢ QA is a means to ensure survival (both legal and financial)
Evaluation by authors	➢ QA systems in Romania are prescriptive, coercive, centralised, oriented towards control and accreditation, focused on input and process indicators

Table 1: Characteristics of quality assurance systems in Romanian higher education (compiled from Vlăsceanu et al., 2011, pp. 22-29)

The third and final product of the ACADEMIS project (Păunescu et al., 2011) attempted to explain these findings from a theoretical perspective. ***Drawing from the new institutionalist literature, the authors discussed three of its strands: sociological institutionalism, normative institutionalism and rational choice institutionalism, with the latter being the most dominant** (ibid, pp. 26-29).* The intention was to use these theories in a complementary way to explain the problematic implementation of quality assurance in Romanian universities. As such, quality assurance in Romania is understood in the context of a given opportunity structure (the legal framework, ARACIS' methodologies etc) in which certain actors (ARACIS, external evaluators, universities, etc.) participate in given activities (primarily internal/external evaluation). In return for these activities, universities receive rewards or sanctions (accreditation/non-accreditation). Within this framework, universities act as rational actors who pursue the same goal (accreditation) and follow the same paths (minimum standards) in order to get symbolic and financial rewards (ibid, pp. 30-31). The result is institutional homogeneity (described above), ritualistic conformity to external requirements

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[3] For an overview on 'structural isomorphism', see DiMaggio and Powell (1983).

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and decoupling of quality assurance processes from the daily running of universities. Consequently, quality assurance remains an administrative rather than a substantive process impacting the university level (ibid, pp. 32-35).

The main results of the ACADEMIS project can also be found in a summary article published in English, which provides additional theoretical insights (Păunescu et al., 2012). Alongside the new institutionalist analysis mentioned before, the article proposes a Leviathan-inspired model of the state-university relationship, which is the historical result of [first] accreditation and [second] quality assurance processes. Since ARACIS inherited many institutional practices from the CNEAA (establishing internal commissions for external evaluation, focus on input indicators etc), the institutionalisation of the Leviathan-based model is conceptualised as path-dependent (ibid, p. 327). Its evolution took place over a longer period of time (from 1993 to 2007), mostly in response to the proliferation of private higher education institutions and the necessity of a "focal reference point" under uncertain circumstances. In a context characterised by a weak civil society and inactive professional communities, the state 'stepped in' and thus gained a prominent power position vis-à-vis the universities (ibid, p. 330). In new institutionalist terms, this is explained as the effect of 'coercive isomorphism' (pressuring universities to comply with the 'minimum standards' of an organisation on which they are legally and financially dependent) and 'mimetic isomorphism' (in order to adapt, universities copy either the organisation's or each other's quality assurance systems). In relation to internal quality assurance, the analysis suggests that there are no incentives for universities to engage in supplementary self-evaluation of quality.

To sum up, the Romanian-language literature on quality assurance provides first and foremost a 'high-resolution picture' of the national higher education system, constructed from a variety of sources. For the purposes of our project, it offers an informative starting point, raising a number of expectations with regard to internal quality assurance processes and the question of their 'fitness for purpose'. First, if internal quality assurance developed solely in response to external requirements of ARACIS, we should expect universities to have a superficial implementation of such mechanisms. Second, if internal evaluation procedures are prescribed either from ARACIS or consistently borrowed from other universities, we should expect to find uniform internal quality assurance systems across the board. Third, given the influential role of ARACIS throughout the process, we should expect to see a strong hierarchical system at play – with universities displaying a compliant behaviour when it comes to quality assurance. It remains to be seen whether empirical research confirm or refute these expectations.
A number of open questions remain, therefore:
1. *What drives the difference between private and public institutions in the debate on quality assurance?*
2. *To what extent is quality assurance in Romania a way to mediate the relation between the state and the university?*
3. *In what other ways is this relation mediated?*
4. *Which (foreign) models are leading for Romanian quality assurance?*

4. The technical dimensions of quality assurance
The guiding principles of the recent quality assurance scheme are laid down in a document called the 'European Standards and Guidelines on Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area' (Bologna Process, 2005). This document was written and negotiated by four organisations, namely the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), the European University Association (EUA),

the European Students' Union and Eurashe (a network of non-university higher education institutions) with the participation of the European Commission.

The 'European Standards and Guidelines' make a distinction between 'internal' quality assurance and 'external' quality assurance. Whereas 'internal quality assurance' refers to quality assurance within universities, 'external quality assurance' refers to quality assurance carried out by quasi-autonomous governmental agencies. Indeed, this reflects a compromise between two guiding principles that (1) 'providers of higher education have the primary responsibility for the quality of their provision and its assurance', yet that (2) 'the interests of society in the quality and standards of higher education need to be safeguarded' (Bologna Process, 2005, p. 14). In line with the ideas of EUA cite earlier, these forms of quality assurance aim to promote a 'quality culture' in which everyone in the system feels responsible for the quality of the service that is provided.

Even though the 'European Standards and Guidelines' separate 'internal' from 'external' quality assurance, the basic mechanism is rather the same. Following the broader template of public and private sector 'audits' (Power, 1997), an external quality assurance system looks more or less like this (Van Vught and Westerheijden, 1994, Sursock, 2011):

- A report is written by the university to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the institution (the 'self-evaluation report');
- The external agency appoints a panel of 'peers', 'stakeholders' or 'foreign experts' to visit the institution and evaluate how the system works;
- The panel writes a report with recommendations for future improvement as well as on whether it is satisfied with what it found in the institution;
- The report is published, leading to a public debate or a public decision on whether standards have been maintained.

