Analysis of the performance and fitness for purpose of Romanian HEIs' internal quality assurance systems

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Higher Education Evidence
Based Policy Making

Analysis of the performance and fitness for purpose of Romanian HEIs' internal quality assurance systems

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Chapter 1: Learning to Evaluate – From Administrative Burden to Reflection on Education and Research

1.1 Executive Summary

Romanian universities – faculty members, students and administrators - are caught in a "merry-go-round" of evaluations. There are no less than 10 different evaluation instruments at national level, often complemented by evaluation procedures at university, faculty and departmental level. While much effort goes into these evaluations, we think their results are questionable.

The evaluations address many legitimate concerns, such as the quality of education in private, for-profit universities, the Europeanisation of higher education and research as well as academic corruption and plagiarism. However, we believe that it is hard for the evaluations to deliver on all these ambitious policy goals. In fact, it is important to realise the limits of evaluation instruments amidst an unstable policy environment and constant budget cuts.

This policy brief is intended for the Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding (UEFISCDI), the Romanian quality assurance agency (ARACIS), the National Research Council (CNCS), the National Council for Higher Education Funding (CNFIS), the Ministry of Education, Scientific Research, Youth and Sports. It also contains recommendations for decision-makers in Romanian universities as well as interested faculty and students. The recommendations may also be of interest to international organisations active in Romania, such as the European University Association and the European Commission.

The brief is based on an analysis of 187 interviews with a cross-section of decision-makers, professors, students and administrators in 5 Romanian universities, as well as an examination of key policy documents in this area. It is accompanied by two other papers, one paper addressing the reasons why Romanian universities fail to internalise quality assurance and one on how Romanian universities construct the meaning of 'quality' in higher education and research.

We argue in this policy brief that the main problem is that the evaluations fail to achieve substantial reflection on higher education and scientific research. More concretely, we consider that (1) the current evaluation practices are too bureaucratic, (2) that academics and students do not feel ownership of the evaluations, and (3) existing standards are inconsistent. This is presented in the following problem tree, in which general problems are cascaded into specific issues and then described at national and university level.

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General problem	Evaluations fail to achieve substantial reflection on higher education and scientific research		
Specific problem	1. The current evaluation practices are too bureaucratic	2. Academics and students do not feel ownership over evaluations.	3. Evaluation standards are inconsistent.
Problem at National Level	*The evaluation practices cost a lot of time and money.*	*The evaluations have been designed for needs of policy-makers, rather than those of academics and students.*	*Evaluations present an inconsistent picture of what 'quality' means, how it should be assessed and improved.*
	The evaluation practices change too frequently.		
	Evaluations are not always the best method to achieve the policy objective.		
Problem at University Level	*Too much weight is put on formal evaluations.*	*There is not enough flexibility to deal with disciplinary differences and innovations.*	*There has been little systematic reflection within faculties and departments on what 'quality' means in education and research.*

Table 1.1: *The policy tree defining the problem of evaluation in Romanian universities.*

Accordingly, we provide three objectives for future policy-making in this area. We think that future policies should focus on (1) simplifying the procedures, (2) allowing professors and students to set their own standards in education and research, and (3) applying a more consistent and open concept of 'quality'. These are sub-divided in five recommendations for the government and four recommendations for universities, are presented in the table below.

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Policy Objective	1. Simplify the evaluation procedures.	2. Allow professors and students to decide on quality standards	3. Apply a more consistent and open concept of 'quality'
Recommendations at national level	*1.1 Reduce the number of evaluation instruments and reports*	*2.1. Focus on organising the evaluations without pre-defining all the standards.*	*3.1. Reduce the number of standards on which evaluations are to be carried out.*
	1.2. Evaluate the evaluation procedures as a whole every five years.		
	1.3 Create new policy instruments to deal with gross misconduct.		
Recommendations at university and departmental level	*1.4. Foster informal evaluation practices as well as formal practices.*	*2.2 Enable a more flexible approach to evaluations within departments*	*3.2. Organise structured discussions about the meaning of quality in faculties and departments.*
			3.3. Develop professional networks between people working on evaluations.

Table 1.2: the proposed solutions to the policy problem.

These policy initiatives should be the responsibility of government, universities, academics and students. Only together can a more structured dialogue be established to deal with the many substantial concerns with quality in Romanian higher education and research.

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1.2 Introduction

The Romanian two-part film 'Tales from the Golden Age' (2009) portrays several legends from the 'golden age' of communism. One of these tales recounts a legendary inspection of a village in preparation of a party motorcade passing through the next day. The whole village is nervous about the preparations and receives detailed instructions from two inspectors. 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.

While folk-tale should not be confused for reality, it is not impossible to draw a parallel between dark comedy and current debates about 'quality' in Romanian universities. Concerns about quality are clearly connected to expectations of state officials (both domestic and foreign), while it is hard to disentangle the inspectors, academics and other actors involved in the merry-go-round of evaluations. *This policy brief[1] aims to present some suggestions on how this merry-go-round can be stopped, to the benefit of higher education and scientific research in Romania.*

We present five recommendations to the government, the ministry of education, science, youth and sports and the various agencies tasked with evaluation (primarily UEFISCDI, ARACIS, CNCS, CNFIS, and CNATDCU[2]). We also present four recommendations to the universities, and interested faculty, students and other stakeholders. While the primary audience of the policy brief is Romanian, international organisations active in Romania (EUA, the European Commission) may also take an interest. *The core of our message is that (1) evaluation procedures should be simplified, (2) students and professors should receive more control over the evaluations and (3) a more open and consistent notion of 'quality' should be used.*

1.3. Evaluations in Romanian universities

The language surrounding evaluations in universities is a swamp. We try to wade through these murky grounds by adopting one general term, 'evaluation', to denote the various assessments that take place in the universities. These include accreditation, quality assurance (both internal and external), research assessments, audits, and various other forms of assessing what universities, and the people working in them, are doing. In this sense, we follow the academic literature arguing that there exists an 'audit culture' in university life (Power, 1997, Shore and Wright, 1999). While this conceptual lumping may be confusing for those working in different fields of evaluation, we think it is a useful way to describe a variety of instruments being used in the universities.

The following table breaks down the different policy instruments that we would like to discuss in this brief:

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[1] The brief is an outcome a research project carried out in 2012/13, comprising of field visits to five Romanian universities. During these visits, 187 in-depth interviews were conducted with the management of the universities, members of quality assurance bodies, professors, administrators and students. While the research project initially addressed quality assurance in Romanian universities, this policy brief extends the recommendations to other fields of higher education governance as well. The research underlying the policy brief was conducted in the context of the project "Higher Education Evidence Based Policy Making: a necessary premise for progress in Romania", run by the Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding (UEFISCDI) between 2012 and 2014.

[2] 'UEFISCDI' is the Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding. 'ARACIS' is the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 'CNCS' is the National Research Council, CNFIS is the National Council for Higher Education Funding, and 'CNATDCU' is the National Council for the Recognition of Degrees, Diplomas and Certificates.

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Category	Evaluation Instruments	Introduced in:
Quality assurance	Institutional evaluation and accreditation	2006 Law on Education Quality Assurance
	Programme evaluation and accreditation	1993, changed in 2006 Law on Education Quality Assurance
	Evaluation of doctoral schools	2011 Law on National Education (Art. 158)
Classification and ranking	Institutional classification	2011 Law on National Education (Art. 193)
	Programme ranking	2011 Law on National Education (Art .193)
	Institutional evaluation	2011 Law on National Education (Art 193.6)
Research assessment exercise	Research evaluation	2011 Law on National Education (Art. 195)
Standards for promotion	Legal standards for promotion	2011 Law on National Education (Art. 295)
	Habilitation standards	2011 Law on National Education (Art. 300)
Audits by various national agencies	Audits of various managerial practices like ethics, financing, promotions, etc.	2011 Law on National Education (Art. 218-219)

Table 1.3: *Different instruments of evaluation in Romanian universities*[3]

These legal instruments did not 'fall out of the sky', but arose because of specific - albeit strongly contested - socio-political concerns. We believe that three developments have been particularly important. The ***first*** is the ***privatisation of Romanian higher education*** in the early 1990s. Since the founding of CNEAA in 1993, evaluations have aimed to provide some control over the quality of education (especially of private-for-profit institutions), from the perspective of consumer protection (Tomusk, 2000). ***Secondly***, ***the Europeanisation process*** has put several pressures on Romanian universities (Wodak and Fairclough, 2010). The Bologna Process has shaped the successor of the accreditation system through its influence over the quality assurance and accreditation agency, ARACIS. Moreover, initiatives in the European Research Area have led to the creation of various research evaluations, led by the agency for the funding of scientific research, CNCS. ***Thirdly***, there has been a continuous concern with ***plagiarism and academic malpractice*** over the last two decades, most notably at the level of political discourse. As several scandals have made it to the (international) press in recent years, many of these evaluations have been legitimated as part of a struggle with a corrupt 'old guard' (cf. Abbott, 2013).

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[3] Sources: Law 87/2006 on the approval of the Government Emergency Ordinance No. 75/2005 regarding the education quality assurance, Law 01/2011 on National Education, Art 295-297 and subsequently Ministerial Ordinance OMECTS nr. 6560/2012 and draft amendments to OMECTS nr. 6560/16.07.2013.

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As each of these three developments has a strong normative connotation, it is hard to imagine that these policy instruments can simply be 'wished away'. Rather, we must analyse what happens with these instruments inside the universities.

It is important to note that the table above only mentions the evaluations that are legally required to be undertaken by universities. Some of these instruments are not (yet?) operational, since no methodology has been agreed upon. This is the case for the evaluation of doctoral schools as well as the national research assessment exercise. However, some universities have already started the implementation process in anticipation of legal action, organising projects to implement these instruments, or carrying out their own evaluations in line with national regulations. Other instruments are fully operational and produce a variety of activities and practices at the university level, such as those resulting from programme evaluation and institutional accreditation. The following table gives an overview of the variety of structures and practices found in the universities:

University level	*Faculty and Department level*
Administrative structures, such as vice-rector positions for academic quality and scientific research, a department on teaching quality, a department on scientific research, a commission on quality and evaluation (CEAC) and various senate commissions on quality.	*Administrative structures,* such as a faculty commission on quality and evaluation, specific positions for vice-deans.
Internal reviews, such as institutional reviews, internal programme reviews, research reviews and financial audits.	*Evaluations of faculty*, such as peer reviews, self-evaluations and managerial evaluations.
Documents, such as a quality policy, quality reports and an internal research strategy.	*Documents*, such as a faculty-level quality policy, quality reports, publication lists, etc.
Surveys, such as alumni questionnaires or student questionnaires.	*Formal deliberation,* such as discussions on curricula and research.
	Informal deliberation, such as discussions at the coffee machine or in class.

Table 1.4: *The various evaluation structures and practices in Romanian universities.*

This table shows that the instruments mentioned above lead to various activities in the universities, faculties and departments. For example, universities have created different structures to provide statistics and reports to governmental agencies, ranging from senate commissions to specialised quality assurance departments and committees. Even for the people involved in these structures, it is quite hard to figure out what they are supposed to do and why.

The numerous evaluation instruments pose several challenges in the implementation process within universities, despite addressing quite legitimate concerns. These are discussed in the next section.

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1.4 The Policy Problem

In our fieldwork, we encountered three major problems with the implementation of evaluation instruments, which we describe below.

