

# **An Evaluation of the *Quality (Assurance) Evaluation* – Case Study: The University of Bucharest**

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## **Abstract**

*Quality* still defies a precise definition. The result is a lack of effectiveness and a general misunderstanding of the role of quality assurance in higher education, especially when is considered in international setting. On the other hand, this may offer diversity and creativeness in a space of rigid regulations and strict standards to the point that this may be the core issue that allows us to build bridges between different approaches.

Our paper aims to be a systematic reflection on the main concepts concerning quality assurance processes, starting with quality itself. A national quality assurance evaluation of the University of Bucharest (UB) is the reference framework of our discussion, strengthening the arguments with real examples and providing further food for thought.

Our approach starts with a minute analysis of the concepts and tries to see how far one may go to encompass the realities of higher education institutions.

**Keywords:** quality assurance evaluation, quality culture, university management.

## **Introduction**

Currently, ‘quality’ is on everybody’s lips. Quality Assurance (QA) is at the top of most universities agendas, and quality evaluation and enhancement are without any doubt among most important tasks of any higher education institution all around the world. However, the current understanding of this problematic varies not only from country to country, but from university to university. In Europe, QA plays even a more important role, being regarded as one of the key factors which will lead to the creation of the European Higher Education Area<sup>1</sup>. However, in spite of this promoted crucial role, QA still remains an enigmatic concept<sup>2</sup> for many Romanian universities. It is very difficult to define and asses quality, since we lack a precise understanding of these key terms. Thus, “What does it mean?” and “How can it be measured?” are still important questions.

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<sup>1</sup> Maassen, & Olsen (2007), p. 9: “The Bologna process focuses on structural convergence of, and a common architecture for, higher education systems in Europe. To some extent the Bologna process can be seen as, at least initially, an attempt to recover a national and educational sector initiative as a countermove to the power of the Commission and to reforms giving priority to economic concerns.”

<sup>2</sup> Orsingher (2006), p. 1: “In Europe, the meaning of quality assurance is being developed in apparently different ways. In some countries quality assurance is an internal responsibility of each higher education institution and is based on an internal evaluation of the institution’s programs. In other countries, quality assurance entails an external evaluation or accreditation.” It may be added that in some European countries one can find even both ways, and thus it is not an either-or situation.

In this context, we will focus our attention only to a discussion concerning quality evaluation of higher education institutions. This is still perplexing, since one's notion of quality evaluation often does not coincide with another's, and, as very often may happen, no two experts in the field ever come to the same idea when debating what means an excellent university. Some authors goes even further and claim that not just the mere notion of quality lacks a stable and unique understanding, but the whole quality environment varies from place to place: "Perhaps the most obvious recent influence on assessment has been the policy climate in relation to quality assurance and enhancement. The quality assurance and accountability climate differs from nation to nation"<sup>3</sup>. Creativity and cultural oriented-approaches could play an interesting role in helping university overcoming the black and white paradigm of seeing things.

### Quality Assurance Evaluation

What does Quality Assurance Evaluation (QAE) mean? In order to answer this question, we think, one should break it down in another two questions:

1. What does *quality assurance* mean?
2. What does it mean to *evaluate* quality assurance?

With regard to the first question, one could generally accept the following definition: *QA means the totality of the procedures, processes and systems used by a Higher Education Institution (HEI) in order to manage and improve the quality of its educational and administrative activities.*

Currently, almost all universities have a unit comprising several experts dealing with this topic, and all European countries have national regulations in this sense. Moreover, all around Europe, there are various agencies that take care of this process on a national and even international level. The main objectives of an evaluation deal with the functioning of the university as a whole and the functioning of its components, the programs (degrees) and the disciplines. The evaluation actions are covering areas like teaching, research, outreach, as well as the State policies or the governance of institutions.<sup>4</sup>

Now, let us deal with the second question: How can one **evaluate** *quality assurance* of HEIs? Normally, to evaluate or asses something means to measure its parameters and compare them according with certain standards. Dealing with universities is no different. The parameters are called in this case 'performance indicators'. So far, so good, but what are these indicators? What really do they indicate?

Quality indicators are designed to measure the degree of implementation and efficiency of a quality management system in a HEI. In short, they measure quality. But this seems already highly paradoxical, since one aims to measure *quantitatively* the quality of an institution.

According to our previous definition, quality concerns procedures, processes and systems. Taking that as a working definition, we can certainly observe that procedures,

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<sup>3</sup> Bloxgam & Boyd (2007), p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Weber (2003).

processes and systems could be measured in one way or another. Once identified, we can say whether or not, in accordance with certain standards, our educational system is 'delivering quality products'. Without considering a new puzzling question, namely what is meant by 'product' when dealing with education systems, we have to face again the old question: What is *quality*?

