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Case-study: Romanian universities

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Purposes and criteria for evaluating the way in which the responsiveness principle is implemented within public organizations. Case-study: Romanian universities

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Abstract

This article is based on the idea that in the context of the development of an organizational culture aimed towards responsiveness, organizations, through the evaluation practices and procedures they apply, are called upon to offer not only answers regarding the background of the community they serve, but also landmarks, impulses and visions in order to support them in their development by offering alternative solutions, designing the development model, and anticipating possible scenarios which are specific to the development of the beneficiaries and communities. All these aspects need to be evaluated in order to offer the necessary stimuli for organizational development and continuous improvement of the quality of services, products and programs. In the first part of the communication we identify the theoretical premises regarding the need and practice of evaluating the way in which organizations implement the responsiveness principle. In order to achieve this, we use the responsive evaluation approach, developed by Robert Stake, and then we focus on the particularities of evaluating the way in which the responsiveness principle is implemented in educational organizations. In the second part of the communication we describe and analyze the evolution of the way in which the responsiveness principle is applied in the internal and external evaluations of Romanian higher education institutions. At the end of this brief analysis we propose a set of criteria for evaluating the degree of organizational responsiveness, criteria which could be used by Romanian universities in order to improve quality assurance.

Keywords: *responsiveness principle, responsive evaluation, quality assurance, internal and external evaluation of the universities*

Rezumat: *Articolul pleacă de la ideea că în contextul dezvoltării unei culturi organizaționale orientate spre responsivitate, organizațiile, prin practicile și procedurile de evaluare aplicate, sunt chemate să ofere nu numai răspunsuri privind tabloul de moment pentru comunitățile deservite, dar și repere, impulsuri și viziuni cu scopul de a le sprijini în dezvoltarea lor - prin oferirea de soluții alternative, proiectarea modului de dezvoltare, anticiparea unor posibile scenarii specifice dezvoltării beneficiarilor și comunităților deservite. Ori toate aceste aspecte necesită a fi evaluate tocmai pentru a oferi impulsul necesar pentru dezvoltarea organizațională și îmbunătățirea continuă a calității serviciilor, produselor și programelor oferite. În prima parte a comunicării identificăm premisele teoretice privind nevoia și practica evaluării modului în care organizațiile aplică principiul responsivității. În acest sens, apelăm la abordarea evaluării responsive, dezvoltată inițial de Robert Stake, iar apoi ne aplecăm asupra particularităților evaluării modului de aplicare a principiului responsivității în organizații cu specific educațional. În a doua parte a comunicării este descrisă și analizată evoluția modului de aplicare a principiului responsivității în evaluarea internă și externă a instituțiilor de învățământ superior din România. La finalul acestei analize*

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propunem un set de criterii privind evaluarea gradului de responsivitate organizațională, criteriile ce ar putea fi utilizate de universitățile românești în vederea îmbunătățirii asigurării calității.

Cuvinte cheie: *principiul responsivității; evaluare responsivă; asigurarea calității; evaluarea internă și externă a universităților*

Introduction: evaluation and organizational development

The principle of responsiveness is one of the key elements that connect organizations with the economical, social, cultural and political environment in which they function (Hanne Foss Hansen, 2005). For example, in order to coordinate the informational flows between different interests in an efficient manner, so that a consensus can be reached, organizations should be both flexible and responsive (Rusaw, 1998: 170). Thus, analyzing the responsiveness of organizations can provide a set of explanations regarding the way in which organizations interact with different actors, as well as the steps which are undertaken in order to assure the development of a strong relationship with the socio-economic environment.

