"Internal Quality Assurance in Romanian Universities" Conference
1 November 2013, Bucharest
Hotel Ibis Palatul Parlamentului

Report

Introductory session

On November 1st 2013, the Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding (UEFISCDI) organized the **"Internal Quality Assurance in Romanian Universities" Conference**, under the framework of the "Higher Education Evidence Based Policy Making: a necessary premise for progress in Romania" project. The event brought together representatives of the Ministry of National Education (MEN), the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) and the Romanian universities.

The event was opened by the Minister of National Education, Mr. Remus Pricopie, who highlighted the interest shown by the academic community concerning the internal and external quality assurance processes. The Minister declared his interest for possible policy recommendations resulting from the Conference that may increase the quality of teaching and research in the Romanian higher education institutions.

The UEFISCDI General Director, Mr. Adrian Curaj, noted the importance of quality in the academic environment, while linking the results of the project with those achieved through other UEFISCDI institutional endeavors.

Mr. Cezar Hâj, assistant project manager, briefly presented the "Higher Education Evidence Based Policy Making: a necessary premise for progress in Romania" project, with its main activities and deliverables, putting an emphasis on the analysis concerning internal quality assurance systems.

The activity coordinator, Mr. Koen Geven (European University Institute, Florence) delivered a keynote speech on the social construction of quality in Romanian Higher Education, starting from the analysis of the fitness for purpose of internal quality assurance systems in Romanian universities.

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The debates continued in two rounds of parallel sessions, each addressing specific issues connected to the internal quality assurance processes.

Parallel session 1A – Tools and Instruments of Internal Quality Assurance

This session, moderated by Adina Maricuț (Central European University, Budapest), focused on:
- the current instruments available for universities in the process of internal quality assurance (IQA);
- the way in which the criteria and indicators are correlated with the objectives of IQA.

Daniel Lucheș, West University of Timisoara, presented the general Romanian framework of evaluations. The presentation focused on the historical perspective of the way the evaluations and quality assurance (QA) developed in Romania, as well as the currently used instruments for IQA.

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The most important three moments mentioned were:
- the early 1990s, when the number of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) increased to 128, generating the need to control the QA at higher education level; this in turn determined the creation of a structure responsible with quality assurance processes;
- ten years later, with the internationalization trend, when the higher education system was restructured according to the Bologna Process action lines;
- the recent interest in professional deontology – reducing to elimination of the plagiarism as well as the academic malpractice.

All of these have led to the creation of several public policies regarding quality assurance in the higher education system, the classification and ranking process, as well as human resources policies.

The second part of the presentation focused on the practices implemented by the West University of Timisoara he represents, both at university and faculty level as a good-practice example study case. Among these, one can note the university's attempts to standardize evaluations inside the institution, to level the approach regarding the curricula and program description plan, but also to introduce an internal audit with several criteria of data collection that addressed an already identified problem: the decreasing number of students enrolling each year backed up by the increasing number of students dropping out of school after the first year.

The second intervention – Mariana Ursache, "Gh. Asachi" Technical University of Iasi – highlighted the similarities between the two institutions in terms of QA instruments and processes in place, while noting that the greatest added value of the instruments used was related to the development and implementation of a manual of procedures and methodologies designed by the Iasi university. Considered to be unique at the moment of writing, this document facilitates all existing evaluations. However, its usefulness is directly linked to the qualified human resources responsible with IQA, bringing forward the idea of transparency inside and outside the institution, by making the collected data easily available (with only few exceptions).

In the Q&A session that followed:
- examples of good practice were provided, a university presenting the electronic platform to facilitate the collection of data and export of different kinds of reports needed for the various moments of evaluations and stakeholders who request it;

- the relation between the data collection indicators and the process of IQA in the West University of Timisoara was explained in more detail;
- the speakers mentioned that their universities cooperate with students in different parts of the IQA process and they consider it useful, although they have observed a lack of implication from the part of students. This could be potentially determined by the lack of transparency of the follow-up undergone by the universities regarding the evaluations in which students are involved.