This sounds like a very puzzling and fundamental question, one which has a special philosophical flavor. But then, "What is *the philosophy* of quality (assurance)?" Paraphrasing St. Augustine (*Confessions*, chapter XIV), one may say that "if no one asks me, I know what it is. If I wish to explain it to him who asks me, I do not know".

In a sense, all of us have a certain idea of what quality means, the hard part comes when we have to indentify exactly what gives quality to an educational product. The problem gets even more complicated, depending whether we consider education an outcome or a process, or both. Anyway, we do what to be caught in this kind of discussion so we can go further and put an end to this digression asking the following questions: What quality assurance indicators cannot measure? What does fall out when evaluating the quality of an educational system? What they cannot really measure is the existence of a *culture of quality*. What does this mean?

## Quality Culture

The existence of a quality culture in a higher education institution presupposes (at least) three important aspects:

- the commitment of the central management<sup>5</sup>;
- the awareness of all participants;
- the existence of an efficient evaluation system.

In addition, a quality culture in an HEI reflects not only an orientation towards the needs of its stakeholders, but also an internality that supports its staff in the fulfillment of their duties.<sup>6</sup> But still, what is meant by *quality culture*? In short, the philosophy of quality culture could be expressed by the following:

*To write down everything you do, and to do all you have written.*<sup>7</sup>

This is very important and touches the heart of the process, namely to act consciously, to be aware of all the procedures and mechanisms involved in the educational processes, to respect them and to try to continuously improve them. But does this conscious action exhaust the meaning of 'quality culture'? Certainly, it is very important, in fact, it is extremely important to know and follow procedures, yet it is not enough. But what is missing?

An evaluation focuses primarily on the first component, on the *documentation* of the institution, and the second, the *implementation* of the procedures, if wanted, could be

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<sup>5</sup> For more on the role of university management and quality culture, see Gordon (2002).

<sup>6</sup> Yorke (2000).

<sup>7</sup> A similar approach may be found in McGhee (2003), p. 1: "Write down what you are trying to do and check periodically that you are doing it."

easily mimed in the case of an evaluation. Yet, exactly the second part accounts for the inner life of an institution. This particular ingredient indicates the existence of a *quality culture*. Employing a trivial example, it is like cooking. The recipe acts as a procedure that has to be followed. Tasting the food from time to time has as counterpart the periodical inner and/or external evaluations of the institution, evaluations which provide an essential feed-back in order to adjust and improve the quality. But does following closely a recipe provide enough assurance and predictability that the meal would be good? In a sense, yes, it means that the food will be good, but here good it is not good enough, and what we need is excellence. But good food means that it is eatable, whereas an excellent one means much more, and this ‘much more’ does not appear at such in any recipe, it is not captured by any procedure. What is lacking in this case is exactly the skill that makes someone an excellent cook. That means to know very well the system. Moreover, it means to know how to adjust its parameter in order to provide a better outcome. This is the real mark of the existence of a quality culture: both the desire and the knowledge how to obtain quality.

### **An instance of a Quality Evaluation – The case of UB**

The University of Bucharest underwent last year through an important quality evaluation done by ARACIS<sup>8</sup>. The evaluation focused on the university management at various levels, including the university as a whole and its administrative departments, as well as undergraduate<sup>9</sup> programs at all its nineteen faculties.

Using a bottom-up approach, we will start by proving a suggestive example of a very important dysfunctionality. The evaluators ask our department<sup>10</sup> to provide an indicator concerning the ratio of professors to students. We asked the General Secretariat to provide us such information, but their answer was negative: they could not offer us such ratio. We turn then to the Human Resources Department, but again the result was negative. The impasse was evident. What can be done in such cases? We contacted again the General Secretariat and asked them to provide us the total number of students; we get it very quickly. We asked then Human Resources to provide us the number of professors and we got it without any problem. Eventually, we did the calculation and obtained the required ratio.

The moral of this story is obvious: confronted with the specific requirements of an evaluation, we discovered a lack of communication among the departments of our university. It seems that they do not have the benefic practice of sharing information and, in fact, we discover a lack of transparency. But transparency and enhancing quality work hand-in-hand, and they increase the capability of the institution to adapt to and solve new challenges and changes.

Another negative aspect that came out during the same quality evaluation was what we may call *The Ivory Tower Symptom*. What does this mean? Basically, it means the tendency of most UB professors to consider that their main task is only to teach and

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<sup>8</sup> Romanian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (in Romanian ‘Agentia Romana pentru Asigurarea Calitatii in Invatamantul Superior’)

<sup>9</sup> An evaluation of its graduate programs has been done separately.

