

QUALITY OF EDUCATION – A GUARANTEE OF INSTITUTIONAL COMPETITIVENESS

Mariana IATAGAN

“Spiru Haret” University, Bucharest, Roumania
iataganm@gmail.com

Abstract: Starting from the three challenges in the field of the higher education: relevant character, quality and international cooperation (...), this work represents an analysis of the impact of quality culture on the increasing of Romanian universities competitiveness on the European market of education. Analyzing the literature in the branch, we find out that the main changes recorded at the level of the tertiary education are the diversification and the consistent development of education at a higher level, on the ground of the intensified difficulties as far as it regards insuring resources and an increased demand of responsibility. We are also witnesses, in present, of the development of a “consumption” view over the universities and passing from a higher education for elites, to a mass one, where the performance seems often to be uncertain. As far as it concerns assuring the quality in the higher education environment, it can be noticed that its implementation is made almost in a mechanical way, on the ground of a quality management that is not enough developed and a weak involvement of direct beneficiaries in the project of the quality system. In this regard, we recommend developing of a system of total quality management at university level, beginning from the student’s needs, identifying some new performance items in education and development of some effective instruments of ensuring higher education quality.

Keywords: higher education, stakeholders, quality culture, competitiveness, education requirement

1. Introduction

In Romania, as well as in other European countries, the quality of education has become a very interesting domain considering in the first place the national differences in comparison to developed countries and the necessity of obtaining results integrated in the European context.

In this sense, compatible politics and procedures for ensuring the quality of teaching and higher education have began to be promoted, in order to increase the global competitiveness of higher European education and to facilitate mutual recognition of diplomas and university degrees.

2. Quality of Educational Services – a Must of the Present

Taking into consideration the desired outcomes, any higher education institution is

responsible to develop a quality culture, meaning to develop policies, techniques and practices that are consistently and thoroughly documented in order to obtain those results/performances that are consistent with the established objectives.[3]

Among the institutional standards of ensuring the quality in a university are: the existence of specific mechanisms of approval, surveillance and evaluation of study programs and diplomas, the evaluation of students according to public criteria and procedures consistently applied, the compulsory fact of ensuring sufficient, competent and qualified teaching staff to manage teaching and study, learning resources offered to the students e appropriate and specific for each learning program, institutions should have data systems and information to measure the quality.

The quality of education services is a desired social objective, and its contribution to the general growth of the efficiency of economics is critical. Although the most widespread idea about quality is that it's expensive, research has shown that this idea is false.

Ensuring the quality in education supposes the elaboration of reference standards, norms and performance markers in the national education system considering the following aspects:

- a. the quality of the national education system;
- b. the quality of suppliers, education unit and institution representatives.
- c. the quality of teaching and education process of the students is proven by the learning results, by applying development methodologies of the curriculum, teaching and learning methods, evaluating the examinations and certifications. [5]

There are concerns regarding the assurance of the academic quality also in the extra-European and global space. For example, UNESCO and OECD, taking into consideration the transnational, cross-border education, are involved by elaborating and applying of "guidelines" regarding the quality of the services offered by transnational institutions. The issue is applying the same quality rigorous demands not only to national institutions, but also to the transnational ones.

Among the motivational factors that determine higher education institutions to be concerned about the quality issue are:

- orientation towards performance and increasing competitiveness of universities on the education services market and of graduates on the workforce market;
- the increase of expenses for education processes and for research and development;
- the acknowledgement on the European market of the qualifications (titles and

diplomas) offered by the institutions in the country;

- developing a corporate culture of quality, total involvement of the staff for obtaining performances;
- increasing the responsibility for the quality of university services. [7]

In order to offer a common set of references to all universities and to facilitate the inter-university comparison regarding the institutional management and to evaluate the quality externally, the following things were proposed by Law:

- a. reference standards;
- b. clues concerning fields where this applies;
- c. the necessity of working with performance indicators.

The reference standards define the fundamental norms and the quality evaluation framework in any institution. Among those, the most relevant are:

- a) institutional capacity, which refers to the internal organization and to the available infrastructure, which are designed by the university so that they accomplish the desired mission and objectives. The institutional policies and the way they are applied are taken into consideration so that the desired performances are achieved.
- b) the educational effectiveness, which refers to the internal and external resources that are mobilized by the university in order to achieve the desired performances. The main reference is represented by the delivery processes whose effectiveness is measured by reporting at the students' learning performances.
- c) quality management consists of the mechanisms that are activated by the university in order to manage the quality.

