



## **8<sup>th</sup> European Quality Assurance Forum**

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**Paper proposal form**

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## Proposal

**Title: Comparative study on external evaluations of a higher education institution**

### **Abstract (150 words max):**

A number of various definitions have been given concerning quality in higher education, each one representing a different view, a reality which is reflected in the content of external evaluation methodologies. The paper presents a synthetic comparison between two external evaluations: the first one performed by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education and the second one by the Institutional Evaluation Programme of the European University Association. The aim of the study is to show the impact of the external evaluation results on Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, and how the institution developed the implementation process of the recommendations that the assessment teams have made in 2009 and 2012. Findings lead to the idea, that the integration of different perspectives on quality and of all conclusions drawn by the evaluation teams brings many benefits to the development of the management process and quality culture of universities.

**Key-words:** *quality evaluation methodology, higher education, ARACIS, EUA/IEP, Babeş-Bolyai University*

### **Text of paper (3000 words max):**

#### **1. Introduction**

A brief history of quality assurance and evaluation in higher education reveals that the notion of quality has proved to be a complex one, which can be viewed from multiple angles and perspectives, the result being a wide palette of concepts and definitions, generating different approaches: quality as exceptional or as excellence (Harvey and Green, 1993; Biggs, 2004), as perfection to consistency ("zero errors" as Harvey and Green called it), as fitness to purpose (Harvey and Green, 1993, Doherty, 2008), as value for money, as transformation (Harvey and Green, 1993; Clark, 2000, 2004), meeting standards (Harvey, 1999; Rocki, 2005), organisational culture (Harvey, 1999), meeting the students' expectation (Harvey, 1999; Tsinidou, Gerogiannis and Fitsilis, 2010), stakeholders' expectations (Harvey 1999, Middlehurst, 1992).

Based on these conceptualisations, various models of quality assurance in higher education institution (HEIs) have been identified from different authors, which can be summarised into three main categories (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2002):

1. *Transformative model* – the university transform inputs into outputs by integrating all aspects of the educational process.



2. *An engagement model of program quality* – like in industrial management, all the resources are integrated – human, financial, material - as well as the reports established between them.
3. *A model for a responsive university* – the customer-oriented university, concerned with the quality of services provided and with meeting the market demand.

The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) asserts that providing a definition for quality assurance is a cumbersome task, on one hand because the term covers a number of complex elements and on the other hand, because each national education system has adopted its own view and definitions of these elements (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 2005). Because the concept of quality fulfils so many important roles, a concern for the quality of the evaluation methodology itself, the level of efficiency, adequacy and opportunity of the employed instruments is natural. Harmonising the systems for quality evaluation, both with the existent reality and among themselves, is a real challenge and a great opportunity for the global higher education system (Kohler, 2009).

The paper presents a synthetic comparison of the applied methodologies for the external evaluation in higher education by The Institutional Evaluation Programme and The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. It aims to highlight the results of the evaluations and the recommendations that have been made for Babeş-Bolyai University (UBB) by these two institutions in 2009 and 2012, and reveals how the university developed the process of implementation. Findings lead to idea that the integration of different perspectives on quality and of all information and conclusions drawn by the evaluation teams bring many benefits for the development of the strategic management and internal quality culture of the higher education institutions.

## **2. External evaluation: the foundation of the evaluation process**

### ***2.1. The ARACIS Methodology***

In Romania, between 1993 and 2006, The National Council for Academic Evaluation and Accreditation (CNEAA) was responsible for the evaluation and accreditation of institutions and study programmes. The Romanian National Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) was established in 2005 and in 2009 it became a full member of ENQA, listed in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). ARACIS adopted in 2006 “*The Methodology for External Evaluation, Standards, Standards of Reference, and List of Performance Indicators of the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education*” (hereinafter being named as “The ARACIS Methodology”).