<sup>10</sup> The Quality Management Department of The University of Bucharest

research, while administrative work is not part of their current duties, and, accordantly, it should be charged extra. But is this right? For instance a normal contract of a tenured North American professor stipulates the following duties: 35% Teaching, 35% Research and 30% Administrative work. We consider that as an important aspect of our academic life and we think that to provide some administrative work should be a mandatory requirement for all faculty members. Certainly, most administrative work<sup>11</sup> is highly time-consuming, yet it should be done by someone, for otherwise the institution could not function properly. This would be regarded as a necessary condition.

The sufficient condition in this case is given by the fact that involving all members of a department in academic work will certainly increase their awareness and capacity to provide quality. Quality means feedback and consciousness, but quality means also teamwork and coordination. Certainly, it is very important to increase the quality of our teaching and research, and in this case administrative work acts as a burden, which distract us from the real stuff, yet, when discussing about the quality assurance at the level of the whole institution, administrative work is essential. Moreover, pushing the things further in this direction, with few exceptions, we may say that administrative work becomes in this case as a liaison, enhancing the inner cohesion of the institution. This is so because such work normally requires collaboration and awareness; collaboration between colleagues and awareness of the processes.

*The Ivory Tower Symptom*, we think, is an important aspect which is hard to be corrected for it has its roots in a certain mentality which discourages the active role of communities. The sound social behavior of collaboration and self-organization of small communities has been discouraged systematically by communism, and thus we still have to face its remains. At that time the *ivory tower* was a method of self-defense against a cruel and irrational system, yet now is a just an inherited negative social aspect of most of us which slows down the normal life and development of many universities. Universities are very affected by this symptom because they, as knowledge depositories, count perhaps as one of the most conservatories institutions of our modern societies.

We tend to characterize our modern societies as *knowledge-based societies*, where the *collective intelligence*, obviously, plays a key role. Also obvious it is the fact that such societies could not be based on collections of ivory towers, so such practices should be discourages, and our university should try to find better ways to communicate and integrate its faculty.

We have chosen to present first some negative aspects not because we are negativist but because their acknowledgement and the feedback received from the evaluation team are essential in order to expand the positive elements of our university. The quality culture requires at least the capacity to detect the dysfunctional item of the system along with the desire to fix them. Both of these are mandatory, and the lack of one jeopardizes the other. They work hand-in-hand, and I think that in spite of drawbacks presented above and some other punctual problems, UB is on the right track exactly because of the presence of these two important factors: the awareness and the will of the management with regard to quality assurance.

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<sup>11</sup> What is meant here is not administrative work done by people working in the administrative compartments of the university, but the administrative work done or which should be done by the professors themselves

The self-evaluation process of UB, as an introductory step of the institutional evaluation, gave a good starting point for the evaluation team. The statistical data and the descriptive information for each faculty had represented a very valuable resource. The systemic complexity of UB (19 faculties encompassing the major fields of teaching and research) was recognized both as an asset in the national landscape, as well as a big challenge in running the system at its full potential of interdisciplinary and collaboration. It is not easy to have at the same table theologians and biologists, chemists and economists, physicists and psychologists. Yet, all of them should look beyond their particular field of interests, and have a common institutional interest in improving the quality environment.

The focus on quality and internationalization were positively scored by the evaluators but of course there is always room for improvement. Also, the role of creativity and innovation was seen as highly valued by the university management. A follow-up action in respect to this evaluation was the launch of an internal project competition between faculties, in pursuing the improvement of their undergraduate programs with the help of new technologies.

## Conclusions

In order to have a functional system is essential for the findings and recommendations of the evaluation to be further cornerstones of the drafting of new strategic documents such as the operational plans and the UB strategy for the next academic year. The critical challenge for quality assurance processes is how to prove themselves as activities which demonstrably adds value to institutional activities.

An essential remark regarding *Quality Culture* is that it requires a good coordination: *horizontally*, a better coordination and collaboration between academic and administrative departments; *vertically*, a better coordination and communication between central management and its local counterpart.

Our understanding of the ways **to enhance quality assurance** in a higher education institution has to main points:

1. to increase the **inter-departmental communication and coordination**;
2. to augment the degree of **administrative involvement** of professors.

As the research proves it<sup>12</sup>, in the knowledge society, creativity is one of the keys in solving the issues stated above. Thus, the emerging agenda should take in consideration to put a growing emphasis over factors like cross-cultural communication, the importance of multicultural environment or the role of design and aesthetics.

## Questions for further reflections and discussions

- How can we detect the presence of a quality culture in an institution?
- How can we enhance inter-departmental and inter-personal coordination?
- How to deal with the *Ivory Tower* disease?

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<sup>12</sup> The METRIS Report (2009)

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