The first standard refers to organizing and total university management aspects; the second one refers to resources or inputs that are necessary for teaching and learning and especially for the teaching, learning and

examination way of functioning, while the third one is designed to reveal how quality is managed, by which structures and practices. In other words, the first standard is designed to refer to the way in which one organization, which pretends to be a university, has the structure and the management that correspond to the existing university model; the second standard refers to the way in which certain inputs are activated and at the processes which are ongoing in order to achieve learning performances; at last, the third standard focuses on the structures and mechanisms that provide quality management.

Defined this way, the standards are very general. The alternative is to formulate standards as precise and detailed as possible, like it was done for example in the case of our certification policy: how many people from the teaching staff with a basic norm and with a title of professor and lecturer, how many books in the library, what surface is allocated for learning-teaching spaces etc.

The consequence of this approach would be that we would get to certified universities which are according to the input type requests, but without having information and adequate data which refer to the effective quality of teaching and learning processes.

We certify a university based on some information about buildings, equipments and impersonal figures, excluding exactly the processes that give them life and are leading to certain performances. We are focusing on some important indications, but totally insufficient to evaluate that quality culture that relates to the institution of the university.

3. Quality Management and Culture of the Higher Education System

The higher education system is the one that shapes the specialists who will lead in the near future the Romanian society and the EU integrated economics. The accomplishment of a quality orientated

behavior is one major constraint in the Romanian process of European integration, being at the same time “the vital element for achieving a successful economics.” (M. Juran)

Regarding this aspect the educational factor has a major impact, not only under the education quality aspect but also under the integration of the need of quality itself in the national culture. The individual’s conception has to assimilate the belief that wellbeing cannot exist without responsible and quality work.

With this mission in mind, it becomes obvious that the entire activity of the university has to be focused on growing the institution’s competitiveness both at national and international level by: offer and activity results quality, high level management, a financial policy dedicated to rational use of resources and to engaging new resources, increasing the international dimension of the activity, encouraging a responsible attitude of all personnel. [3]

Besides performance orientation and competitiveness growth, which are general requests, the need of implementing quality management in the higher education system is determined also by specific and immediate demands like:

- society’s demand regarding the efficient and transparent use of public and extra-budgetary resources assigned for higher education.
- creating and developing a quality culture in the university, both for the personnel and for the students;
- providing high level preparation for the students in order to fulfill the demands of Romania’s actual and future economic situation.
- the alignment at the standards and practice of the European higher education institutions regarding quality management; requirement for strengthening the international dimension of the university.
- the growth of the Romanian society’s confidence that its explicit and implicit

- needs and expectations regarding the higher education's services will be met.
- the growth of the international community's confidence in the Romanian higher education capacity to provide a high level activity;
 - identifying the weaknesses and preventing the deviations that might appear in the higher education process;
 - the effectiveness of activities in all the fundamental domains of competence, organization and functioning, specific to an university;
 - continuous improvement of higher education teaching quality.

Higher education quality management, as a special notion, was introduced in Romania by the Ministry of Education in 2003.

There are 2 main approaches of TQM: the American approach, where it is seen as a "horizontal" control fulfilled by the specialists and the Japanese approach, where it is seen as a "vertical" dimension that involves the whole personnel. By international agreement, established under ISO8402 standard, TQM is the managerial approach of an organization focused on quality, based on the participation of all of its members.

Its purpose is to ensure long term success by satisfying the customer's demands and obtaining advantages for all members of the organization, as well as for the society in general.

ISO8402 states that for TQM, the concept of quality refers to fulfilling all the managerial objectives, not only the quality objectives. TQM adds to the quality management concept a long term quality management strategy, as well as the idea of contribution of the whole personnel in the benefit of the organization, personal benefit, of the clients and of the society as a whole.

In corporate management there have been established 5 subsystems, called key points in quality control. These are: Q1 = supplier systems; Q2 = inputs (requirements regarding quality, quantity, costs, and terms); Q3 = transformation processes; Q4

= outputs (product verification); Q5 = beneficiary systems. [1]

In the same way we can distinguish key subsystems in quality control even for total (global) higher education management by specifying quality and quantity (financial) aspects.

In order to achieve this, it's necessary to have quality leadership and strategic management in every higher education institution. Also, all the academic community must be actively involved in the transformation process, including the students and the other external partners that have a relevant thing to say regarding the society's demands and current trends. Only this way, there can be created an academic environment oriented towards quality that can deal with the competitors and with the new social challenges.

Quality culture, as a matter of internal institutional quality, is seen as a priority for both the development of higher education institution as well as achieving the European Space of Higher education. The interest for this concept has grown considerably for the people involved in the processes of ensuring the quality, as well as for the common projects of the European Higher Education Association with the European Commission.