As in the case of EUA/IEP Methodology, the internal evaluation is a very important step of the process. The three fundamental evaluated areas (and the criteria for) are:

1. *Institutional Capacity*
  - Institutional, administrative and managerial structures
  - Material resources
2. *Educational effectiveness*
  - Content of study programmes
  - Learning outcomes
  - Scientific research activities



- Financial management
- 3. *Quality Management*
  - Quality assurance strategies and procedures
  - Procedures for initiation, monitoring and periodic revision of the implemented programmes and activities
  - Objective and transparent procedures for learning outcomes evaluation
  - Procedures for the periodic evaluation of the teaching staff
  - Access to adequate learning resources
  - Regularly updated database on internal quality assurance
  - Transparent information of public interest with regards study programmes, certificates, diplomas, and qualifications
  - Operational quality assurance structures

Standards, standards of reference, and performance indicators are the same for both already accredited institutions and accrediting newly established institutions, the difference being determined by their level of achievement.

- *The standards* are formulated in terms of rules and outcomes, defining the minimum compulsory level of achievement by activity.
- *The standards of reference* are optional and specific to each study programme or institution, their content defining the optimal level of achievement by activity, based on existing national, European or international good practices.
- *The performance indicators* measure the level of accomplishment of a certain activity between a minimum acceptable level (corresponding to the requirements of a Standard) and a maximum identifiable level (which correspond to a standard of reference, therefore being optional).

As a result of external evaluation, Romanian universities are granted with a qualification which can be “*high degree of confidence*”, “*confidence*”, “*limited confidence*” and “*non-confidence*”.

The ARACIS Methodology is focused rather on the internal present state of the university than on its relationships with the external environment and its future goals. Quality is seen mainly as “meeting standards”.

## **2.2. The EUA/IEP Methodology**

The Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP) is an independent membership service of the European University Association (EUA), a full-member of the ENQA, and is listed in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). The programme has been designed “*to ensure that higher education institutions gain maximum benefit from a comprehensive evaluation conducted by a team of experienced higher education leaders*” (European University Association, 2013, p.4). Its methodology (being hereinafter referred to as “The EUA/IEP Methodology”) is based on the provision of the “Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area” (ESG) adopted in 2005 by ENQA, document whose first part refers to internal quality evaluation and emphasises its importance for the entire assessment process.

The EUA/IEP Methodology is designed to be applicable to all higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies in Europe. The main issues considered are:

1. *What is the institution trying to do?* in terms of norms and values, mission and goals.



2. *How is the institution trying to do it?* in terms of governance, management and activities.
3. *How does the institution know it works?* in terms of quality assessment practices.
4. *How does the institution change in order to improve?* in terms of strategic management and capacity for change.

Considering all the aspects of the internal evaluation that IEP is referring to, three of them caught our attention:

- As it is mentioned in the document, *“the evaluation is responsive to the institution’s needs, mission, culture and situation and is future oriented”* (European University Association, 2013, p. 16).
- The methodology emphasizes the importance of the resources for sustaining the academic and administrative activities (according to the institution’s needs, mission and goals), and the relationships with funding agencies.
- The importance of the relationship between university and its environment (society as a whole, stakeholders, different institutions, etc.), and the cultural and social involvement of the higher institution.

On one hand, IEP is developing not “a standard evaluation” but a “correlative” one, and on the other hand, the university is viewed as both a network of relationships and as being part of one. Quality is seen as “fitness to purpose”, but meeting the students’ and stakeholders’ expectation is also important, based on the organisational culture of an open entity in a permanent process of adaptation

### **3. External evaluations review reports and recommendations**

#### **3.1. ARACIS external evaluation**

The external evaluation performed by the Romanian National Accreditation Agency included the overall institutional assessment and the evaluation of 13 bachelor study programs, one master program, one doctoral program, the evaluation of the mathematics component within each program and multiculturalism at UBB. The evaluation was conducted by 24 evaluators and resulted in eight evaluation reports, based on the self-evaluation report (with over 500 appendices) and one site visit. Given the detailed structure of the evaluation indicators, all the reports included rich data, which closely followed each of the dimensions evaluated.