1. Evaluations are too bureaucratic and too easily changed

The first problem with the national legislation is that it creates a bureaucratic workload. This bureaucracy dominates current evaluation practices; professionals see such practices as being disconnected from their daily activities of teaching and research. This results in a sort of resignation and task avoidance, which is one of the reasons why evaluations cannot be internalised.

This bureaucracy costs both time and money. **Many of our interviewees**, particularly those we see as decision-makers (rectors, vice-rectors, deans, vice-deans, senate members) **are faced with an enormous pile of papers each day**. In the words of some of them:

> *"[We need] to stop working twice for the same thing. Why do I need to have a faculty report and a QA report? Are they not the same thing? Why do we need two different reports and formats?" (Decision-Maker, Professor, Male, RS0503).*
> *"Time management needs to become better. We are wasting a lot of time on useless things" (Decision-Maker, Lecturer, Male, KG075).*
> *"The QA process is characterized by huge quantities of bureaucratic requirements. We are lucky that the Vice-Dean for Quality Management takes care of these documents" (Decision-Maker, Professor, Male, RS0604).*

In terms of money, we calculated for a large university that the costs associated to undergoing quality assurance evaluations amount to around RON 1.160.900 (approx. € 258.000) per year[4]. This is most likely a conservative estimate, since it does not include the costs for the (usually quite substantial) involvement of non-technical personnel in evaluation activities. Nor does it involve any other costs than those for complying with the quality assurance and accreditation procedures. While some may argue that these are legitimate costs for improving the quality of education and scientific research, we have our doubts that these costs can be justified as such.

We believe that one of the reasons why many of these evaluations are seen as bureaucratic is that they are too often and too easily changed. One interviewee described the situation as such:

> *"Regulations are constantly changing and it is hard to follow up on them. Some of the regulations are not coherent. We are constantly on stand-by. This creates confusion and we cannot plan for the future." (Decision-Maker, Professor, Female, NS0302).*

Indeed, universities do not have a consistent set of rules to follow when it comes to evaluation instruments. This creates confusion (since it is difficult to keep up-to-date with the latest legislative modifications) and prevents them from engaging in long-term planning. While the law on quality assurance has remained more or less in place since 2005, there have been many subsequent legal changes following

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[4] This is based on a calculation of costs of all the programme evaluations and the institutional evaluation (official costs ARACIS) as well as information provided to us by the university. While the university faces a discount through European funds, these are included in the total price, since they provide a cost to the public.

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the 2011 law on education, the classification exercise and associated legislation related to the evaluation of research centers (UEFISCDI 2010). Each of these changes has led to a build-up of frustrations about evaluations procedures and their supposed remedies among many academics.

Another reason why these procedures are perceived as bureaucratic is that they overshadow more informal practices to improve. Yet, discussions at the coffee machine or a simple personal exchange between colleagues are often the most efficient ways to solve a problem. One of our interviewees said that:

> *"The contact with people is most important. Collegial visits could help, but please do not try to quantify quality". (Associate Professor, Female, KG0602).*

When it comes to students, it may be much easier to hear their problems through informal channels. As one student told us:

> *"Face to face conversations are better if something needs to be improved. Professors shouldn't give up on this feature." (Student, Female, NS0702).*

Taken as a whole, we can perhaps conclude that these policy instruments try to achieve too many things at the same time: applying minimum standards for curricula, matching curricula to labour market needs, introducing pedagogic innovations, improving the management of the universities and faculties, and lifting Romania's scientific production up to Western European standards. And if this is not enough, they also intend to rid the universities of plagiarism and corruption. The combined effect is that these policy instruments achieve very few specific intended results. But they also have some unintended consequences. The next two sections will try to show that bureaucracy is not the only concern.

2. Academics and Students do not feel ownership over evaluations

A problem closely related to the frustration over the evaluation procedures is that actors in the university feel little ownership over what is being evaluated, for whom and how. The people in the universities express it as such:

> *"The QA system was only created in response to the law and ARACIS requirements - there is no point to hide this fact" (Decision-Maker, Associate Professor, Male, AM1201).*
> *"We are forced by all these different institutions, ARACIS, EUA, to do such evaluations" (Decision-Maker, Professor, Male, AM0202).*

This understanding highlights that evaluation procedures are implemented mainly to comply with the law and governmental regulations rather than to actually improve institutional quality. For instance, evaluations related to quality assurance are viewed as something imposed from the outside, through procedures meant to artificially create a 'quality culture'.

While students participating in administrative structures typically felt slightly more involved than academic staff, not all students feel that they are being listened to, even if they are being heard. Indeed, in practice many barriers exist that hinder students' active participation in these evaluations.

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"There is not a lot of freedom of speech. The problem is mostly in our mind, but also we are not asked to speak our mind, not allowed to say what we really think" (Student, Postgraduate, Female, KG0603).

"A big problem is the laziness of the students. About 50% of the students do not even read their e-mails. Students are also not very involved in the university" (Student, Postgraduate, Male, KG0802).

While it is hard to give any 'objective' measure of this lack of ownership, the end-result does present some unintended consequences. Since the evaluation process is not seen as legitimate, people display strategic behaviour towards the evaluations. This problem is often referred to in the literature as 'gaming' the system (cf. Hood, 2006). This seems to range from trying to avoid consequences from evaluations (especially with regard to the ranking exercise) to outright plagiarism in order to meet research requirements (or indeed improve one's status). ***The paradox is thus that the evaluations may reinforce the very gaming behaviour they are meant to address!***

Another unintended consequence is visible in scientific research. Many interviewees mention that the current assessment framework for scientific research is heavily biased towards the sciences for which international journals exist (with an interest for Romanian science). Although it seems pointless to reward research in the humanities or legal research in the same way as theoretical physics, yet this is precisely what is being done. The framework thus hardly acknowledges that publication practices differ widely between disciplines in terms of how often one can publish, whether one has access to international journals and with whom one collaborates. The unintended consequence is that only a few scientific fields are seen as 'serious' sciences that are worthy of funding and public attention. This may hurt the short and medium-term production of scientific research (as well as the Romanian interests and/or cultural heritage) more than is being realised currently.

3. Evaluations are based on inconsistent criteria

This gaming behaviour is reinforced by the fact that the evaluations are all based on different standards and performance indicators. Below is the same table that we showed above, now displaying the different indicators used in each instrument. In the programme evaluation and accreditation organised by ARACIS, there are 43 different performance indicators. In the programme ranking, on the other hand, there are no less than 80 variables on which the programmes are evaluated. These are not just complementary, but also quite different. Whereas the quality assurance and accreditation scheme focuses on education and training as well as the internal quality assurance procedures of the university, the classification emphasises research productivity (scientometrics) and 'external relations'. This makes it quite hard for academics to figure out what the standards really are.

If we take a more detailed look, we can see that the instruments are based on different underlying ideas of 'quality'. The quality assurance scheme is based on minimum standards for all universities, whereas the classification is based on nominal categories for universities. In other words, the quality assurance and accreditation is based on the idea that there are common (minimum) features to all universities, whereas the classification is based on the idea that there are different kinds of universities. The ranking, on the other hand, is based on the idea that universities are inherently 'better' or 'worse' than each other. Moreover, the ranking instrument places these universities and programmes on an ordinal scale.

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What is important about these inconsistent criteria is that they lead to a confusing picture for the academics, let alone for students. A university can receive, in principle, high trust in the accreditation process, but categorised as a 'C' university in the classification, and ranked in the middle of the distribution. To achieve a higher ranking, it may have to shift resources away from education to scientific production, which may in turn lower its status in the accreditation system. In other words, these different instruments send confusing messages to the universities about what is required from them, and do not help the wider Romanian society to understand what is going on in the field of higher education and research.

Instruments	Quality standards defined in:
Institutional evaluation and accreditation	3 areas, 14 criteria, 16 standards, 43 performance indicators[5]
Programme evaluation and accreditation	3 areas, 14 criteria, 16 standards, 43 performance indicators as well as 'specific standards of specialist committees'[6]
Evaluation of doctoral schools	Unclear, draft mentions 3 areas, 14 criteria, 65 performance indicators[7]
Institutional classification	4 criteria, 11 standards, 91 variables[8]
Programme ranking	4 criteria, 10 standards, 80 variables[9]
Institutional evaluation	4 central questions[10]
Research evaluation	4 criteria, 11 indicators [11]
Legal standards for promotion	Unclear, standards to evaluate personal scientific work[12]
Habilitation standards	Unclear, standards to evaluate personal scientific work[13]
Audits by various national agencies	Unclear

Table 1.5: *The different criteria used in each policy instrument.*

At the level of the universities, there is much complaint, yet little reflection about the standards. While a few universities have defined their own standards for evaluation, this has not yet trickled down to the faculties and departments. We have not found a single faculty where there exists a systematic plan to improve teaching and learning practices or to experiment with pedagogic innovations[14]. Similarly, we have

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[5] ARACIS. 2006. Methodology.

[6] Ibid, ARACIS. 2006. Specific standards of specialist committees. Available at <http://www.aracis.ro/uploads/media/Standarde_specifice_ale_comisiilor_de_specialitate.zip>.

[7] The methodology for the evaluation of doctoral schools exists only in draft form and has, until now, only been piloted. The draft is available at <http://administraresite.edu.ro/index.php/articles/16691>

[8] Ministerial Ordinance OMECTS nr. 4174/13.05.2011

[9] ibid.

[10] EUA. 2012. Institutional Evaluation Programme: Guidelines for institutions. Project "Ready to innovate, ready to better address the local needs. Quality and diversity of Romanian Universities". Brussels: EUA.

[11] UEFISCDI. 2010. Romanian Research Assessment Exercise (RRAE) General Assessment Methodology. Bucharest: UEFISCDI.

[12] Law 01/2011 on National Education, Art 295-297 and subsequently Ministerial Ordinance OMECTS nr. 6560/2012 and draft amendments to OMECTS nr. 6560/16.07.2013.

[13] Ministerial Order. OMECTS 5691/27.10.2011 on the CNATDCU Habilitation Thesis.

[14] We have found one department that was engaged in pedagogical innovation. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this was a department of pedagogy.

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found very few instances of faculty-level attempts to improve scientific research production. Indeed, there are many individual initiatives to achieve this, but this is not done very systematically.

Can these instruments lead to a reflection on education and scientific research?
We think it is important to remind policy-makers that evaluations do not replace action. If you allow us the metaphor, evaluations are diagnostic instruments; they are not the medicine to cure the patient. In fact, we (and our interviewees) found it quite hard to attribute follow-up activities to each of the evaluations carried out. We cannot put it better than one of our interviewees:

> *I do not believe that even 100 laws will increase quality in the system. Most people respond with maximum attention to forms, but the best way to learn on how to have a quality education system is by learning from [other] teachers. That is how we learned before (Decision-Maker, Professor, Male, RS0903).*

In line with this statement, we think that the government and the universities should strengthen the common-sense discussions about quality of education and scientific research. We will present our recommendations to achieve this in the next sections.

1.5. Recommendations for national policy-makers

To address the previously outlined general problem and its causes we propose to move from an administrative burden to systematic reflection on key dimensions of education and research.

Objective 1: Simplify the procedures

Recommendation 1.1: Reduce the number of evaluation instruments and reports.