As chair of this session, Adina Maricuț (Central European University) concluded that it is important to remember the project did not aim to blame any stakeholder in the process, nor the academics responsible for the implementation of the instruments of IQA or their evaluation and report, neither the decisional factors that fail to address the need for a coherent legislation in the field. One should have in mind that the objective of the project was to reflect upon the already used instruments, the way they are implemented and how this influences their impact and relevance towards IQA.

Parallel session 1B – Meaning of "Quality" in Teaching and Research

The participants in this session, moderated by Oana Sârbu (ARACIS), aimed at focusing their discussions on what each perceives as "quality" at university level, both in terms of teaching and research.

The speaker – Koen Geven, European University Institute, Florence – delivered a presentation, introducing his perspective on the topic. Among others, he underlined that meaning of "quality" is socially constructed and "quality culture" can change over time.

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Mădălin Bunoiu (West University of Timisoara) noted that a long term approach on QA in research and teaching will influence the overall quality in higher education. He also mentioned the possibility to create a national institute or university department preparing students and PhD students for scientific activities; if a specific course is made available to all students, all will benefit from the information in a structured manner. One should also keep in mind that research should not be evaluated only through statistical methods.

In the discussion that followed, it was suggested that an exchange of good practices between members of the academic staff could be put into place, thus enhancing the quality of courses.

Regarding the issue of external evaluations and ARACIS, participants suggested ways in which the agency could improve its performance, such as: a better focus on the outcomes, as opposed to the process (at university / program level); evaluation of the field of study (domeniu), not only of the subjects (specializari); promoting criteria adapted for evaluating diversity of Romanian higher education.

Other participants mentioned that:
- the first responsibility for QA belongs to the university; the institutions are aware of this fact;
- the major challenge of the universities is to have internal mechanisms to ensure quality, both in teaching and research. For universities with functional IQAs, the ARACIS standards seem to be

redundant, so the personnel dealing with QA is not pleased, as they consider external QA procedures as a duplication of their work. On the other side, universities with non-functional IQA systems also perceive ARACIS standards as an impediment, since they need to comply in order to ensure their functioning. This means that ARACIS is not popular;

- some teachers are reluctant when it comes to external evaluations because they are afraid of being punished as a result of the evaluation results. The evaluation mechanisms should have the full support of the management of universities;
- universities should pay more attention to how they construct their mission statements, since a clear and honest vision of the institution itself is the starting point for good quality (assurance).

The session ended by concluding ARACIS cannot be blamed for all things malfunctioning in the QA system and the universities should start from an in-depth analysis of their own internal activities. When looking at the big picture, one should take into account the interactions between different QA instruments and elements.

Parallel session 1C – Limits of Quality Assurance

Due to the fact that the concept of internal quality assurance (IQA) was linked, during the study visits organized within the project, with concepts such as ethics, financing, governance or others, it was considered that a debate be carried out regarding the limits of IQA, under the moderation of Robert Santa (Institute of Education, London).

The first intervention – Mihai Korka, Bucharest University of Economic Studies – defined eight perspectives from which limits of IQA could be drawn:
- the mission and the purposes of universities;
- the university's regulatory framework;
- the national bodies and institutions that deal with QA (one ministry and 12 specialized bodies and institutions), mainly due to the fact that there are many external assessment processes, which leads to the perception that QA is associated with an external process;
- the differences between the interests and expectations of the multiple university's structures. It is difficult to gain ownership over QA when expectations are quite different;
- the institutional behavior and the leadership attitude influence the perception on IQA. Even though QA is everyone's responsibility, it seems that within the universities there are only three to five people dealing with QA. The frequent lack of an information management system generates bureaucratic workload, due to the fact that with each assessment new data is gathered.
- the dynamic of socio-cultural context;
- Romania's commitments to the EU, Bologna Process, ENQA, EQAR;
- the internationalization of education.