As a common element, all the reports stated the achievement of mostly all of the evaluation indicators. On the other hand, each of them offered a rather different perspective, focusing on a specific area. In order to emphasise the common points and the differences in focus, we briefly present the main recommendations included in each of the final reports.

a) The report of the *Agency Department for Quality Evaluation*, which centralises all the reports, states that on the institutional level all the criteria and indicators regarding the academic infrastructure were accomplished. With regard the study programs, for each of them the evaluation teams stated that all the standards were accomplished. The following recommendations were advanced: to continue attracting prospective students and external funding (for Physics study program), to offer more scholarships for students (for Chemistry), to adapt the title of some courses and to use a standard course description sheet and to more coherently structure the practical internships (for Geography), to implement more



efficient criteria for the final bachelor exam and improve the student-teaching staff ratio (for Law), to use a new form of grade book and to post online the courses schedule (for History), to include admittance exam based on physical abilities and to improve the student-teaching staff ratio (for Sports), to organise research workshops with the students and develop portfolios which to be presented to companies interested in internships and offering scholarships (for the master program).

The main *final recommendations* support the admittance system based on physical abilities for the Sports Faculty, suggest an increased attention for the number of students in study groups, focus on improving the hiring process, implement solutions to prevent plagiarism among teaching staff and students, and a better adaptation of the math lectures to the specific of different fields of studies.

b) The main *external evaluation* report offers a detailed description of the institutional activities according to all the evaluation indicators and awards the highest degree of confidence (which is the highest score).

c) *The Consultative Commission* report is focused on rather formal aspects. It mentions the number of evaluators, the fact that the schedule set for the visit was entirely respected and the meetings with the stakeholders (students, graduates and employers) were extremely relevant.

d) The report of the *Agency Council* is again rather formal, and states that all the reports filled in by the evaluating team favourably appreciates the quality of the self-evaluation report, approves the external report and recommendations.

e) The *students' report* focused on the relationship between students and university management, campus conditions, faculty endowment, the relation with employers and the student satisfaction level. Besides the interviews conducted with students enrolled into the university, the evaluators applied an exploratory survey on 54 students. While all the conclusions in the report were favourable for the institution, the satisfaction survey indicated rather varied opinions regarding students' satisfaction with the scholarships, teaching process, career orientation services, and mobility opportunities.

f) The *foreign evaluator* report emphasised the successful efforts of the university in setting a multi-ethnic and multilingual environment, international cooperation, international programmes and activities. The recommendations refer to focus on improving the student access to library resources and increased fund allocation for the libraries, and entitle more professors to supervise PhD candidates. Bearing a more reflective approach, the report also discusses the discrepancy between the Humboldtian approach of the university and the Bologna process adopted by the institution.

g) The reports *multiculturalism* and the one on *math* within university have 36 and 62 pages and present in a detailed manner the approaches in each of the study fields, emphasising the positive results achieved. The suggestions refer to an even greater emphasis on math across institution.

The conclusions in the reports mentioned above supports the idea that also in external evaluations quality remains a stakeholder relative concept (Vroeijenstijn, 1991, Harvey and Green, 1993). Each distinct approach brings its own value in understanding the quality of the evaluated institution. While the report on math is focused on the role math has for the quality of the university, the foreign evaluator report is focused on internationalisation



and international best practices, and the student report is focused on student aspects such as facilities and student satisfaction.