At the moment several evaluations are being undertaken across universities in Romania that absorb lot of money and time. Therefore, we suggest for national level actors to integrate the existing evaluation instruments (see table 3) into a comprehensive evaluation scheme that will satisfy the need for quality assurance, quality improvements, and comparative quality analysis across institutions. A single (or at least a reduced number of) evaluation(s) will indisputably reduce the amount of administrative and paperwork conducted at the moment by universities, and make the standards and their assessments more transparent for professionals. Failing to do so, or increasing the number of evaluations, is likely to further increase the bureaucracy that universities deal with on a daily basis.

Recommendation 1.2: Evaluate the evaluation procedures as a whole every five years.

Evaluation procedures can never be perfect instruments to assess all aspects of the quality of higher education. However, that doesn't imply that they cannot be improved. Higher education as other aspects of society change from time to time. As new priorities and structures emerge, new ways for evaluating them should be developed. Consequently, we suggest the holistic assessment of the evaluation practice(s) on national level every 5 years. This time interval would give enough stability for the evaluation practices to be understood and effectively carried out by institutions, but also provide an opportunity for national level stakeholders to make small improvement where needed. Moreover, involving universities in this process is crucial, since they are the ones who deal with quality assurance regularly.

Recommendation 1.3: Create new policy instruments to deal with gross misconduct.

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Evaluation instruments are not very effective in dealing with misconduct. In these cases, the problem is not so much the lack of reflection, but the simple abuse of power. We think that it would be wise to separate these problems from the objective to improve and reflect upon education and research. Instruments that would be more effective in dealing with misconduct should aim at distributing power within the university. Policy-makers can fight plagiarism by providing anti-plagiarism software to review previously published and new scientific publications. Cases of corruption can be dealt with more effectively by providing external reviews of students' (dissertation) work. Moreover, labour legislation could be made more flexible so that universities can fire people after cases of gross misconduct.

Objective 2: Allow professors and students to set the standards for evaluation
Recommendation 2.1: Focus on organising the evaluations without pre-defining all the standards.
At the moment ARACIS offers a set of minimum standards, and a set of reference standards. Other evaluation practices prescribe similar – or even higher - levels of performance based on which institutions and people are assessed. While these are often meant as thresholds, they also reduce the ability of universities to define quality according to their own terms and standards. However, allowing professors and students to set the standards would encourage organisational actors to conceptualize quality and engage in a search for relevant benchmarks. Reducing the amount of standards is also likely to change the predominantly quantitative nature of assessment, to one, which relies more on feedback and identifying possible improvements. Failing to involve professors and students in the definition of standards, will likely lead to perverse incentives where individuals will be encouraged to trick the system and hence the numbers will lose their meaning.

Objective 3: Apply a more consistent and open concept of 'quality'
Recommendation 3.1: Reduce the number of criteria on which evaluations are to be carried out.
Every evaluation has its own preconceptions of what quality is. This preconception is reflected in the criteria or standards set by the external agency who is in charge of carrying out the activity. The criteria vary across the evaluation procedures applied in Romania, which results in an unwanted level of confusion among universities and individuals. Besides, the more criteria are defined, the more limited the possibility of universities to supplement the assessment of quality with additional aspects, tailored to their own needs Hence, the reduction of criteria on which evaluations are carried out can reduce the existing formal inconsistencies, why simultaneously broadening up the discussion on the meaning of quality.

1.6. Recommendations for the universities
Objective 1: Simplify the procedures
Recommendation 1.4: Foster informal evaluation practices as well as formal practices.
Current evaluation practices put too much weight on formal assessment methods, such as questionnaires and reports. However, many times quality assurance happens in a less formal environment, without explicit planning or measurement behind it. Such informal practices have been present in universities for a long time, and in some cases continue to be the most important evaluation method. Therefore, we suggest, that informal assessments should be also accounted for, by encouraging individuals to constantly assess the quality of their own work and that of their institution, and providing formal ways to share this knowledge between professors and students.

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Objective 2: Allow professors and students to set the standards

Recommendation 2.2: Enable a more flexible approach to evaluations within departments.

Criteria set at the national level can rarely be assessed truthfully across a number of different departments. Many fields of knowledge are so specific, that the meaning of the criteria gets easily distorted, which reduces its validity and reliability. This requires a more flexible approach at the institutional level to evaluations. Particularities of the teaching and research traditions of each department should be allowed to influence and change the outcome of the assessment. In contrary, institutions risk to produce results on the pre-set criteria, which do not reflect the true quality of their department's work.

Objective 3: Apply a more consistent and open concept of 'quality'

Recommendation 3.2: Organise structured discussions about the meaning of quality in faculties and departments

Individuals tend to define the quality of academic practice differently. Nevertheless, without structured discussions on this topic among academics, the existing practices will likely remain superficial or technical. Promoting organized deliberations on the quality of work at the university, the quality of teaching and research, the quality of administration and management, and so forth, is essential for developing a shared understanding on what quality is in the context of a particular institution. These events should be initiated on a regular basis by the top-management of the institution and be open to professors, students, employers, and representatives of the wider community.

Recommendation 3.3: Develop professional networks between people working on evaluations.

In most of the cases evaluation exercises are carried out by professors, with the support of the institutions administrative staff. With time, these individuals build up extensive experience in carrying out evaluations, and some even develop innovative approaches to it. On the other hand many practical problems arise during implementation of particular evaluations. Organizing professional networks between people working on evaluations will help the institution to make good ideas travel from one organizational unit to the other, or to help the involved individuals to overcome some of the emerging challenges more easily. Certainly, the more isolated the involved parties remain from each other, the harder it becomes to organize evaluations across the university.

1.7. Concluding remarks

No single set of recommendations can address all the problems surrounding the use, misuse and abuse of evaluation procedures in Romanian higher education. The proposals in this brief have been put forward in response to specific problems identified in our research, as well as for their broad applicability to both national actors and higher education institutions. While the recommendations for the national level imply the alteration of the legal framework and various evaluation methodologies in higher education, those for universities are generic and can be implemented regardless of legislative requirements. When putting our proposals into practice, it is important to recognise that there is no straightforward recommendation that could solve all difficulties of the Romanian system overnight. Our main message is thus to ***shift focus from procedural aspects on how to carry out evaluations to the substantive results aimed to be achieved through the various instruments applied***. In other words, these complex problems can only be solved if we recognise the brainpower of everyone in the universities. Only in this way can policy makers, university

leaders, faculty and students step off the merry-go-round of evaluations and start reflecting on the purpose and scope of existent practices, and subsequently act upon them.

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Chapter 2: Why do Romanian universities fail to internalize quality assurance?

2.1 Abstract

Despite legal provisions in place since 2005, Romanian universities are considered to perform internal quality assurance only at a formal level, on paper, and usually in anticipation of external evaluations demanded by the government or other official institutions. This paper posits five hypotheses to explain this situation. We analyze 187 interviews with people in universities in order to evaluate these hypotheses. Only two hypotheses are confirmed by the data, allowing us to construct a narrative of policy failure. First, there are top-down failures resulting from unclear and inconsistent legal provisions that focus on multilayered evaluation procedures. Second, there are bottom-up failures related to the lack of ownership over internal quality assurance systems by the actors in the universities. Consequently, these tools are often seen as control-tools of government, and understood as disconnected from the universities' own goals and problems. Consequently, people on the ground passively try to subvert these tools by carrying them out in a ritualistic manner – which is why quality assurance cannot become internalized.

2.2. Introduction[15]

In response to laments about administrative burdens and 'reform fatigue', many university leaders have called for a prioritization of 'internal quality assurance' over 'external quality control'. Already since 2003, the European University Association (EUA) has promoted "a coherent quality assurance (QA) policy for Europe, based on the belief: that institutional autonomy creates and requires responsibility, that universities are responsible for developing internal quality cultures and that progress at European level involving all stakeholders is a necessary next step" (EUA 2003, 9). Indeed, it would be strange if universities would not take this responsibility, "since quality management, at least theoretically, can have potential academic benefits" (Pratasavitskaya and Stensaker, 2010, 3).

Underlying this idea is an implicit assumption that QA is in the best interest of universities because it fosters the development of procedures and mechanisms meant to ensure that "quality, however defined and measured, is delivered" to the stakeholders (Harvey and Green 1993, 19). By setting up QA processes, universities would show the larger public that quality in general and quality improvement in particular is an ongoing concern for the governance of higher education institutions. Moreover, individual academics would continuously try to improve their scientific work and teaching, in line with the needs of employers and students.

In this light, an interesting empirical question is to ask why most universities – and indeed most professionals in higher education – do not internalize quality assurance. In fact, we can find quite a lot of resistance against this practice, both in the academic literature and in practice (Apple 2005; Ball 2003). In Romania, the topic has caught the attention of some scholarly debate, as universities are generally considered to fail to internalize quality assurance (Păunescu, Florian, & Hâncean 2012). The present paper asks why this is the case; in other words: why do Romanian universities not internalize quality assurance?

We address the question by drawing up five different hypotheses as to why quality assurance is not internalized in Romanian universities. The hypotheses are taken from the public policy literature as well as the literature on post-communist transitions. They are then tested on empirical data consisting of national policy documents on quality assurance and 187 semi-structured interviews with around 327 people (managers, faculty members, administrators and students) in 5 universities. After an analysis of the evidence, we argue that there are top-down problems with the internalization of quality assurance, caused by ambiguous and inconsistent national regulations focused on multilayered evaluation procedures. At the same time, problems arise from the interpretation of quality assurance at lower levels of decision-making. These hypotheses are then used to construct a narrative of why Romanian universities fail to internalize quality assurance.

The paper proceeds as follows. It starts with a short background of the history of QA in Romanian higher education, with an emphasis on difficulties encountered. In order to explain problems in the internalization of QA, we then provide some conceptual clarifications on the notion of 'quality assurance' and the differences between its 'internal' and 'external' variants. Next, we advance five hypotheses for the failure to internalize QA in Romanian higher education institutions. After presenting our research design, we put forward the analysis of our empirical data and discuss its implications.

2.3. Internal Quality Assurance in Romanian Universities - a Mere Formality?

In the Romanian higher education system, QA exists as such since 2005, when the government passed an Emergency Ordinance to comply with the 'European Standards and Guidelines on Quality Assurance in Higher Education' (2005). Before this date, the idea of quality management was limited to the accreditation of higher education institutions, regulated since 1993 in order to tackle the mushrooming of the private sector – a common phenomenon in post-communist countries (Scott 2002). Throughout the 1990s, a National Council for Academic Evaluation and Accreditation (CNEEA) was appointed by the Ministry of Education to run the accreditation process, and focused on staffing, infrastructure, management and administration capacities (Păunescu, Florian, and Hâncean 2012, 317). The 2005 legislation created a new autonomous public institution – the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) – that took over the accreditation process and was entrusted with responsibilities in the authorization of study programs and external quality assurance more broadly. The law explicitly distinguished internal from external quality assurance, and specific provisions focused on external evaluations – defined as "multi-criteria examinations of the extent to which a higher education institution fulfills the reference standards" (Emergency Ordinance 75/2005, Art 3[2]). Accordingly, quality was to be 'assured' through "a set of activities meant to develop the capacity of universities to elaborate, plan and implement study programs, thus gaining beneficiaries' trust that the institution is maintaining quality standards" (Ibid, Art 3[3]). More

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importantly however, external quality assurance was linked with the accreditation of universities, upon which ARACIS was to decide.