Discussed in association with the principles of relevance and utility, the principle of responsiveness can offer explanations to issues such as the appropriateness of interventions and actions undertaken by organizations in order to ensure usefulness for beneficiaries. Robert Stake proposed in 1975 the concept of responsive evaluation, a concept which has generated a shift of paradigm in the theory and practice of evaluation. In the original acceptance of this concept, Robert Stake underlined the need to focus primarily on „*program activities, portrayals, testimony and audience comprehension than on data-gathering instruments, experimental designs and researcher comprehension*” (Stake, 1975). This approach is based on the idea that a responsive evaluation should be aimed towards ensuring the proper use of experience in developing services and programs, the development of the ability to sense and understand needs, existing tensions, but also towards offering a better understanding of the target beneficiaries and their values (Stake, 2004; Abma, 2006). Through this approach, both qualitative and quantitative evaluations have developed a new line of research regarding the relevance and usefulness of the interventions or products and services which are offered, which drives organizations to get closer and adapt to the interests and aspirations of beneficiaries, by thinking and acting in unison with them.

Responsive evaluation leads to an expansion of the environment and categories of actors which are taken into consideration for the evaluation exercise. Egon G. Guba and Yvona S. Lincoln continued to develop the concept of responsive evaluation, considering that „*responsive evaluation is not only responsive for the reason that it seeks out different stakeholder views but also since it responds to those items in the subsequent collection of information*” (Guba and Lincoln, 1989: 41). By using this line of thinking, one can argue that in order to ensure a continuous process of quality improvement, organizations need to generate constructive relationships and contexts of negotiation with stakeholders, beneficiaries, but also with actors which might be affected by the side effects of the products and services which are offered. It is important to point out the fact that responsive evaluations are just one of the many ways in which an evaluation can be conducted. This type of evaluation can be applied to a diversity of components/characteristics/activities of a program or an organization. Thus, when used to evaluating organizations, this approach has two major benefits: 1) it contributes to a great extent in offering a clear image on how an organization communicates, participates, uses and satisfies the demands and experience of the actors in the socio-economic environment which are interested or affected by its activity and 2) it enables the improvement of responsiveness in real time during the evaluation because once these aspects are identified, organizations have the opportunity to respond to them in an appropriate manner.

From Stake’s perspective, those who undertake a responsive evaluation design a plan for observation and negotiations and agree with people from outside the program to give them the role of observers (Stake, 2002: 348). By extending this process to the organization level, an organization can conduct a responsive self-evaluation, by designing its own plan or checklist for evaluation,

observation and negotiation and by developing a relationship with an external actor (organization/agency), in which the latter becomes an observer, who contributes to the evaluation process by offering feedback regarding the processes that have been observed in the activities through which the organization interacts with the actors in the socio-economic environment. Thus, as we will discuss later on, this type of observed-observer relationship can also be used in the case of universities in order to evaluate as well as improve organizational responsiveness.

It is obvious that the shift in paradigm which was initiated by Robert Stake affected not only the field of evaluation, but also the field of organizational management, as well as their development strategies. This aspect has to be taken into account in connection with the *external control of organizations* approach, which was developed in organizational theory, an approach that provides the necessary premises for the analysis of the involvement/partial inclusion of different types of beneficiaries (Pfeffer and Salancik, 2003). We can conclude that in the context of the development of an organizational culture which is oriented towards responsiveness, organizations, through the evaluation practices and procedures which are applied, are called upon to offer answers not only regarding the background of the communities which they serve, but also landmarks, motivation and vision in order to support their development by offering alternative solutions, designing models of development, anticipating possible scenarios which are specific to the development of the beneficiaries and the communities they serve.

The particularities of evaluating the way in which the responsiveness principle is applied

By extensively using services and program evaluations, both public and private organizations have institutionalized practices which refer to the evaluation of organizational responsiveness. The principle of organizational responsiveness was institutionalized in time as a distinct evaluation criterion, which has had a set of standards associated with it. Thus, evaluating the way in which organizations apply the responsiveness principle offers explanations regarding the way in which they manage to achieve high performances, but also to offer a high degree of trust to beneficiaries regarding the services and products which are offered (Mark and Henry, 2004). Evaluating the implementation of the responsiveness principle offers organizations a comprehensive, adequate and more explicit knowledge of communities and different types of beneficiaries they serve. Last but not least, from the perspective of external control, evaluating the implementation of the responsiveness principle allows for a diversification of approaches and methods for evaluating the institutional arrangements which are specific to the respective organizations. Evaluating the way in which the responsiveness principle is applied offers a series of explanations and results which are relevant to the proper development of an organization, such as:

- The contribution of beneficiaries to the decision making process after conducting evaluations;
- Offering satisficient information to the interested parties, but also to those who are affected by the decisions which are taken;
- Continuously improving the quality of the information which is collected and analyzed after conducting evaluations;
- Preparing beneficiaries for potential changes in the offer of services or programs;
- Contributing to the institutionalization of an evaluation culture;

As we have stated earlier, evaluating the way in which the responsiveness principle is applied by public organizations has to be done by taking into account the existence of explicit evaluation standards. Such explicit standards represent a crucial element which enables organizations to be interested in diversifying their requests and themes for the evaluation of organizational performance. Consequently, one of the elements which can contribute to diversifying evaluation themes can be represented exactly by the evaluation of the way in which the responsiveness principle is applied by the organization which is being evaluated. Concurrently, through an isomorphic process, diversified

requests can lead to the institutionalization of a specific culture of evaluating the way in which the responsiveness principle is applied. Such a culture would generate significant changes regarding the improvement of organizational performance, but also of the quality of the products and services which are offered, which are much more sensitive to the needs of the beneficiaries or other affected parties. To this end, organizations change their organizational strategies and arrangements by taking into account the contextual evolutions of interventions and of the organizational environment, of the marginal modifications regarding the way decisions are taken and problems are solved, as well as the evaluation practices. Involving communities in the process of organizational evaluation contributes to increasing cohesion and social justice (Rog, 2012: 32). What is more, involving beneficiary communities ensures a higher degree of transparency and organizational accountability towards the communities which are served or affected, leading in the end to a higher trust in the services and products which are offered by the organization.

In the case of educational services and programs, applying the responsive way of thinking and acting becomes essential. The phenomenon of normative institutionalization of some criteria, standards and evaluation indicators is noteworthy, and professional organizations strongly support the process of developing evaluation tools. For example, The Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation has created a distinct evaluation standard – P1. Responsive and Inclusive. According to the guide which was elaborated by the Joint Committee, this standard is integrated in the Propriety Standards group, which aims to point out *what is proper, fair, legal, right and just in evaluations*. Essentially, this standard stipulates that evaluations have to be responsive with stakeholders and communities. Inclusion is seen by this standard as an element which is complementary to responsiveness and which indicates the capacity of widely including the groups which are connected to the evaluation (Yarbrough et al, 2011). In order to use this standard when conducting an evaluation, the authors of the guide recommend to take the following 6 criteria into account:

1. Identify stakeholders broadly, gather useful information from them, and include them in decisions about the purposes, questions, and design of the evaluation, so that they recognize the opportunity to participate as both a right and responsibility;
2. Be open to contradictory views, interests, and beliefs regarding data, knowledge and contexts that are influenced by the culture, prior history, and situations at the local level of the program;
3. Respect and attend to the local settings and maintain an understanding of the program that is fully in tune with the settings in which participants live and function;
4. Make deliberate attempts to build meaningful relationships and contribute to the evaluation process by including groups that have been historically disenfranchised, for example, on the basis of gender, race, culture, ethnicities, sexual orientation, economic status, or disability;
5. Get to know the stakeholders and the local settings, history, significant events, culture, and other factors affecting the program and its evaluation;
6. Strive for an appropriate balance of responsiveness and inclusiveness given stakeholders needs and the available resources in the evaluation setting.

Taking these criteria into account, we will present the evolution of the way in which the responsiveness principle is applied in the internal and external evaluation of higher education institutions in Romania. At the end of this brief analysis we propose a set of criteria which could be used by Romanian universities in order to improve quality assurance.