### **3.2. IEP evaluation**

This evaluation was focused on the institution and not individual study programs, and was performed by a team of 5 international evaluators, based on the self-evaluation report (along with eight appendices) and two site visits. The final external report covered in 40 pages the following dimensions: governance and institutional decision-making, teaching and learning, research, service to society, quality culture, and internationalization. Besides the descriptive analysis of the data and processes, the report offers a set of recommendations aimed to support the university to become a leading national higher education institution, recognized at European and a broader international context. Instead of focusing on the strengths of the institution, the purpose of the review was to offer suggestions supposed to lead to further improvements. The recommendations were relevant and focused on in-depth aspects of the academic life processes, some of them being also argued in the self-evaluation report. We mention here some of the most important recommendations: to revise the organizational structure of the institution, given its large dimension and numerous departmental units; to secure the alignment with the strategic plan across university; to strengthen its orientation competences and learning outcomes; to better value the student-centred methods; to ensure the training of the academic staff in teaching; to better use the research results in the teaching activity; to ensure a differential allocation of resources to support research; to focus on increase the quality of cooperation with stakeholders; to close the loop on the feedback received from students; to focus on the internalization strategy.

### **4. Actions taken and concluding remarks**

On the institutional level there can be identified several benefits of the external evaluations performed. On one hand, the ARACIS evaluation certified that the university fulfils all the quality standards, conferring public credibility. This is important information for the prospective students interested in enrolling into the institution, parents, or the employers who are hiring our graduates. Also, through the transparent information we complied with the public demand for governmental accountability (Meyers, 1981). On the other hand, the IEP evaluation contributed by bringing the insightful philosophy and triggered internal improvement. Both evaluations greatly spurred the institution in running an in-depth analysis of its own activity and outcomes. Through the means of the internal evaluation, the institutional strengths and weakness were identified and possible solutions to overcome them were advanced. Comparing the two evaluations we can identify great differences. While the ARACIS report is based on quality standards, delivering a final judgment (achieved or not achieved) for each of the indicators, thus narrowing the institutional choice in the self-analysis performed, the IEP is focused on the institutional aims and strategy and allows more freedom in deciding the paths.

Following the external evaluations actions were launched in our university at many levels, involving all management and executive structures of UBB, and required a tighter collaboration between them.



**Quality Assurance** – there was an improvement in the strategic and quality plans at both university and faculty level (based on SMART objectives); a quality management course was organised; the institution attempted to close the feedback loop by providing students with the evaluation results for the courses they evaluate; a survey of doctoral and international students' satisfaction was launched; the Ethics Commission was supported and started to play a real active role in the academic community life.

**Human Resources** – the institution achieved an increase in the number of teaching staff (by 6.4%) and improved the doctoral students / supervisors ratio.

**Teaching and Learning** – the university established a structure that offers training programs for the teaching staff (during the first year around 30 academics attended the courses); introduced a standard descriptive sheet for each class, focused on competences and learning outcomes; improved the teaching activity through proper utilisation of the IT system and new acquisitions; affiliated to the European Distance and E-Learning Network (EDEN) and European Universities – Continuing Education Network (EUCEN); increased the number of grant applications which can support both teaching and research activities within the university.

**Facilities for students and carrier management** – the university developed the structures offering psychological counselling for students; developed an on-line platform for students' jobs and internships and strengthened the relations with career centres country wide; organised professional structures for students with high research achievements; reorganised the structures coordinating students' internships; developed collaborations with the business sector for establishing new partnerships (including international) for students' internships.

**Visibility and the relationship with the society** – the university increased the efforts in promoting the educational programs by organizing experimental events for young people; represented the University within two cluster type structures (IT cluster and Polaris); conceived a new web interface of UBB and improved the on-line communication regarding University programmes and events; intensified UBB's presence in social networks (facebook, twitter).

Given the results obtained, we can conclude, that both types of evaluations bring benefits for the evaluated institution, especially if we consider the different perspectives through which they approach the evaluation process. In this way, the institution is helped to achieve a set of standards, but it is also propelled in setting its own objectives, strategic aims and quality indicators.

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### Questions for discussion:



- 1. How can be the different approaches on quality balanced within institutional evaluations?**
- 2. Do the benefits of external evaluations exceed costs?**
- 3. How should an institution decide what external evaluation body to chose for getting evaluated?**

*Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 2 August 2013 to Ivana Juraga ([Ivana.Juraga@eua.be](mailto:Ivana.Juraga@eua.be)). Please do not send a hard copy or a PDF file.*