Since universities depended on ARACIS for their legal survival, they formally complied with external requirements for quality assurance without necessarily developing systems of their own (Vlăsceanu et al. 2011, 25). As a result, universities failed to consider internal quality assurance (IQA) as a managerial instrument meant to enhance the quality of education (Păunescu, Vlăsceanu, and Miroiu 2011, 30–31); instead, they viewed it as an auxiliary bureaucratic procedure mentioned in the organizational chart but separated from the daily activities of teaching and learning in the university. In the absence of a "local culture of quality" (Vlăsceanu et al. 2011, 26), IQA was just another 'empty-shell' institution imported into the Romanian higher education landscape, which came to be implemented without substantive effects.

But if QA were to have 'substantive effects' at the level of universities, how would they look like? The next section reflects on this issue from a theoretical perspective.

2.4. Conceptual Notes on 'Quality Assurance'

From an analytical point of view, we suggest that the problem with the lack of substantive effects in the implementation of quality assurance stems from the fact that universities only focus on 'compliance' with the rules imposed by QA policy, without identifying with or believing in the underlying ideas behind it. More specifically, academics in Romanian universities - for whatever reasons - do not internalize the various policies and norms entailed in QA. Indeed, if all Romanian academics would believe in the necessity of QA-related evaluation practices, we would probably not be discussing this particular policy problem[16]. The present section expands on the issue of 'internalization' by explaining our understanding of 'quality assurance' and the normative connotations behind it.

What we mean with the concept of quality assurance is a variety of techniques tasked with the evaluation of higher education and research with the purpose of improving its quality. These practices have in common that they place a normative appeal on 'continuous self-improvement' and 'stakeholder communication', embedded in procedures that are subject to inspection by peers and/or professional evaluators. The concept thus includes, among others, institutional evaluations, the accreditation of study programs, or even league tables made by governmental bodies. However, it probably does not cover managerial attitudes with a different normative appeal (such as loyalty to superiors, or cut-throat competition with peers) or evaluations of specific professional 'products' rather than the professional as such (e.g. peer review in academic publishing). Nevertheless, it is perhaps not so easy to draw clear boundaries around the technical and normative aspects of QA. The concept has been controversial as to how it can best be adapted to higher education, culminating in a variety of different approaches and terms. We thus see a mushrooming of words like 'audits', 'evaluations', 'reviews' and 'accreditations' and a myriad of acronyms like 'ESG', 'ISO', 'EFQM', 'PDCA-cycles' or 'TQM'[17] - each denoting different techniques of 'doing QA' as well as different people involved in this practice.

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16 Unless, of course, these policies would produce some unintended consequences. In that case, we would probably turn around the question and ask why the academics are so eager to internalize the policies.

17 These acronyms do not cover up any clear meaning. 'ESG' is used to denote the 'European Standards and Guidelines on Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area'; 'EFQM' stands for 'European Foundation for Quality Management' an

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While many debate the differences between these instruments, we think it is important to analyze the shared ways of thinking behind them, their common procedures and the interaction between their various forms. In this sense, we aim to analyze the phenomenon that has sometimes been referred to as an 'audit culture' (Shore and Wright 1999; Strathern 2000) or even an 'audit society' (Power 1997). Analyzing the shared way of thinking behind these instruments is important, because some common conceptual distinctions may not be as easy as they seem. The distinction between 'Internal Quality Assurance' and 'External Quality Assurance' is one chief example. The literature often makes this distinction, whereby: "Internal quality assurance refers to those policies and practices whereby academic institutions themselves monitor and improve the quality of their education provision, while external quality assurance refers to supra-institutional policies and practices whereby the quality of higher education institutions and programs is assured" (Dill and Beerkens 2010, 4).

This distinction is relevant because one of the key reference documents, the 'European Standards and Guidelines on Quality Assurance', places the main responsibility for QA on the shoulders of 'higher education institutions' (ENQA 2005). Indeed, the main policy documents in Romanian higher education make the same distinction[18]. But is it so easy to separate the 'internal' from the 'external'? The professional scholar, student or departmental coordinator can consider both types of quality assurance as 'external'. Inspectors with a mandate from the 'state' or from the 'rector' may be equally insensitive to departmental standards and practices. More importantly perhaps, both 'external' and 'internal' QA are the object of public policy. Indeed, it is the purpose of much 'external' QA to analyze the functioning of the 'internal' QA system. In other words, it is important to question whether 'internal' and 'external' can be disentangled so easily.

A second – and related – conceptual distinction is often made between quality assurance for 'accountability' and for 'improvement', respectively. While the former notion emphasizes the control aspect of QA, the second emphasizes the reflexive aspect (Bovens 2010). While this may seem a useful conceptual line, the border is also hard to draw in practice. Even the hardest forms of control are often justified through the language of improvement (Shore and Wright 1999). Therefore, the relevant question to ask is: 'accountability' and 'improvement' for whom? A specific change in teaching and learning methodology may be considered as an improvement by the government, and at the same time as regress by professionals, or vice versa.

In sum, then, the theoretical discussion on quality assurance requires us to unpack distinctions and analyze what they mean for those involved in its various practices. The following section will continue this discussion and propose various reasons why Romanian universities do not internalize quality assurance.

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organization that has promoted a so-called 'Excellence-model' of quality assurance; 'PDCA-Cycle' stands for 'Plan-Do-Check-Act-Cycle'; Finally, 'TQM' stands for 'Total Quality Management'.

18 This is at least the case for Emergency Ordinance 75/2005, the ARACIS Methodology, and Law 01/2011 on Education. These three texts can be considered as the reference texts on quality assurance in Romanian higher education.

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2.5. Hypotheses on the Failure to Internalize Quality Assurance

We present five possible hypotheses as to why quality assurance is not internalized in Romanian higher education. These are to be seen as complementary rather than contradictory, as they are derived from public debates on higher education as well as from public policy frameworks and political science literature applicable to higher education. The following table gives a schematic overview over our hypotheses. Although we probably cannot disprove any of them, we believe that the likelihood of each hypothesis can be reduced if we do not find any empirical evidence to support it. Each hypothesis is discussed in more detail below with reference to what type of empirical material we expect to find.

Number	Hypothesis
H_1	*Quality assurance is not internalized because of academic 'complacency'.*
H_2	*Quality assurance is not internalized because of ambiguous and inconsistent national regulations.*
H_3	*Quality assurance is not internalized because it lacks support from people 'on the ground'.*
H_4	*Quality assurance is not internalized because of institutional (communist) legacies from the past.*
H_5	*Quality assurance is not internalized because the market does not reward its operation.*

Table 2.1: *a schematic overview over the hypotheses regarding the internalization of quality assurance in Romanian universities.*

2.5.1. The Problem of Academic 'Complacency'

The most straightforward explanation why quality assurance is not internalized is because actors in universities do not see its purpose, since they are content with what they are doing in terms of quality. The reasoning behind illustrates a form of academic 'complacency': people believe that they are good at what they do, and as a result they do not think they need quality assurance (whether external or internal). For instance, ARACIS considers that one of the main weaknesses of QA in Romania is that "higher education institutions still remain too 'self-laudatory' instead of showing an understanding of the role of self-criticism concepts for QA and the quality enhancement activities" (ARACIS Self-Evaluation Report 2013, p. 46).

Hypothesis 1: Quality assurance is not internalized because of academic 'complacency'.
If this hypothesis holds empirical value, we should find that people in universities are often self-praising about their activities while seldom reflecting critically about themselves, their colleagues, or their university. Acknowledging weaknesses is perceived as wrong or even 'unethical', especially if it relates to the activities of others.

2.5.2. Top-Down Policy Failure

If the problem does not originate from complacency, then the failure to internalize quality assurance might originate from the policies themselves. Top-down approaches in implementation studies view the policy process as a linear model wherein policy-makers specify straightforward policy objectives which are then

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put into practice at lower levels (Palumbo and Calista 1990). The underlying assumption is that actors at the top can control what happens in the implementation chain (Elmore 1978; Mazmanian and Sabatier 1989). By implication, policy failure can occur when central-level guidelines are not clear and consistent enough for implementers to follow (Van Meter and Van Horn 1975).

Hypothesis 2. Quality assurance is not internalized because of ambiguous and inconsistent national regulations.
If this hypothesis is correct, we expect to find that people in universities regard national frameworks on quality assurance as overregulated, difficult to disentangle for the purposes of implementation and changing too fast for them to have the necessary time to adjust.

2.5.3. Bottom-Up Policy Failure
A different, yet complementary perspective comes from the bottom-up approach in implementation studies, which argues that policy results are ultimately dependent on target populations and local deliverers (Berman 1978; Lipsky 1980; Matland 1995, 148–150). Accordingly, the success of a policy does not lie at the macro level with the framing of legal requirements (which of course provide certain structures of incentives), but at the micro level – where implementing actors need to be asked about their problems, goals and activities in order to identify relevant policies and ways to implement them (Hjern, Hanf, and Porter 1978).

Hypothesis 3: Quality assurance is not internalized because it lacks support from people 'on the ground'.
If this hypothesis is accurate, then we should find discordance between the narratives at central level and those of actors inside universities. Importantly, we should encounter actors in institutions who (at the very least) express skepticism about the content and necessity of QA-related evaluation practices, suggesting that national policies have little legitimacy or relevance on the ground.

2.5.4. Problems in Overcoming 'Legacies from the Past'
A prominent narrative in the transition literature in political science is that of 'communist legacies', which generally prevent people from adapting to new approaches and mindsets (Kopstein 2003). In its more popularized form, this 'legacy' is a sort of vicious circle, with people distrusting each other, while the state is not able or willing to engage with new institutional forms. In its more serious form, 'legacy' is taken as a sociological type of institutional 'path-dependence' (Thelen and Steinmo 1992; Mahoney 2000) which deems the policy process as incremental and overall resistant to change (Hall and Taylor 1996, 941). Bruszt and Stark (1998), for instance, emphasize that transition in Eastern Europe consists of institutional innovations, although these are both enabled and constrained by earlier political choices. In this sense, failure to absorb the new institutional set-up is a function of both past failures and faulty design.

Hypothesis 4: Quality assurance is not internalized because of institutional (communist) legacies from the past.
If such 'path-dependence' exists, we should find dominant institutional forms from the past that continue to influence actors today. In particular, we should find that academics refer to either formal or informal institutions with a long history that are still prevalent in the university. We should find that these institutions and historical practices stand in competition or simply overshadow the implementation of QA.

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2.5.5. Logic of the Market for Higher Education

In contrast to theoretical frameworks focused on path-dependence stands a well-known theory that emphasizes the logic of the market. Not only did post-socialist countries democratize, but some also imported a specific type of capitalism, namely neo-liberalism (Bohle and Greskovits 2012). Already in earlier discussions, some scholars highlighted that new market arrangements could erase both old structures and attempts at new institutional forms (Burawoy 2001). Although the market is also a typical institution that is subject to path-dependence, we think it warrants a separate hypothesis. The difference with 'path-dependence' is that the market is not so much a 'past-dependence', as a 'future-dependence' which influences operations in the present based on the actors' cost-benefit analysis (ibid).

Consequently, the market may both inhibit and encourage quality assurance practices depending on the individual preferences of actors (i.e. higher education institutions, students, professors, employers, etc.). On the one hand, the market may value less traditional academic standards of quality, while rewarding only the qualifications of graduates, which can lead to the cheap milling of diplomas. On the other hand, since the concept of quality management was pioneered in industry, the market may encourage a constant concern with quality assurance. Since we are concerned with answering why QA is not internalized, we will only discuss the former interpretation of the argument.