Applying the responsiveness principle in the evaluation of universities in Romania

Even though in western-european states the debates concerning the evaluation of the way in which the responsiveness principle is applied are very dynamic and fruitful, in the case of former communist states debates are only just beginning. For example, in the case of Romania, the responsiveness principle has a limited application, and evaluations still do not fully take into account the need to determine the degree of organizational responsiveness. The principle is applied rather in the private sector (multinational corporations, foundations and nongovernmental organizations) than in public governmental organizations. On the one hand, the responsiveness principle did not prove to be a constituent of the free and democratic market when the private sector was built and developed in the post-socialist transition period. On the other hand, the principles of responsibility and accountability were not considered to be fundamental in the first decade of the transition, but they have started to gain a more prominent place during the last decade. Higher education institutions developed in this institutional environment and their organizational arrangements progressively generated an accountable and responsible behavior for the study programs which were offered (Andreescu et al, 2012).

In the domain of educational programs and services which are connected to higher education, the responsiveness principles has to be considered in connection with the principles of accountability and public responsibility, which outline the institutional arrangements connected to the way in which organizations accomplish their mission and to the objectives they have. Thus, the principle of responsibility refers to the way in which the higher education institution relates to beneficiaries by offering high quality and performed educational, cognitive and research services. In essence, the principle offers universities the possibility to practice reflection, interpretation and to offer specific educational, cognitive and research answers in order to achieve a competitive and sustainable development of the different types of beneficiaries it serves. For example, the process of bringing educational and research programs and services closer to local and regional communities and making them more adequate contributes to socio-economic development, which implicitly contributes to an increase in the level of the citizens' and public and private organizations' civic participation (Arthur et al, 2005). However, this principle stops at the institutional boundaries and makes universities not to cross their statutory limit, which is stipulated in the national law or internal regulations (Weber, 2005). This aspect can easily be seen in former socialist states, like in the case of Romania, where specific national regulations have mainly promoted stato-centric institutional arrangements as opposed to socio-centric arrangements. Taking the principle of responsibility into account, higher education institutions develop educational programs and other types of cognitive services in a centripetal manner – they are aimed towards the university – which ensues and exercise of adaptation, diversification and at most a personalization of the programs which are offered, and not in a centrifugal manner – aimed towards the community they serve – which would ensure delocalization, contextualization and proactivity (Bărbulescu et al, 2011).

Starting from the premises of the responsibility principle, the responsiveness principle deepens the relationship between universities and the communities they serve. By summing up the meanings of the responsibility principle, the responsiveness principle refers to the development of universities in a tight symbiosis with the communities' (local, professional, cultural etc.) level of development. During this process, the university acts not only as an institution which has specific functions related to offering educational services and developing knowledge, but also as an institution which has direct involvement and community development functions. Thus, responsiveness refers to the behavior of being active within the community being served and to think for and in unison with it, having at the same time a role of guidance towards development through technical or social innovation.

The third principle, that of accountability refers to the degree in which the responsibilities undertaken by universities were achieved. In comparison with the first two principles, the

accountability principle refers to the relationship with the direct “client” and constrains the university to offer him the educational and cognitive services according to the specific parameters in the educational offer which was presented and agreed upon by the “client” (Weber et al, 2005). In the case of centralized higher education systems, the principle of accountability is also interpreted through the compliance of educational offers with necessities which are explicitly formulated by state institutions, which means that universities accomplish their mission of supplying a public good. In the same manner, universities can be accountable towards corporations which ask for professional qualifications services. In this regard, the dimension of civic involvement is implicit through its contents and educational products, and, in consequence, the role of universities consists in transmitting them to direct beneficiaries, without measuring the impact of these contents on the development of the communities which are served. The major role of the principle of accountability is that it conditions universities to adopt a transparent behavior, which in some ways transcends the organizational and functional framework of universities and “contaminates” the institutions and organizations in other areas of society, thus making them more responsible and transparent.

In the last two decades, the higher education institutions in Romania have mainly been preoccupied with their own expansion. This expansion was connected to the following processes: offering new study programs – mainly those programs which were solicited by potential beneficiaries, enrolling higher and higher numbers of students (this process is also known under the name of massification). Apart from these simultaneous processes, the higher education system went through a process of multiplication of the number of both state and private higher education institutions. Until now, Romanian universities have not applied the responsiveness principle. This principle has been and still is foreign to the Romanian university field. The new legislation in the educational field does not even refer to this principle. Being used primarily by large national and international corporations, the responsiveness principle is starting to grow roots in the internal public space. Naturally, universities should have stimulated the generalization of responsiveness practices, by offering examples and specific actions. Instead, as a consequence of the functions they have, as well as of the way the teaching and managerial staff is structured, universities focused more on researching the phenomenon of corporative responsiveness, thus introducing specific contents in the curriculum and giving less importance to their own organizational responsiveness, both regarding the research of this aspect, as well as from the perspective of identifying ways to implement responsiveness in the relationship with the socio-economic environment.