Such an example is the "Quality Culture Project" meant to help the European universities to introduce and strengthen an internal culture of quality that is to be considered as a personal asset of the institution and of the respective academic community.

The project began in 2002 and has the following objectives:

- increasing the awareness degree of the need to develop an internal culture of quality in universities;
- assuring an extended dissemination of the good practices in this domain;
- promoting the introduction of an internal management of quality in order to improve the quality levels;

- supporting universities in order to identify the most suitable procedures to ensure the quality, in a constructive way;
- contributing to BOLOGNA process by increasing the attractiveness of the European universities.

There have been included 40 European universities in this project, grouped in 6 networks. Every network of universities received 60.000 EURO in order to carry on the activities that the project implied. The first action of the networks was to obtain a SWOT analysis and an action plan to improve the quality in every university from the project.

The success factors identified at the end of the study were: the importance of strategic coordination and leadership (versus management) in order to have an efficient quality culture, the importance of strategic thinking and university autonomy as an essential factor of an internal quality culture.

Also, the conclusions of the European University Association's study were that:

- 82% of the institutions monitor the internal quality of teaching;
- 53% of the institutions monitor the internal quality of research;
- 48% of the institutions want to develop the quality insurance at European level for mutual acknowledgement and transparency.

The methods that were proposed in the end by the people, who conducted the study in order to improve this situation, were:

- involving the whole academic community – including the students and the administrative personnel, often forgotten, in the process of thinking the institution's mission and goals.
- developing a communication strategy that joins the communication channels from upwards to downwards and the ones from downwards to upwards, the written documents and formal and informal meetings;
- identifying and giving the power to “quality culture champions” that would

contribute to the development and implementation of a quality culture strategy;

- creating teams inside the institution that ensure the mixing of ideas and their dissemination among the academic community;
- dealing with issues that create concerns by developing a coherent organization chart of the academic personnel;
- supporting an internal quality culture with proper human and financial resources.

The main identified characters with an essential role in shaping the quality culture were:

- the rector
- “Quality champions”
- financial resources administrators
- human resources administrators
- students
- characters from outside the institution.

The project was then started again in round II – 2004, III respectively – 2005, the last having as goal introducing and strengthening an internal quality culture in the higher education institutions, allowing them at the same time to systematically monitor their own activities and to strengthen their capacity to adapt to an environment with fast changes.

Regarding the students' involvement, as actors with key role in developing an internal quality culture in the academic environment, in the students' book about ensuring the quality as we've discussed above, there are presented a series of important aspects regarding the contribution of the students at this goal. First of all it has to be seen from the point of view of the relationship between the institution, personnel and students. The students' view on quality culture is pretty unclear and there's a lot of work to be done for this in the European institutions of higher education.

There are a lot of agencies for ensuring the quality all over the world. Currently, there can be observed a certain uniformity and

harmonization between these and the utilized procedures. Indeed, in many countries, regions and cultures, are developed own styles of ensuring the academic quality. Some agencies are managed by the state; others are independent, or many other intermediate types of management. Although there's a certain convergence of these at a global model of quality level, there still are great differences regarding the methodology, protocols, evaluation techniques and obtained outputs. Thus, there can be multiple consequences of the evaluations and also all of the quality insurance functions and of certification can vary in a certain degree.

The opportunities and benefits of higher education institutions concerning the global quality would be that the institutions and programs that are being evaluated or certified by these agencies acknowledged at a global level have a certain quality that deserves the society's complete trust. However, these imply certain aspects such as the students' mobility, transferable study credits, the acknowledgement and equalization of study degrees.[6]

In the process of ensuring the quality of education, universities should try to observe the following principles:

1. Taking into consideration the globalization factor, obtaining a high level of competitiveness implies a high quality of the higher education system.
2. A high level of quality implies a high capacity of innovation and continuous improvement of education processes.
3. From the point of view of university autonomy, the university is one of the main agents of ensuring the quality of its own activities.
4. Ensuring the quality and quality management represent a constitutive part of the universities' functions. [4]

In order to deal with the demands of education services, higher education institutions must have a clear vision of the future and to anticipate changes that can

happen either on the education market or on the workforce market, by maintaining permanent contact with the partners both upstream and downstream. [8]

4. Management Deficiencies for Higher Education Institutions

At present, higher education institutions deal with various difficulties regarding the quality management issue, such as: the lack of strategies and of a policy in quality management at institutional level and fragmented approach of ensuring quality to the detriment of systemic approach, insufficiency in informing and training the personnel of the universities at all levels regarding the quality management and quality systems, dealing with the quality issue based on principles of identifying of the divergences and correcting them instead of preventing the emergence of issue, the insufficiency of orientation towards the needs of the clients and of the partners and the focus on internal possibilities, dislike towards change and the complexity of promoting changes in the way of thinking, attitudes, behavior.