Hypothesis 5: Quality assurance is not internalized because the market does not reward its operation.
If this hypothesis holds empirical value, we expect to find that members of the university community do not perceive the market to reward quality assurance [19] Moreover, the internalization of QA should be perceived by these same actors as 'not worth the time and money'. Instead, their perception would be that the market rewards other type of activities, like popular study programs with little substance.

Having outlined the possible explanations for the failure to internalize QA in Romanian universities, the next sections move to presenting the data and the main findings. Before that, some elements of research design are introduced.

2.6. Research Design

From a methodological standpoint, our research follows in the tradition of interpretive policy analysis, exploring both discourses and the effects of ideas on practices (Fischer and Forester 1993; Finlayson et al. 2004). Within this framework, the purpose was to understand how actors in universities engage with quality assurance in terms of activities, effects and meanings associated with it (Milliken 1999). To this end, we examined three dimensions: a) what is being done at the university/faculty level under the heading 'Quality Assurance'; b) what these activities lead to, and c) how actors relate to this process.

In order to investigate how people "make sense of their lived experiences" (Yanow 2007, 410) with quality assurance, we used two primary methods - namely *interviews* and *document analysis*. Five field visits were

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19 Of course, it is also possible that the market rewards a specific type of QA. In this case, we would expect to find that actors in universities will use it strategically to respond to market needs.

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carried out between December 2012 and May 2013 to a representative sample[20] of universities: the West University of Timisoara (UVT), the Babes Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca (UBB), the Gheorghe Asachi Technical University (TUI) in Iasi, the Romanian American University (RAU) in Bucharest and the Lucian Blaga University (LBU) in Sibiu. During the visits (which followed a standard template), we conducted 187 semi-structured interviews with a cross-section of the university population - including management in rectorates and faculties, QA commissions and departments, individual professors, and students (327 people in total). All interviews were transcribed, allowing for a structured analysis of transcripts. We then constructed a database on quality assurance in Romania, consisting of national-level policy documents in conjunction with documents originating from universities (institutional reports on QA) and the interview data. Each document was analyzed with a similar coding procedure used in the computer program 'Atlas.TI'[21]. Inter-code reliability was ensured through a shared list of codes and mutual evaluations of coding practices. The coded material was later examined in light of the alternative hypotheses proposed. The findings are presented in the next section.

2.7. Findings

Table 2 below presents a concise summary of our findings. As shown in the table, hypotheses 2 and 3 were confirmed by the evidence gathered, while we did not find any support for hypotheses 1, 4 and 5.

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20 The sample ensured geographical variation, as well as variation between different types of university profiles (comprehensive/technical) and sizes (large universities with over 20,000 students, and smaller universities with less than 10,000 students). A private university (RAU) was included in the sample in order to avoid an overemphasis on public universities. For individual interviews, faculty members and students were selected by the administration of universities. Although this process was probably not entirely random, care was taken to visit as many faculties as possible (usually 2-4 faculties with various departments). This selection had a predictable effect - those who were selected being more likely to have internalized QA more strongly, or at least to be more aware of discussions on the topic. In other words, the findings will probably have a positive bias (Dillman, Smyth, and Christian 2009).

21 This coding process, as well as the resulting database is available (in anonymized form) for further research upon written request to the researchers.

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No.	Hypothesis	Supported by evidence?	Justification
H_1	*Quality assurance is not internalized because of academic 'complacency'.*	NO	While there were a few isolated cases of complacency, most interviewees were well aware of problems facing their professional lives and the weaknesses of their university. In fact, most interviewees would be interested in improving the quality of their work.
H_2	*Quality assurance is not internalized because of ambiguous and inconsistent national regulations.*	YES	The legislation and the ARACIS methodology are seen by members of the university community to regulate too many activities without actually addressing teaching and learning in any substantive way. Moreover, the policy context was described by our interviewees as highly unstable and inconsistent, creating more problems than solutions for those working in universities.
H_3	*Quality assurance is not internalized because it lacks support from people 'on the ground'.*	YES	Actors in universities often consider QA regulations as divorced from problems 'on the ground'. Simultaneously, the multiple evaluation procedures are questioned by many actors in universities in terms of both content and necessity. Some people manifested a need for a bottom-up debate as to what QA should entail.
H_4	*Quality assurance is not internalized because of institutional (communist) legacies from the past.*	NO	There have been no references to Romania's communist legacy as an inhibitor of QA reforms. Neither have there been any such references to ARACIS' predecessor CNEEA. When mention was given of 'history', it usually referred to QA projects before 2005 in the absence of legislation.
H_5	*Quality assurance is not internalized because the market does not reward its operation.*	NO	On the contrary, the market is often seen by members of the university community as a chief driver for QA-related activities. This was particularly so for the private university case. But even public universities increasingly started to link QA to their ability to remain competitive on the higher education market in the context of a declining number of students.

Table 2.2: *an overview over the hypotheses proposed and their empirical validation*

The empirical evidence thus goes against some of the dominant explanations for why universities fail to internalize quality assurance. Although we cannot definitely reject hypotheses 1, 4 and 5, we have not found enough empirical material to support them. In fact, when it comes to hypothesis 1, we often encountered the opposite situation: rather than being complacent, most interviewees manifested insecurity about their professional status and awareness of the gaps in their 'scientific' work, coupled with an evident desire for self-improvement. In a similar vein - in relation to hypotheses 4 and 5 - we discovered that quality assurance is not directly inhibited by 'communist legacies', but instead seems to be encouraged by market mechanisms. Indeed, the university that was most dependent on the market (the private one) had strongly internalized the improvement values associated with quality assurance.

Clearly, there is no single mechanism at play that prevents QA from being internalized in Romanian universities. The two hypotheses confirmed by empirical evidence are thus complementary rather than mutually exclusive – as such, we will aim to construct a narrative in which hypotheses 2 and 3 provide a 'full story' of the reasons why QA is not internalized. **The heart of the problem, according to our data, lies in the nature of policy-making in Romanian higher education - which fails in both its top-down and bottom-up dimensions.** On the one hand, policy failure originates from unclear and inconsistent legal provisions that only result in a bewildering array of evaluation procedures and administrative structures considered burdening by actors in universities. On the other hand, policy failure derives from the exclusion of lower-level actors from decision-making on QA policy; as a result, these actors feel no ownership over their IQA systems. On the contrary, they regard quality assurance as a tool of the government, imposed from above, with the purpose to control universities through various reporting mechanisms. As a form of passive dissent, they comply with QA requirements in a ritualistic manner - which is why the process fails to produce substantive quality enhancements.

Based on an initial analysis of empirical evidence for each hypothesis in turn, we constructed a narrative[22] as to why Romanian universities fail to internalize QA. In line with hypotheses 2 and 3, we present the 'story' below.

2.7.1 Top-Down Problems

The account starts at the macro level, with the design of national policies on quality assurance and higher education more broadly. Probably the most serious problem of the Romanian higher education system, as resulting from our data, comes from the unstable policy environment – higher education policies change very frequently, and so do procedures to ensure quality. Universities do not have a consistent set of rules to follow on QA and other activities in general, which creates confusion (since it is difficult to keep up-to-date with the latest legislative modifications) and prevents them from engaging in long-term planning. While the law on quality assurance has remained more or less in place since 2005, there have been many subsequent legal changes following the 2011 law on education, the classification exercise and associated legislation related to the evaluation of research centers (UEFISCDI 2010). Each of these changes has led to a build-up of frustrations about quality assurance and its supposed remedies among many academics. As expressed by one professor:

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22 In interpretive policy analysis, narratives are stories "participants are disposed to tell about policy situations" (Fischer and Forester 1993, 11) in an attempt to make sense of a socially constructed world. They play a key role in problem definition, providing "a view of what has to be done and what the expected consequences will be" (Fischer 2003, 161).

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"Regulations are constantly changing and it is hard to follow up on them. Some of the regulations are not coherent. We are constantly on stand-by. This creates confusion and we cannot plan for the future." (Decision-Maker, Professor, Female, NS0302).

The back-and-forth with the national classification system, whose legal status remains unclear[23], was an oft-cited example of policy instability affecting the implementation chain. Specific to internal quality assurance, recent legislation obliged universities to separate QA commissions operating under the rector from curriculum and quality commissions at the Senate level, which was criticized by implementing actors as overlapping and counterproductive because they are sometimes doing the same thing (Decision-Maker[24], Professor, Male, AM0102).

Since neither the law nor the methodology specifies the boundaries of QA, people tend to understand it according to their own agenda. For instance, managers at faculty level would often link QA with the enforcement of sanctions on their employees. In the absence of flexible labor legislation, some university managers claimed that they would like to use staff evaluations for command-and-control purposes, e.g. to fire people (Decision-Maker, Professor, Male, AM0203). While QA may very well have the role to keep track of professors' teaching and research activities, it can probably not substitute legal requirements on proper academic conduct. IQA may be the wrong tool to prevent violations of professional standards such as academic corruption, unmotivated absence from classes or defiance of basic student rights. This is where labor and even criminal law is supposed to come into effect. As one interviewee put it:

"We have moved from quality evaluation to quality control - this does not mean quality improvement exactly" (Decision-Maker, Professor, Male, AM0202).

In addition, the legal framework on QA is not straightforward to implement. For example, the ARACIS methodology emphasizes the production of documents outlining procedures rather than substantive performance indicators on teaching and learning. As one interviewee noticed:

"Many of the things discussed on QA at ARACIS or the university level are empty of any content. For example, there is little in the way of ARACIS criteria that checks if teaching is suitable and relevant for the departments concerned. There is also little in the way of checking what actually happens in the classroom. It is important to check facts, not paper reports" (Decision-Maker, Professor, Female, RS0802).

Although the legislation aims for the enhancement of quality by reference to numerous 'standards' and 'procedures', it is far from clear what they are supposed to achieve in terms of teaching and learning

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23 The hierarchization of study programs, whose legal basis lies in Ministerial Order no. 4174/13.05.2011, was a controversial measure introduced to classify higher education institutions in Romania according to teaching and research capacities and subsequently determine their financing. The funding effects of the classification were overturned by Emergency Ordinance 21/2012 and a university in Suceava even won an appeal case against the Ministry on the matter (2013). The classification as such still stands legal, without implications for financing.

24 In our coding, 'Decision-Makers' include: rectors, vice-rectors, deans, vice-dean, heads of department, senate members, senate/university-level CEAC; 'Administrators' are people working in Quality Assurance Departments or Faculty-level CEACs; 'Professors/Associate Professors/Lecturers/Assistant Professors' are academics not holding any hierarchical or QA-related position, whereas 'Students' can be undergraduate or postgraduate (both MA and PhD).

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outcomes. Moreover, since universities rarely have QA-trained people to understand and apply the technical language from the national level, it is hard for them to relate to QA activities.

Another macro-level problem refers to the requirement to establish several administrative structures layered on top of each other. Typically, an institution would have at university level a QA department (DMC) and a QA commission (University-CEAC) - both operating under the supervision of a vice-rector responsible for quality management. These structures are complemented by a department on scientific research (under the supervision of another vice-rector) and a Senate commission on curriculum and quality. At faculty level, there are quality assurance and evaluation commissions (Faculty-CEAC), usually headed by the dean or a vice-dean tasked with quality management. Within departments, specific people are sometimes appointed as QA responsible, but usually the tasks fall under the role of department heads. While all these structures are theoretically part of an integrated system, the relationship between them does not seem entirely clear to many interviewees. Usually, the Quality Assurance Department is the most active structure at university level, but the degree to which QA procedures are organized and followed up at faculty level is largely dependent on individual managerial initiatives.