Still, in the case of Romania, although not by assuming of referring explicitly to responsiveness, some higher education institutions have developed sets of instruments and practices which are specific to the responsiveness principle or which refer to, in an indirect or tangential way to responsive practices in the relationship with the environment. This has contributed to the strengthening of universities inside the reference regions, ensuring in the same time a framework which is favorable for achieving organizational performance. The legal framework concerning the functioning of higher education institutions, which has been applied beginning with the year 2011, vaguely refers to the responsiveness principle. On the other hand, the procedure for classifying universities and ranking study programs, which was also applied in 2011, took the evaluation of the higher education institutions’ responsiveness into account (Bărbulescu et al, 2011). The aim of this exercise will be identified through the modification of the financing policy of study programs from state budget allocations.

A first result of the process of classifying higher education institutions which was undertaken in April - September 2011 refers to the fact that the Methodology for allocating budgetary funds for base financing and supplementary financing of state higher education institutions in Romania for the year 2012, which was adopted through OMECTS 3998 from the 5th of May 2012, lead to the institutionalization of the criteria according to which higher education institutions have to assume an active role at the local and regional levels. Thus, according to art. 4 in the Methodology, in order to encourage excellence in higher education institutions, a fund for supplementary financing for higher education institutions at the national level was created, which represents 30.5% of the amount which

was allocated at the national level for state universities as base financing. These funds are allocated to universities based on the ranking of study programmes (25.0%), but also on the following three criteria:

- a. *Preferential financing for master and doctorate study programmes in advanced sciences and technologies, for study programmes in international languages and for joint supervision doctorate programmes (2.50%);*
- b. *Increasing institutional capacity and managerial efficiency;*
- c. *Higher education institutions' commitment to playing an active role and the local and regional levels (3.00%).*

Thus, even though the Methodology does not explicitly refer to the principle of responsiveness, which can be deduced from the criteria according to which higher education institutions have to assume an active role at the local and regional levels, it is important to mention the fact that institutionalizing financial stimulation mechanisms will lead in time to an increase in the degree of institutional responsiveness of Romanian universities.

After analyzing the current Methodology for external evaluation, the standards, the reference standards and the list of performance indicators of the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS, 2006), it can be noticed that it doesn't make any direct references to the responsiveness principle. On the other hand, several references are made with regard to the principles of responsibility and institutional accountability. For example, one provision states that institutional responsibility and quality assurance management are in the competence field of every accredited university, according to the principle of university autonomy. What is more, one of the indicators connected to public responsibility and accountability refers to the fact that higher education institutions need to have internal auditing practices for the primary domains of their activities in order to ensure that the commitments which were taken are rigorously respected, in conditions of public transparency.

Later on, a consistent change can be noticed after the Project for the new methodology for external evaluation, the standards, the reference standards and the list of performance indicators was elaborated in 2011 by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. In accordance with the procedure for classifying universities and ranking study programs, the project for the new methodology (ARACIS, 2011) includes several provisions which are connected to responsiveness which educational and scientific research universities, as well as educational and artistic universities have to respect, although the term *responsiveness* isn't mentioned explicitly. Thus, these types of universities have to prove that they promote the relationship with the socio-economic environment through specific actions, such as developing partnerships with the socio-economic environment, the revenues which are obtained through supplying services, but also through other accomplishments which demonstrate an efficient transfer of research results in the economic and social life. On the other hand, educational and advanced research universities have to prove the efficiency of their research activities through the social and economical applicability of the scientific production, but also through other accomplishments which demonstrate an efficient transfer of research results in the economic and social life.