It is not so easy to summarise practices of internal quality assurance, however. There is a variety of 'internal' quality assurance systems in operation, such as 'Total Quality Management' (TQM), the ISO-9001:2000 standard, the 'EFQM' model or the 'Plan-Do-Check-Act' ('PDCA') model (Pratasavitskaya and Stensaker, 2010). Driven by this diversity, useful classifications have been developed that distinguish different approaches based on their aims and methods. For instance, Brennan and Shah (2000, p. 14) classify different approaches to institutional quality assurance within four categories (see Table 2)

1. Academic	Subject focus - knowledge and curricula
	Professorial authority
	Quality varies vary across institution
2. Managerial	Institutional focus - policies and procedures
	Managerial authority
	Quality values invariant across institution
3. Pedagogic	People focus - skills and competencies
	Staff developers/educationalist influence
	Quality varies invariant across institution
4. Employment focus	Output focus - graduate standards/learning outcomes
	Employment/professional authority
	Quality values both variant and invariant across institution

Table 2: Four different perspectives on institutional quality assurance . Based on a review of quality assurance systems in 14 different countries (Brennan and Shah, 2000, p. 14).

Although it could be doubted whether these categories are mutually exclusive, the usefulness of this classification is that it associates different models of quality assurance with different types of authority and thus includes a consideration of power relations in the university. Moreover, it associates these different models with different sets of values and expectations about quality assurance in the institution.

An alternative way of looking at control systems is provided in the work of Hood et al (2004). Following cultural anthropologist Mary Douglas, Hood argues that forms of control and regulation can be mapped on the dimensions of 'grid and 'group'. Briefly, whereas 'grid' indicates the level at which 'our lives are circumscribed by conventions or rules', 'group' measures the level at which our lives are 'constrained by group choice, by binding the individual into a collective body' (Hood, 1998, p. 8). This leads to four ideal-types of public management and four associated methods of control (see Table 3). Broadly, '*hierarchism*' refers to hierarchical forms of control based on centralized standards. '*Fatalism or chancism*' refers to random processes of control that are relatively hard to find in modern administration, such as random inspections. '*Egalitarianism or Groupism*' is closely associated with the idea of democratisation, and puts the community (i.e. the academic staff and students) in charge of control systems. Finally, '*Individualism or Choicism*' is the more market-like control scheme based on competition between people.

	High Group	Low Group
High Grid	*Hierarchism* ('Oversight') Examples: Centralised quality standards, government-imposed procedures	*Fatalism or Chancism* ('Contrived Randomness') Examples: Randomised inspections, risk analyses
Low Grid	*Egalitarianism or Groupism* ('Mutuality') Examples: Peer-review mechanisms, self-controlled promotion mechanisms	*Individualism or Choicism* ('Competition') Examples: rankings or league tables, open competition for academic positions

Table 3: An alternative perspective on institutional quality assurance based on the cultural theory of Mary Douglas (Hood et al., 2004)

While there is some overlap between these different schemes, the techniques categorised here are slightly more exclusive (a promotion scheme cannot be both egalitarian and competitive for instance). On the other hand, Hood et al (ibid) argue that it is quite common to find different types of control mechanisms operating in parallel to each other (particularly common are combinations of 'hierarchism' and 'individualism or choicism').

Questions:
1. *What are the instruments of quality measurement?*
2. *What is the most useful way to classify these instruments?*
3. *Which other control instruments does IQA have to compete with?*
4. *Who has designed these instruments? How have they travelled from expert networks?*
5. *Who pays for IQA and how much money is involved?*

5. Conclusion

This literature review has aimed to present an overview over the state of the art in the academic literature on quality assurance. It has aimed to make clear that the issue of quality assurance is by no means straightforward. The discourse of quality assurance is often cloaked in normative discourse of democratisation and is embedded within far-reaching reforms of governance, particularly with the rise of a quasi-market in education. As such, it seems to change the power relations in academia, as well provide a new perspective on professional (and student) identities. These topics can provide many questions to guide the investigation.

Although the academic literature raise many interesting issues, the question of how quality assurance functions in Romania is above all an empirical one. The review has therefore also aimed to present the politico-historical context in which quality assurance was introduced in Romanian universities. This history shows that it is rather unlikely to find a linear implementation of initial policy ideas within the governance of universities. The topic is too contested between different types of universities, and different international actors have emphasised different models of quality assurance. In turn, this informs the technical discussion of quality assurance, and the challenge of untangling 'external' from 'internal' quality assurance. Perhaps, like in the folk tales from the golden age, this may prove a bigger challenge than anticipated.

Maybe this will be more straightforward than the academic literature portrays it to be. Indeed, much of the academic controversy may reflect the fact that it is the academic profession itself that has been the object of scrutiny. But however the source of these debates, they do raise a number of interesting questions for any research project on quality assurance. Coming back to the research question of this project, if there is one thing that has been made clear, it is that the literature requires us to unpack the notions 'quality assurance', 'fitness for purpose' and 'performance'. Moreover, it requires the project to move beyond desk-research and investigate the actual context in which quality assurance operates. As such, the research project seems to be on track by moving into a phase of empirical research on how quality assurance is constructed within Romanian universities.

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