Owing to such complex institutional structures, there is a tendency to multiply procedures that are not always needed. Does the Senate really have to be involved in evaluating programs before ARACIS visits? Do faculties and departments really have to operationalize the strategic plan each year, and produce a report on their activities? There is a lot of frustration about the level of bureaucratization involved in running the IQA system:

> "[We need] to stop working twice for the same thing. Why do I need to have a faculty report and a QA report? Are they not the same thing? Why do we need two different reports and formats?" (Decision-Maker, Professor, Male, RS0503).
>
> "Time management needs to become better. We are wasting a lot of time on useless things" (Decision-Maker, Lecturer, Male, KG075).
>
> "The QA process is characterized by huge quantities of bureaucratic requirements. We are lucky that the Vice-Dean for Quality Management takes care of these documents" (Decision-Maker, Professor, Male, RS0604).

So far, the narrative presented reflects top-down aspects of the problems to internalize quality assurance. **But our data shows that even if the national regulations would have been perfectly clear and consistent, they may not have been applied on the ground**. There are significant bottom-up elements to consider, and they are presented next.

2.7.2 Bottom-Up Problems
Most significantly, our data suggests that members of the university community do not feel ownership over their IQA systems. Since there are direct links between external evaluations and the legal survival of universities, respondents seem to understand IQA as preparation for external inspection rather than internal reflection on teaching and learning:

> "The QA system was only created in response to the law and ARACIS requirements - there is no point to hide this fact" (Decision-Maker, Associate Professor, Male, AM1201).

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"We are forced by all these different institutions, ARACIS, EUA, to do such evaluations" (Decision-Maker, Professor, Male, AM0202).

This understanding highlights that IQA is implemented mainly to comply with the law and governmental regulations rather than to actually improve institutional quality. In this sense, QA is viewed as something imposed from the outside, through procedures meant to artificially create a 'quality culture'. But since the focus is on reporting (externally), the IQA system is regarded as a tool of government designed to control universities by invoking the argument of accountability - which is perceived especially by university and faculty management as infringing upon university autonomy. Further in the implementation chain, there is no wonder that people react strategically:

"We were even told from the university level: you do what you think is best, and don't take the self-evaluation too seriously" (Associate Professor, Male, AM0502).

Accordingly, people passively try to subvert this tool of government by carrying it out in a ritualistic fashion while hiding what they are really doing. Instead of open contestation, there is a sort of resignation and task avoidance, which is why QA cannot become internalized. For instance, most respondents believe that evaluation criteria are imposed from above by policy-makers with little experience in running a university:

"The system is designed by bureaucrats who have never been in a university. Now this system meets the everyday reality of people who try to cope" (Lecturer, Male, NS0902).

"Universities need to be autonomous. (…) they need to be free to set their own path to excellence rather than being constrained by excessive regulation from the central level" (Decision-Maker, Associate Professor, Female, RS0105).

Many problems are derived from here. One interviewee referred to the difficulty to comply with the recently-imposed research standards, given both the lack of resources (e.g. access to international databases) and expertise to conduct research at a European level. The unintended effect was that research quality probably decreased as a result:

"[Research indicators] have asked us to become 'writing machines'. Books are written like this (snaps fingers) without reflecting on what should be written" (Administrator, Assistant Professor, Female, KG0905).

"I take information from students diploma projects. I give them some research to do, and I maybe get some papers from the research. It is maybe not so good, but both the student and I gain from this". (Associate Professor, Male, KG0503)

Simultaneously, assessment procedures do not account for differences between disciplines and fields of research. For example, in technical fields manuals are in great demand because of the fast-changing nature of the disciplines; however, their production is not counted as research (Decision-Maker, Associate Professor, Male, AM1003).

Moreover, QA procedures are often perceived as disconnected from the actual problems and goals universities have:

"QA is not related to the improvement of quality: there has never been a bottom-up debate on what it should entail" (Postgraduate Student, Male, AM0701).

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For the average academic, QA has little utility in generating any type of change unless there is a personal desire for self-improvement. Without the connection between QA procedures and quality improvement, many academics see the QA process as purposeless and only taking important time from their teaching and research activities:

> "I was tormented years in a row by all this paperwork [for ARACIS evaluations]; when should you have time for research when you have all these additional tasks?" (Lecturer, Male, AM1301).

In the language of the bottom-up implementation literature, this discussion can be summarized by claiming that local implementers (individual academics) do not see IQA as responding to their institutional needs and goals, their understandings of quality and how this should be achieved. Although there are individual exceptions, IQA thus fails to produce the quality improvements stated as objective.

2.8. Conclusion and Discussion

Despite being wrapped in a technical, enhancement-driven discourse, the discussion on the internalization of quality assurance is in fact as multifaceted as it is politically sensitive. This paper has demonstrated that there is no straightforward way to understand why actors in universities fail to routinize QA practices in their activities and subsequently use them to generate quality improvements, since the mechanisms at play are manifold. The analysis of the Romanian case has shown that problems revolve around the process of policy-making, with underlying causes at both the macro level (top-down failure) and the micro level (bottom-up failure). Indeed, the inconsistency and ambiguity of national regulations – not linked to teaching and learning in any substantive way - determine actors in universities to feel burdened by QA and confused as to how they should implement and make use of its activities. Moreover, there is some discordance between central-level narratives focused on quality enhancement and accountability and those of actors in universities, who generally feel no ownership over their IQA systems and fail to see the purpose of the multiple evaluation procedures. Therefore, actors on the ground reject QA practices as unnecessary and infringing upon university autonomy, which is why they subsequently perform them in a superficial manner – as a form of passive dissent. In the end, there can be no talk of improving QA processes in the Romanian higher education system without direct involvement and support from the people for whom they are effectively designed.

In light of the conceptual clarifications presented earlier in this paper, our findings may appear less surprising. Undeniably, it is difficult to separate the 'internal' from the 'external' when it comes to quality assurance. Academics are inclined to perceive all evaluations as 'external', regardless if they are conducted by governmental agencies/international bodies or their own institutions. At the same time, professional evaluators may miss the specificities of individual departments and disciplines, touching upon the sensitivities of local actors who thus become less open to move beyond ritualistic compliance with QA requirements. The issue hence returns to the second conceptual element mentioned, namely *for whom* is QA supposed to produce 'accountability' and 'improvement'? For individual academics in the universities that we visited, the answer is 'not for us'. On the contrary, the government is seen as the main beneficiary of all evaluation procedures, followed perhaps by the university management to a lesser extent. As long as they don't see it in their best interest, actors in universities have no motivation to internalize quality assurance - which as a result fails to deliver on the promised quality enhancement objective.

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Chapter 3: The Changing Meaning of 'Quality' in Romanian Universities

3.1. Abstract

This paper explores how policy instruments construct a new meaning of 'quality' in Romanian universities. The findings are based on discourse analysis of official documents and semi-structured interviews with administrators, professors and students in five universities. Following a Foucaldian approach, we argue that 'quality' has come to mean 'scoring high in evaluations' in both the policy discourse and the accounts of people in universities. Academics are subjected to a wide array of evaluation techniques that often feature contradictory standards. We find that these evaluations have become part of professional life and affect how faculty engages with teaching and research. These evaluations change the type of work that faculty engage with, the career paths they have and their feelings of professional pride. But there are important limitations as well: the evaluations often have no follow-up, the policies are constantly changing, and resources are unavailable to support substantive changes.

3.2. Introduction

This paper asks *'how do policy instruments construct the meaning of 'quality' in Romanian universities?'* In order to reconstruct the meaning of quality, we analyse discourse in official documents and interviews with administrators, professors and students in universities[25]. We identify a predominant way to engage with quality as 'scoring high in evaluations'. The finding reflects Foucault's ideas on technologies of power: faculty inside universities also come to associate quality with their results in evaluations. However, there are also boundaries to these instruments that allow for passive obstruction whenever this strategy is available.

The paper proceeds as follows. We begin by introducing our analytical framework drawing on 'quality culture' debates in higher education in conjunction with the governmentality literature. We then dive into the Romanian case by briefly outlining our research design and presenting our findings along three main questions about discourse (Milliken, 1999); (1) what does the discourse on quality signify, (2) what does it produce and (3) what are its boundaries. In the conclusion, we will come back to our analytical discussion.

3.3 Quality Culture

We start our analysis from the observation that the meaning of quality is culturally bound; it is socially constructed. To say that something is socially constructed is to say that there is nothing natural or obvious about it (Hacking, 1999). Quality is 'observer-relative' (Searle, 1995), namely we cannot make sense of this concept without analysing the meanings it has for the people that employ it. To get closer to the meaning of quality, we thus need to ask question like 'quality for whom?', 'quality of what?' and 'how is quality related to other concerns?' As argued by Taylor (1987, p. 42), meaning is always "for a subject, of

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something, in a field". The only way to meaningfully study this phenomenon is thus by engaging with those people that use the term frequently. For this reason, we have spent considerable time in Romanian universities with professors, students and administrators, as well as reading various policy documents.

For many academics, this probably appeals to intuition. What passes for 'inspiring' research in cultural anthropology is very different from 'excellence' in applied chemistry or theoretical physics. Similarly, what is good teaching in a German Department of Law is quite different from that in an American liberal arts college. Indeed, perhaps because of this intuitive appeal, many policy documents on higher education speak of promoting and establishing a 'quality culture' (ENQA, 2005, EUA, 2006, European Commission, 2009, Eurydice, 2012). And academic debates on 'quality' often feature lengthy debates on concepts resulting in such vague terminology as 'fitness for purpose' (Harvey and Green, 1993). For these reasons, we do not think we are doing something radical if we propose to study the notion of quality as a culture. Indeed, previous research has already studied the various academic cultures.

A good example of research on academic culture is Becher and Trowler's work on 'Academic Tribes and Territories' (Becher and Trowler, 2001). In this book, the authors argued that English and American university life was fragmented along almost tribal lines, associated with various rituals and conflicts. Along similar lines, we propose to study concepts of quality. Quality cultures are embedded in the practices of scientific disciplines, in departmental teaching norms, in the accepted forms of interaction between students and professors, and so on. If we realise this, we can move beyond the simple idea that a 'quality culture' needs to be *established* through policy initiatives. Instead, we can focus on how these policy instruments are *changing* the culture of universities.

This debate about policy instruments has been particularly visible in British research on this topic. Good examples are Power's (1997) book on the "Audit Society" and Strathern's (2000) collection on 'Audit Cultures'. These authors argue that various 'audit instruments' have established a professional obsession with the evaluation of academic work (Shore and Wright, 1999). As powerfully argued by Ball, "[it] is not that performativity gets in the way of 'real' academic work or 'proper' learning, it is a vehicle for changing what academic work and learning are!*" (Ball, 2003, p. 226). We will aim to contribute to this discussion by empirically analysing a quality culture in a quite different political-historical setting.

While these studies have contributed important insights into the new quality culture, we think there are also limitations. In particular, we question whether we are facing a hegemonic and pervasive 'quality regime'. Rather, we think that there are many contradictions in the quality culture that leave space for interpretation and conflict. Moreover, there is a risk in the literature of glorifying the role of 'professionals', or perhaps worse, the system that preceded it. We are conscious that we are studying a case in which there are serious doubts about the moral underpinnings of such a position. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to draw some boundaries around the discourse.

Given the focus of our research question on policy instrumentation, we examine 'meanings' and 'representations' of quality embedded in specific policy instruments, as well as for the people they are addressed to. From a theoretical perspective, such an approach places us in the research programme of the

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governmentality literature inspired by the work of Michel Foucault, which we briefly discuss in the next section.