It is important to keep in mind that Romania has gone to the process of universities classification. Due to the three universities categories, the IQA should respond to the different missions with different objectives, priorities and instruments. On the other hand, the ARACIS methodology gives the same guidelines for IQA regardless of the classification category it falls under.

In regard to the need of having excellence in teaching, a lack of IQA at teaching level was noticed. A possible solution could be including discussions on QA at departments and faculties' level, apart from general criteria set at university level.

The second intervention – Daniel David, "Babes-Bolyai" University of Cluj-Napoca – described two sources of QA limitations. From a conceptual perspective, there are two models of QA: one centered on the quality of education (**quality assurance is a purpose**), the other centered on qualitative education (**quality assurance is a means**). When quality assurance is a purpose, the process risks being formalized and bureaucratic. The second source is an external one. In this regard, external „Romanian" factors influence the attitude towards IQA, such as the multitude of indicators. For example, a researcher should pay attention to three different directions – three types of simultaneous criteria from ARACIS, CNCS and CNADCU. For example, while an ARACIS indicator sets the maximum value for teachers and students ratio, it is hard to follow this maximum standard because the financing per student is too low to keep a program with so few students per professors.

The last intervention – Cristian Clipa, West University of Timisoara – detailed the limits of IQA, perceiving them as the excessive politicization, the "harmful" friendship between academics (the downsize of peer reviews, as evaluators perform having in mind their future assessments), the intensive staff workload.

In the Romanian context, the continuous contracts of employment and the labor market regulations do not allow the exclusion of academic stuff due to poor performances. This leads to no incentives for teaching and research performance. Moreover, the lack of quality indicators related to teaching represents another issue.

The debates following the speakers' interventions highlighted the following issues in relation to the limits of quality assurance:
- the lack of financing;
- the differences between the regional universities and national/international ones;
- the relevance of indicators centered on quantity (e.g. the number of published books may not be a relevant indicator, as a good professor could perform research, publish only one book and be quoted by everybody in that field);
- the current challenge of universities to divide the available resources in order to achieve all the indicators from different processes (e.g. ARACIS indicators, research indicators, classification indicators etc.);

As a general conclusion, the lack of trust from inside and outside the quality assurance system was highlighted.

Parallel session 2A – Student participation

Student participation in quality assurance is a mandatory principle having multiple arguments. Studies show that, at university level, students' participation in the IQA is just a formal procedure manly due to the lack of information, the lack of a leadership strategy and the lack of interest from the students' unions side. More than that, reluctance from the teachers' side on student involvement in QA is often noticed. Although there are some instruments in place for collecting student feedback, there is no follow-up on the results.

At the national level the situation is different, with the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) being the only agency in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) assessed by students.

The discussions in this session were moderated by Oana Sârbu (ARACIS).

The first intervention – Viorel Proteasa, Bologna Secretariat 2010-2012 – described two approaches regarding students participation in IQA: from a normative perspective (e.g. policy documents) and from an assessing perspective (e.g. conference documents).

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First of all an analysis about the students characteristics is needed. In this regard, it was noted that most students come from families without higher education and have families living in urban areas. A large percentage of students (30%) work throughout their studies, with reasons such as the attempt to secure a future job or passion – in exceptional cases.

There are some reasons viewed as challenges for universities and arguments for the teachers' reluctance in involving students in IQA activities: students' expectations differ from what the university currently offers, students are more critical than teachers and students are rather allowing plagiarism.

Two instruments of student participation in IQA process were identified, giving feedback mainly to teachers' activities and being part of the IQA commissions. It seems that both instruments do not have clear impact on the educational process.

Students perceive IQA as a rather formal process, since the commissions dealing with it only function when it comes to deliver reports for external assessments. Although students are more critical than teachers, their perspective does not have an impact (e.g. the students self-report for the institutional assessments, the teachers assessments). There are certain pressures put on students in order not to be critical, such as conducting teachers' assessments before the exams and thus making students fearful in expressing their opinion or trusting the relevance of the questionnaires.