A series of provisions which are connected to the organizational responsiveness principle can be found in the methodology in the mandatory normative conditions for accrediting professional/scientific master programs. Some of the elements which are taken into consideration in the accreditation process are: the involvement of the teaching and professional development staff in contracts with the socio-economic environment; the existence of partnerships with the socio-economic environment; the participation of students in study groups for real or simulated projects of the socio-economic environment; the involvement in community projects; organizing cultural events and collaborations with non-profit organizations.

In the case of doctoral schools, the methodology includes in the criteria, standards and performance indicators which are used for evaluation a series of aspects which refer to the number of

projects developed in partnership with the economy or society in the last five years, the involvement in community projects, organizing cultural events and collaborations with non-profit organizations.

The project for the new methodology also reinforces the importance of the principles of responsibility and accountability for universities through a series of explicit references. Thus, the new methodology aims to assist higher education institutions to assume institutional responsibilities through the mission that every university sets out in its Charter, taking into account the fact that institutional responsibility is a competence of every university, according to the principle of university autonomy. What is more, the new methodology aims to encourage a wide implementation of the principles of public responsibility, university autonomy and transparency through actions such as reaching levels of quality which correspond to the expectations of students and employers, the affirmation of higher education as a public good, clear, consistent and coherent communication with beneficiaries, supplying correct information to the public with regard to the results which were obtained, as well as the actions which were undertaken in order to improve the quality of education. Public responsibility also represents a key performance indicator in the universities' evaluation process, because universities have to demonstrate public responsibility through durable development, adequate spending of resources, but also by assuming objectives with social character in the institutional mission.

Thus, the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education shows a tendency, just like other similar agencies in different states, to evaluate the degree of organizational responsiveness in universities in the different contexts of organizational development. We consider that, in the Romanian case, the way in which this evaluation can be designed should be based on, among other things, the experience which was obtained after classifying the universities and ranking the study programs. What is more, continuing Stake's line of thinking which was discussed earlier, responsive evaluation can represent a viable alternative for improving organizational responsiveness in the field of higher education. On the whole, the project for the new ARACIS Methodology focuses on two elements: on the one hand, a system of quantitative analysis with measurable, quantifiable and comparable indicators, and, on the other hand, giving a higher degree of trust to internal evaluation, and, consequently, to the activities aimed at quality assurance which are undertaken by higher education institutions. Following the rationale of the increased confidence ARACIS has in the universities' internal evaluation, in order to include the responsiveness component, universities can conduct a responsive self-evaluation, during which they can establish a observed-observer relationship with ARACIS. We need to specify the fact that the responsiveness principle is transversal, thus intersecting with the vast majority of actions an university undertakes. This is why we consider that evaluating the way in which responsiveness is translated into the actions of universities and its interactions with the environment should be part of comprehensive evaluations (be it a responsive a evaluation), as a transversal component of the evaluation, rather than an evaluation which is only aimed at responsiveness.

Finally, we propose a set of criteria for evaluating the way in which the responsiveness principle is applied by the higher education institutions in Romania. This could be used in order to develop new means of encouraging institutions which develop programs and actions which are specific to the responsiveness principle. A comprehensive evaluation can also include the transversal responsiveness component through a series of evaluation questions such as:

1. To what extent are universities connected to the changes that take place in the communities which they serve?
2. How and to what extent has the teaching and professional development staff been involved in contracts with the socio-economic environment?
3. How and to what extent have the students participated in study groups for real or simulated projects of the socio-economic environment?
4. How and to what extent have the higher education institutions been involved in community projects?

5. To what extent are universities open to international and transnational cooperation in different programs and activities?
6. How and to what extent have the higher education institutions been involved in organizing cultural events and collaborating with non-profit organizations?
7. To what extent do universities promote a proactive civic culture in the community they are part of?
8. What actions have been undertaken in order to ensure the transfer of research results in the economic and social life?
9. What measures have been taken in order to ensure the social and economical applicability of the scientific production?
10. What actions have been undertaken in order to ensure the appropriate levels of quality which correspond to the expectations of students and beneficiaries?
11. How efficient was the communication with the beneficiaries?

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