3.4. Quality and Governmentality

While governmentality studies can be very diverse and an extensive literature review is beyond the purpose of this paper, two elements are of concern to us, reflecting two sides of the same coin: the government and its subjects. The first revolves around the concepts of 'governmental reason' (or rationality) and 'technologies' (or techniques) of government. The second addresses the process of subjectification by these tools of government.

First, "government involves various forms of thought about the nature of rule and knowledge of who and what are to be governed" (Dean, 2010, p. 28). Public policy effectively defines the areas and subjects of the act of government, the goals to be followed and the means to achieve them. This is manifested in the form of 'policy technologies' (Ball, 2003) or 'policy instruments' (Lascoumes and Le Gales, 2007) that shape the activities, interactions, values and identities of the targeted actors. In order to be acceptable, policy technologies are always underpinned and legitimated by a form of discourse 'that stakes a claim to rationality' (Olssen, 1999, p. 2). In other words, policy is always rationalized and justified at the discursive level as 'the best way to solve a problem' - albeit the problem is itself a social construction of some policy initiators at a particular moment in time. When it comes to meanings of quality in higher education, these ideas generate pertinent questions with regard to 'rationalities' and 'technologies' of government underlying the discourse on quality. How does quality feature in the policy discourse? How does it translate into specific policy instruments? These are the issues that we address empirically when examining the Romanian case.

The second element relevant for our analysis refers to the process of subjectification, that is the constitution of individual subjects as determined by power, and the resistance to this process (Heller, 1996). For Foucault, technologies and rationalities of governments can be turned around into 'counter-conducts' (Gordon, 1991, p. 5). To put it differently, individuals maintain the agency to "utilise strategies of power to manage and affect their constitution as subjects through a recognition of the possible 'subject positions' available, and through resistance, to change history" (Olssen 1999, 32). The only way individuals can manifest resistance is therefore by using the very discourse of power technologies, which paradoxically ensures their reinforcement and perpetuation (Ball 2003). For the discussion on the social construction of quality in higher education, subjectification and resistance are important because they allow us to understand the responses of actors in universities to policy instruments related to quality. What do these instruments lead to at the institutional and personal level? What are their limitations? And how does resistance manifest itself? This is the second set of questions we attempted to answer in our study.

To conclude the theoretical excursus into governmentality, we argue that it provides a useful analytical lens to approach our empirical study on meanings of quality in Romanian higher education. On the one hand, we are concerned with rationalities or 'mentalities' of governments engaging with quality-related instruments, while on the other hand we are interested in the way in which these are resisted and reinforced by the people interacting with them on a daily basis. Having outlined our theoretical perspective, we now move to describing our research design and findings.

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3.5. Research Design

From a methodological standpoint, our research follows in the tradition of interpretive policy analysis, exploring both discourses and the effects of ideas on practices (Fischer, 1995, Finlayson et al., 2004). Within this framework, the purpose was to understand how actors in universities engage with quality assurance in terms of activities, effects and limits associated with it (Milliken 1999). To this end, we examined three dimensions, namely discourse as (a) 'a systems of signification', that is how quality is defined and debated in Romanian higher education; b) 'discourse productivity', namely how the discourse on quality gives rise to practices in the universities, and c) 'the play of practice', that is the limits of quality assurance and how it interacts with other policies in higher education (Milliken, 1999). While the former is directly connected to theoretical debates on 'governmentalities' and policy technologies behind quality-related instruments, the other two are more about subjects and their 'counter-conducts' to the practices proposed.

We try to 'drill down' from the macro to the micro-level in order to understand how 'quality' is constructed in Romanian universities. Our research is therefore mostly focused on how policy documents define quality and how people in universities engage with these definitions. In order to investigate how people "make sense of their lived experiences" (Yanow, 2007, p. 410), we used two primary methods - namely interviews and documentary analysis. Five field visits were carried out between December 2012 and May 2013 to a sample of universities: the West University of Timisoara, the Babes Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, the Gheorghe Asachi Technical University in Iasi, the Romanian American University in Bucharest and the Lucian Blaga University in Sibiu.

During the visits (which followed a standard template), we conducted 187 semi-structured interviews with a cross-section of 327 members of the university population - including management in rectorates and faculties, quality commissions and departments, individual professors, and students. All interviews were transcribed, allowing for a structured analysis of transcripts. We then constructed a database, consisting of national-level policy documents in conjunction with documents originating from universities and the interview data[26]. Each document was analysed with a similar coding procedure used in the computer program 'Atlas.TI. Inter-code reliability was ensured through a shared list of codes and mutual evaluations of coding practices. The findings are presented in the next sections.

3.6. The Legitimation and Rationalisation of Quality in Romanian universities

We begin by examining the context in which quality entered the higher education discourse in governmental documents. Based on the narratives of policy-makers themselves, we can identify three main legitimations for the policy instruments on quality. All of them are rooted in global and regional developments in higher education, and are often framed as challenges that the Romanian system had to overcome since the fall of the communist regime. In this sense, they simultaneously fulfil the function of legitimation and rationalization, because they explain why the Romanian higher education system needed to address quality concerns.

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26 The database and coding scheme (both in the English language) are available upon written request to the authors.

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1. Quality and private for-profit higher education

The first rationalisation is that Romania introduced an accreditation scheme in response to the privatisation of higher education in the post-communist transition. This narrative captures an important part of the regulation of universities throughout the 1990s. In 1993, the government and the World Bank had established an 'independent' agency - CNEEA[27] - that accredited both public and private universities (Beju, 1993, ARACIS, 2009). Politicians watched closely, and Parliament maintained the final authority to license universities to operate (and, conversely, to axe those that did not fulfil the criteria). In this storyline, the accreditation agency was perceived as having 'taken the role of the quality police protecting the monopoly of traditional institutions' (Tomusk, 2000, p. 177). The public universities were automatically accredited, while the private universities had to prove their worth. To put it differently, the accreditation scheme was 'effectively in the control of the [public] élite institutions' (Temple and Billing, 2003, p. 255). In sum, although the accreditation scheme facilitated the market entry of those private universities that met the standards, it had little effect on the functioning of the traditional public universities.

2. Quality and 'Europeanisation'

The second rationalisation presents a number of evaluation tools as necessary steps in Romania's membership of the Bologna Process (ARACIS, 2009, Wodak and Fairclough, 2010). This narrative goes a long way to explain the legislative changes to the accreditation system in 2005/6 as well as some more recent initiatives. In 2005, the Romanian minister for education, Mircea Miclea, attended the Bergen Summit of the Bologna Process where he and his colleagues adopted the 'European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education' (ENQA, 2005). Upon returning to Bucharest, the minister issued an emergency ordinance (75/2005) on 'education quality assurance'. The ordinance created a new agency, ARACIS, which would be more independent from politics and would apply new standards.

This 'Europeanisation' argument also legitimizes more recent policy instruments. Between 2010-2012, Romania hosted the secretariat of the Bologna Process and organised several events, including a European ministerial summit. As a consequence, many Romanian universities sought – and received – European project funding. Moreover, the education minister passed a new law in 2011, containing a number of initiatives to boost the quality of Romanian universities. These matched the dominant European ideas at the time, such as ranking and classifying the universities and study programmes[28]. The law also required the universities to be evaluated by an international organisation.

3. Quality, plagiarism and corruption

The third rationalisation is more scandal-ridden and emphasises the endemic corruption and plagiarism in Romanian universities. A prominent example of this storyline is presented in a series of articles published by the scientific journal *Nature* about Romanian universities. The articles present a series of reforms to impose quality standards as well as attempts by the 'old guard' (including several cabinet members) to fight

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27 National Council for Evaluation and Accreditation. This agency was later succeeded by ARACIS, the Romanian National Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education.

[28] cf. European Commission. *COM (2011) 567 Final Supporting Growth and Jobs – an Agenda for the Modernisation of Europe's Higher Education Systems* Brussels: EC.

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these initiatives (Abbott, 2011, 2013). The 2011 Law on National Education[29] provides several instruments to impose standards on research and teaching, such as research assessments, the involvement of foreign scientists in reviewing grant applications and increased standards for job positions. In recent legislative changes, however, many of these initiatives have been scaled down or abolished.

While each of these three storylines captures important elements of the governmental rationalities on quality, they also leave open questions. First, we wonder what these policy instruments share. Although there may be complementarities between their aims, there may also be some contradictions. Europeanisation may have fuelled privatisation as much as providing tools to regulate it, for instance. So we are left with questions about the red thread through these policy instruments. Do they impose new standards of quality on the universities? What are the people in universities to make of contradictory standards? Second, there is the question on the impact of these discourses on the professors and students inside the universities. The process of subjectification here is rather perverse, as the storylines accord little - if any - agency to 'ordinary' professors and students. If professors are mentioned at all, it is as people who cheat and seek profits. Quality can thus become a double-bitted axe for people in the profession; however, the discussion on meanings of quality is more intricate and makes the topic of the following section.

3.7. What does the discourse on quality signify?

To start with, the primary task is to understand quality as a 'system of signification'. Here we aim to identify what quality assurance means and what it does not mean. To this end, we first reconstruct the meanings of 'quality' in several policy documents. We then discuss how the interviewees try to make sense of the standards embedded in these policy documents. The point here is not to discuss all standards in detail, but rather to point out the complexities in developing a coherent interpretation of the 'meaning of quality'. From a theoretical perspective, this is an exercise untangling 'technologies of government' that shape the activities, interactions, values and identities of the targeted actors.

One possible starting point for the analysis is the law on education quality assurance[30]. The law defines "[e]ducation quality" as *"the set of features of any training program and of any of its providers that fulfills the expectations of the beneficiaries, as well as the quality standards"*[31]. In other words, quality is to be defined by the 'beneficiaries', which are separated into 'direct beneficiaries' (students) and 'indirect beneficiaries' (employers, the society as a whole)[32]. However, the article also adds 'quality standards' to the definition of 'quality'. It is here that we quickly run into problems. Once we develop an overview over the different standards defined in the law and in national policy documents, we find a variety of standards, all embedded in different instruments to measure quality. The following table presents these different standards, ranging from quality assurance, to classifications and rankings and standards for promotion:

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[29] Law 01/2011 on National Education.

[30] Unfortunately the law only defines *education* quality, it does not defined 'research quality'.

[31] Law 87/2006 on the approval of the Government Emergency Ordinance No. 75/2005 regarding the education quality assurance, Art. 3

[32] ibid, Art 2(d) and (e).

Category	Instruments	Quality standards defined in:
Quality assurance	Institutional evaluation and accreditation	3 areas, 14 criteria, 16 standards, 43 performance indicators[33]
	Programme evaluation and accreditation	3 areas, 14 criteria, 16 standards, 43 performance indicators as well as 'specific standards of specialist committees'[34]
	Evaluation of doctoral schools	Unclear, draft mentions 3 areas, 14 criteria, 65 performance indicators[35]
Classification and ranking	Institutional classification	4 criteria, 11 standards, 91 variables[36]
	Programme ranking	4 criteria, 10 standards, 80 variables[37]
	Institutional evaluation	4 central questions[38]
Romanian national research assessment exercise	Research evaluation	4 criteria, 11 indicators [39]
Standards for promotion	Legal standards for promotion	Unclear, standards to evaluate personal scientific work[40]
	Habilitation standards	Unclear, standards to evaluate personal scientific work[41]
Audits by various national agencies	Audits of various managerial practices like ethics, financing, promotions, etc.	Unclear, methodologies not published[42].