As for the management of education institutions, the divergences come from:

- Orientation towards solving and diminishing quality issues as they arise, and towards continuous increase of the quality of processes and activities that generate these issues;
- The duality of organizational structures in education and the tendency of auto isolation of the personnel and functional subdivisions;
- The imperfection of the analysis and measurement processes of the institution's management quality;
- Solving quality issues in many cases, following a "late modernization" model etc.[2]

While searching for modernization solutions for the higher education system we can see the education institutions' interest in quality management models.

The main idea is that quality management in our higher education system must be

significantly improved, because the external pressures of the stipulated “higher education European space” and the internal requirements of the national economy and culture become stronger and stronger.

In the end, the main client of school is the society. Therefore the student has a double role: it's an active participant at his own education but also a client of the university and the added value represents the actual contribution of the school to education, besides the input factors (pupils, resources, economical-social environment).

Quality is a consequence not a premise of work. Although, if it doesn't appear as a permanent reference of any company and moreover of an university, the risk of losing the prestige and market share on a more and more competitive market of European higher education increases more and more. Who wouldn't want to have at least a few Romanian universities to appear on privileged places in an European or global ranking system based on quality and academic prestige?

Quality, at this level, must be evaluated in comparison with the learning and professional shaping results and not only by taking into consideration “input” indicators (education places, teaching staff etc.); the focus must be on the processes for obtaining the desired results.

The total quality approach becomes more and more popular in Romania. An old statement dating from XIV century clarifies the fact that the concern for quality is not recent at all: “If our factories will know and will be able to achieve a superior quality of our products, then foreigners will find that it's better to buy from France and their money will flow towards the kingdom.” (1664, Colbert, minister of Louis the XIV - king of France). According to the continuous improvement principle, the vision on quality also improved along 4 major approaches until the current version: quality inspection, quality control, ensuring quality and total quality management. [1]

The actual concept of total quality management refers to “a politics by which the organization tends to permanently mobilize all its members, to improve the quality of its products or services, as well as the quality of its functioning and its objectives regarding the environment”. Therefore, the quality is asked by the client (individual or society – in the case of education) and is very important in the client – supplier relation (the person that benefits from the education and the one that offers the education services).

Orientations on client, leadership, personnel implication, continuous improvement, are fundamental principles for the organizations that want total quality.

In Japan, specialists consider that there are at least 2 reasons for which the quality management plays an important role in administrating present businesses: it allows companies to better respond to requests from consumers.

As the production, distribution and communication have extended and developed in the entire world economy, it became easier and easier for consumers to buy everything they want, anywhere and anytime they want. Low quality products begin to disappear slowly from the markets. If companies want to evolve, they must adopt this new attitude towards quality management.

Companies must research and identify carefully the consumer's needs and to use the information they obtain to develop products and/or services with a higher and higher quality; the company's management efficiency increases. Companies that have as priority the quality have more achievements. Ideas are more easily generated, creativity blooms, and work productivity is improving.

5. Conclusions

Ensuring the quality and quality management in education and initial education is an area that mainly needs developing and implementing systems and procedures of internal evaluation,

management and the guarantee of quality for the education activities and initial and continuous education, as well as professional managerial activities for the suppliers of education and for the initial and continuous education.

The focus is mainly on the institution's activity and on the suppliers of education and knowledge from the formal education system. The main activities focused on are: creating and developing guarantee systems and quality management in education and training; developing professional training programs for educational management and for quality management; developing mechanisms to monitor the graduates' entrance on the workforce market in order to adjust the education offer according to the evolutions from the workforce market; creating and developing guarantee mechanisms and quality management in education in the non-formal and informal education contexts.

The quality of education in the Romanian education system focuses on outputs as per the European context revealing opportunities offered by the

European society of knowledge. Pupils, students and teachers must be aware of the necessity of proper studies that can be efficiently used in the entire Europe.

Considering that quality education means continuous improvement of performances and considering the rhythm of social changes, education institutions must have as objective the continuous development of human resources.

Thus, in the future, competition and excellence in higher education must be balanced by social cohesion and freedom of access, and through joined actions, the European higher education – that now comprises more than half of the European population – can lead to the life improvement of the whole continent.

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