There are numerous reasons why students do not get involved in the IQA mechanisms. The processes related to IQA are difficult to understand even by teachers at times, yet alone by students. At institutional level, there is a lack of awareness about QA but also a lack of information and transparency. Due to the perception that students are clients, they are not involved as equal partners in all aspects of the educational activity, QA included. The lack of the sense of belonging to the academic community amplifies this perception.

Some recommendations have emerged during the workshop, such as:
- the instruments for collecting students' feedback should be diversified;
- students should be properly included in the departments councils and rector's elections;
- institutional reports should be available on the university's website and presented under an easily understandable form;

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- students' feedback should be collected anonymously; any electronic instruments are welcomed in this regard;
- instruments for gathering students' feedback regarding the social services should be developed;
- more resources for the QA departments and commissions should be allocated.

The session concluded by outlining the perception that the university has no intention of involving students or using their feedback in order to enhance the activity. The current instruments are put in place because they are mandatory by laws and national procedures, not because the universities are willing to enhance their overall performance. Moreover, due to specific national regulations on the type of instruments to be used in collecting students' feedback, universities tend not to be creative but to copy predefined models.

Parallel session 2B – Resources for Quality Assurance

The session, moderated by Norbert Sabic (Central European University, Budapest), aimed to outline the existing national and institutional resources made available for the universities to better develop their quality assurance systems.

The first speaker – Bogdan Murgescu, National Council for Higher Education Funding (CNFIS) – looked at what has been done in Romania to achieve better quality assurance in Higher Education.

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In his presentation, the following ideas were outlined:
- there is a general perception that Romanian universities are underperforming;
- the Romanian HEIs are underfunded and the CNFIS public report on the state of HE financing shows how the money was distributed at national level in 2012, together with proposals made by CNFIS to improve the overall HE financing system;
- there is a strong correlation between the level of financing and performance; there is great need for improvement;
- there are internal efficiency resources that can work up to some extent in each university;
- some measures to improve the quality assurance were also identified, such as ARACIS criteria, funding schemes attempting to connect quality with the distribution of resources, a CNFIS system of quality indicators or the Education Law 1/2011 – defining various types of funding.

The presentation also focused on shortcomings of the evaluations, arguing that quality indicators are sometimes not relevant and are set to counterbalance each other. The ranking of study programs relies extensively on research outcomes and not sufficiently on learning and teaching outlines, while the process of classification of universities has not been accepted by universities.

In the second intervention, Adrian Miroiu, ARACIS, described the current state of the affairs in the Romanian higher education, with an emphasis on the economic crisis (which diminished the overall HE funding), the demographic issues (a drop in the number of students over the last five years, affecting both private and public universities) and the institutional settings (regulations and secondary legislation providing different incentives).

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In the Q&A session, the participants noted that:

- CNFIS has suggested ways to ease the pressure on the system, such as trying to make universities accept that due to financing limitation, the state cannot finance the same number of bachelor and master places (decreasing gradually the number of students supported by the state, compensating by increasing the allocation of resources / student – with the same amount of financial resources);
- the low performance of Romanian HE was seen as being a result of both contradictory incentives and constant changes in the legislation;
- people are not against complying with criteria, but problems like plagiarism or fake research occur; as such, a culture of good research, ethos of academic behavior, etc. need to be developed;
- concerning relevant indicators for classifications, there are different types of indicators used and different procedures to aggregate them;
- the future ranking and classification exercises need to take into account different domains.

The session concluded by underlining the need to stimulate universities in order to internalize their specific missions, to differentiate QA criteria and indicators, to diversify funding resources and, above all, to increase the overall funding for higher education.

Parallel session 2C – National Legislation

The session, moderated by Robert Santa (Institute of Education, London), aimed to identify the possible implications of the new proposal of ARACIS evaluation methodology.