Table 3.1: *National policies to improve quality of teaching and research in Romanian universities.*

At the very least, this table makes it obvious that it is no easy task to figure out what the 'quality standards' are. There are at least ten policy instruments to follow, each setting their own 'standards' for quality. Some of these standards are simply unclear, because they are written down in draft texts or have been amended so many times that no one has been able to publish a final version. For instance, the draft methodology to

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[33] ARACIS. 2006. Methodology.

[34] Ibid, ARACIS. 2006. Specific standards of specialist committees. Available at <http://www.aracis.ro/uploads/media/Standarde_specifice_ale_comisiilor_de_specialitate.zip>.

[35] The methodology for the evaluation of doctoral schools exists only in draft form and has, until now, only been piloted. The draft is available at <http://administraresite.edu.ro/index.php/articles/16691>

[36] Ministerial Ordinance OMECTS nr. 4174/13.05.2011

[37] ibid.

[38] EUA. 2012. Institutional Evaluation Programme: Guidelines for institutions. Project "Ready to innovate, ready to better address the local needs. Quality and diversity of Romanian Universities". Brussels: EUA.

[39] UEFISCDI. 2010. Romanian Research Assessment Exercise (RRAE) General Assessment Methodology. Bucharest: UEFISCDI.

[40] Law 01/2011 on National Education, Art 295-297 and subsequently Ministerial Ordinance OMECTS nr. 6560/2012 and draft amendments to OMECTS nr. 6560/16.07.2013.

[41] Ministerial Order. OMECTS 5691/27.10.2011 on the CNATDCU Habilitation Thesis.

42 Law 01/2011 on National Education, Art 218-219

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evaluate doctoral schools has been questioned so much that the ministry has refused to publish a final version.

Some of these standards are probably complementary. It could perhaps be argued that quality means something different at the individual level than at the institutional level. Thus, different instruments may be needed to evaluate individual academics and universities as organisations. Or, similarly, there may be different standards for quality in teaching and quality in scientific research. But other standards are clearly contradictory. As one interviewee puts it:

> „Sometimes these criteria simply contradict each other: look for example at the ranking process that happened based on the Funeriu law [01/2011 on National Education]. The criteria that existed there focused on research, as opposed to teaching and outcomes, and they were even calculated after the evaluation process" (Decision-maker, Associate Professor, Female, RS0105).

In other words, it is not so easy to come up with a clear answer to what quality means in the policy documents. There are many contradictions and different points of view about quality in both education and research. But it is also clear that this talk is not just 'cheap'; the discourse has set something in motion in people's thinking and action. The next section will discuss in more detail what these debates produce in the universities.

3.8. What does the discourse about quality produce?

If it is not so easy to answer what the 'quality' means, it is perhaps more straightforward to analyse what all this talk about quality leads to. The point here is that the discourse is not something abstract that is debated 'out there'. Despite all the disagreements, it is something that becomes embedded in power relations, and in (institutional) practices that affect people's careers. From a theoretical perspective, this part illustrates the position of subjects and their response to 'power technologies' related to quality. We will try to show how the evaluation instruments are creating an 'evaluation culture' in the universities.

As can perhaps be expected, quality assurance produces quite a broad range of activities in universities. These practices can be found in every university, at multiple levels of decision-making. The following table gives a summary overview over these structures.

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University level	Faculty and Department level
Administrative structures, such as vice-rector positions for academic quality and scientific research, a department on teaching quality, a department on scientific research, a commission on quality and evaluation (CEAC) and various senate commissions on quality.	*Administrative structures,* such as a faculty commission on quality and evaluation, specific positions for vice-deans.
Internal reviews, such as institutional reviews, internal programme reviews, research reviews and financial audits.	*Evaluations of faculty*, such as peer reviews, self-evaluations and managerial evaluations.
Documents, such as a quality policy, quality reports and an internal research strategy.	*Documents*, such as a faculty-level quality policy, quality reports, publication lists, etc.
Surveys, such as alumni questionnaires or student questionnaires.	*Formal deliberation,* such as discussions on curricula and research.
	Informal deliberation, such as discussions at the coffee machine or in class.

Table 3.2: *The various practices to evaluate quality in Romanian universities.*

One of the most obvious effects of these practices, then, is that they have increased the administrative burden on the universities. Although it is hard to put a financial figure on these activities, we estimate that a large university pays around RON 1.8 million, or around € 250.000 annually for the various activities related to quality assurance. This is most likely a conservative estimate, since it does not include the salaries of non-technical staff involved in the evaluation of quality. The growing administration is also reflected in a growing number of people employed in administrative positions or having administrative duties next to their academic careers. It is an attractive career, moreover, because "*if you do not have a management position, your voice is not taken into consideration*" (Lecturer, Male, AM0402). Working on 'quality' has started to provide people with a career even if they do not produce much scientific work. There are professionals on quality assurance in special units, committees, the dean's and the rector's offices, and one can even work as an evaluator for ARACIS or as a research evaluator.

Alongside the growth of administration has come a growth in bureaucratic work for everyone in the university. The most salient interpretation of all the activities relating to quality is 'bureaucracy'. A leading administrator laments that "*quality assurance is just bureaucracy for everyone*" (Decision-maker, Associate Professor, Female, AM0102). Professors complain that *"[w]e have seas of procedures for everything"* (Decision-maker, Professor, Male, AM0202), which leads to problems in time management as well as other adverse effects. "*At the moment, when you try to ask people to fill in too many forms to ensure quality, you are in fact taking away some of the time they have in order to improve their teaching and research*" (Decision-maker, Lecturer, Female, RS0205). What adds to the frustration is that the paperwork is little representative of the reality felt by the academics. For the interviewees, *"the reality is beyond the paper"* (Decision-maker, Professor, Male NS0102).

Finally, these evaluations affect professional pride. Time and again, professors mention that their department ranks highly or that they have received a decision of 'high trust' from the accreditation organisation. People are proud when they can say that "*our faculty (…) is ranked number 1 in the country*" *(Decision-maker, Professor, Male, NS0102)* or "*we became a good practice example*" *(Decision-maker, Associate Professor, Male, RS0203)*. Moreover, many professors would like to receive rewards from scoring high in evaluations. In fact, the frustration that people have very much follows the lack of rewards or sanctions: "*Things have not progressed much, because there is no punishment and reward. So people don't react and don't believe in the importance of it*" *(Decision-maker, Associate Professor, Female, NS0205).*

It is this last point that we find most striking about these policy instruments. If academics define their professional roles in relation to these policy instruments, then this is clearly a process of *'subjectification'*. The culture of quality is therefore clearly defined in the language of evaluation. The universities do not just face an 'evaluative state' (Neave, 1994), but have themselves created an 'evaluation culture'. The question remains, however, how dominant this evaluate culture is and whether there are also forms of resistance to these instruments. The next section will discuss this problem in more detail, by analysing the limits of the discourse on quality.

3.9. What are the boundaries of the 'evaluation culture'?

In this section, we turn to limits to the discourse on quality. From a theoretical standpoint, such limitations are manifestations of resistance to 'power technologies' related to quality; however, this is not a heroic resistance, but rather a passive resistance to avoid the new techniques of government.

One indication of passive resistance is visible in debates about follow-up. Interviewees often complain that "*it leads to nothing*" *(Decision-maker, Associate Professor, Male, KG0403)*. A prominent example is the assessment of academic staff in the autumn of 2012, which was aimed to provide a salary bump. The new government, however, blocked these changes by ministerial order, leading to widely felt frustration about another useless evaluation. Students often express this frustration about the evaluations: "*some professors [improve] their teaching following these evaluations. But in general, improvements are not visible, which discourage other students from taking the evaluations seriously*" *(Student, Postgraduate, NS0701)*.

Another indication of resistance is embedded in the process of policy-making. This has much to do with the many changes and initiatives that were undertaken successively. Almost all interviewees mention that "*you make preparations in view of some criteria in the law and then they change*" *(Associate Professor, Female, AM0104)* and "*the legislation is changeable like the weather*" *(Decision-maker, Professor, Male, KG0205)*. So many changes lead to problematic implementation, because "*change too much, too fast, and you end up with more resistance*" (*Decision-maker, Associate Professor, Male, RS0203*). The many changes also lead to confusion and frustration. The general idea is that "*things are changed for the sake of changing*" *(Decision-maker, Associate Professor, Female, RS0105),* rather than for substantial reasons.

Thus, it is not surprising that we find that people react strategically: "*we were even told from the university level: you do what you think is best, and don't take the self-evaluation too seriously*" *(Assistant Professor,*

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Male, AM0502). In such a context, people adopt a wait-and-see approach. They do not take the policy instruments too seriously, since they will anyway be changed in the next political cycle.

A final form of passive resistance arises because evaluations intersect with questions about resources: "*many of the problems with regards to quality are contextual: the quality of enrolments and the financing system affect the quality of education*" *(Decision-Maker, Professor, Male, KG0103)*. Some of these are literally 'bread and butter' issues, as salaries for early career academics are extremely low[43], particularly after the austerity measures.

> „*The fact that promotions were banned and that salaries were cut by 25% as a result of austerity measures lead to increasing demotivation from the side of teaching staff. Most of our colleagues are idealists, and do not necessarily focus on money, but once you have financial problems, striving for excellence is hardly your top concern (Decision-maker, Lecturer, Female, RS0205)*"

Since the quality discourse intersects with other political concerns, universities have an argument to do nothing until other problems are solved. Thus, "*if we had more money, we would keep people in a positive mentality*" *(Decision-maker, Professor, Male, AM0205)* and although "*it is embarrassing to talk all the time about the lack of money*" interviewees think that they "*are forced to make compromises*" *(Lecturer, Male, AM1301)*.

What is interesting about this type of resistance is that it often undertaken by the very same individuals who are responsible for the evaluations. Moreover, these people use the very language of evaluations to frame their (passive) resistance: if the policies would change so much, they would follow up the evaluations, if there would be more money, they might consider improvements, etc. It is thus not a classical story of heroes versus villains, management versus academics, of leaders versus opposition. Rather, the process of subjectification involves everyone in the university, from decision-makers to faculty and students. Conduct and counter-conduct involves the same people using a similar language.

3.10. Discussion and Conclusion

We have asked in this paper how policy instruments construct a new meaning of quality in the Romanian universities. We find that evaluations have become part of professional life and affect how faculty engage with teaching and research. Academics are subjected to an array of evaluation techniques, from rankings and league tables to job evaluations and research assessments. This is changing the type of work that they do, the career paths they have and their feelings of professional pride. But the changes come with forms of resistance as well: the evaluations often have no follow-up, as the policies themselves are constantly changing and resources are often unavailable.

These limitations are important from both an academic and a political point of view. Academically, our understanding of the new quality culture has been that it is pervasive and powerful. In Romania, we see that the discourse on evaluation instruments has a political legitimation and strongly affects academic life. Nevertheless, we see that there are many boundaries and limits to the discourse on quality. Indeed, we

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[43] The University of Bucharest recently hired staff on a gross starting salary of RON 1.419 (€ 320) per month. See <www.unibuc.ro/n/organizare/dirresumane/post-vaca/docs/2013/iul/19_21_24_03Salarii_minime_de_incadrare.pdf>

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have found various forms of (passive) resistance to the new quality culture. This is also politically important, as we may find new approaches to quality through the cracks in the discourse.

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