The first speaker – Radu Damian, ARACIS – presented the history of the existing legislation regarding quality assurance in Romania and made a short review of the reasoning behind it:

- to ensure minimal standards in each university regarding the resources needed to conduct proper teaching and learning activity;
- to control the rapid expansion of newly opened institutions providing educational services;
- to be in correlation with the European standards;
- to develop in line with the long-term objectives.

The speaker noted that it is not desirable to frequently change national legislation. However, minuses of the QA legal framework have been observed, the legislation is often incomplete or impossible to implement.

Radu Damian mentioned that there is a proposal of ARACIS for a new methodology, based on the principle of benchmarking that brings new elements to the evaluation (e.g. the evaluation of learning outcomes). However, this proposal cannot bring a totally new approach to the evaluations, although it is important to gradually switch the focus towards IQA. He also explained that, as long as there are still big differences in understanding the importance of guaranteeing a minimal standard at HEIs level, one cannot loosen up the criteria in the methodology too much. People complain of not being consulted, although no feedback is provided during the public consultation process, when the draft versions are made available.

The second speaker – Mihai Păunescu, National University of Political and Administrative Studies – presented the downsides of the current evaluation formula. This formula determines HEIs to have a standardized approach, losing to some extent their characteristics, as they do not find any incentives to

move beyond the minimal standards recommended by ARACIS (for which they have a strong incentive). Moreover, it has been observed that the current methodology is rather not internalized by those in the system. There is little understanding about its functioning, as one can observe a redundancy in copying other good practice examples in a formal way.

During the Q&A session, the main ideas highlighted were:
- there are contradictory provisions at the decision-making level and these confuse the members of the academic community (e.g. ministers send notes to clarify the existing legislation which often lead to more contradiction and thus confusion);
- there should be a clearer distinction between quality, quality assurance and quality management; the existing resources (financial, human, material, etc.) should be better invested in all these elements, with the help of university management and decisional.

The session concluded by agreeing that the changes in legislation are sometimes needed and could be welcomed, if planned and introduced gradually in the academic environment, allowing people inside the system to internalize them.

Report and Response session

The Conference was organized also in the context of a need for dialogue of the academics and professionals dealing with QA in higher education. The event tried to create a framework for this type of debates.

In the final panel of the Conference, Koen Geven started by presenting the parallel workshops conclusions and then some general conclusions were drawn.

The first message noted was the difficulty of having quality education without proper financial resources.

There is still much progress to be done regarding internal quality assurance. It is necessary to promote it at the department level, make it part of the daily activities. Moreover, for the internal structures to function properly, universities should employ and promote adequate and professional staff.

Implementing the Bologna Process principles is also important: changing the paradigm to focus on learning outcomes, involve more the stakeholders, such as like labor market representatives and students.

The external quality assurance system needs to be transparent and in line with the developments at institutional level. The IQA structures should be better developed for the second and third cycle.

Quality assurance was defined also as the capacity to respond to new challenges. Education and professional formation are among the most important university missions, which should be achieved through quality higher education provision. All higher education institutions should strive to provide diverse learning paths, as well as pursue excellence in all types of education provision.

Some recommendations made by the expert team at national and university level could be taken into consideration. A smaller number of evaluations will reduce the amount of administrative and paperwork conducted at the moment by universities, while making the standards and their assessments more

transparent for professionals. Given the dynamic of the educational system, the evaluation procedures should be evaluated themselves periodically, in order to establish their relevance and effectiveness.

Professors and students should be involved more in the process of establishing the quality assurance standards, as well as all steps of the process, thus being provided a sense of ownership. Structured discussions about the meaning of quality in faculties and departments could result in a better understanding of the overall IQA process. A more consistent and open concept of "quality" should be applied, by reducing the number of criteria on which evaluations are to be carried out.

However, one should keep in mind that even if these recommendations are implemented, it will take time until the results become visible. The focus should be shifted from procedural aspects on how to carry out evaluations to the substantive results aimed to be achieved through the various instruments applied.